

# To My Death I Fight

**By: BahamutReishiki**

It's been seven months since Ichigo managed to defeat Aizen during the Winter War. Just recently settling into new life as a normal human, he is shocked when he finds out he has been accepted into the prestigious Honnouji Academy. Unwilling to go, but not having a choice in the matter, he reluctantly decides to attend but wonders just what the next year will bring.

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# To My Death I Fight

[Introduction](#)

[Who'll Stop the Rain?](#)

[If You Don't Know Me By Now](#)

[I'll Take You There](#)

[Instant Karma](#)

[Go Your Own Way](#)

[I Can't Help Myself](#)

[Just My Imagination](#)

[Tired of Being Alone](#)

[Bohemian Rhapsody](#)

[Living for the City](#)

[Riders on the Storm](#)

[Wish You Were Here](#)

[Disco Inferno](#)

[Psycho Killer](#)

[Won't Get Fooled Again](#)

[Behind Blue Eyes](#)

[Walk on the Wild Side](#)

[Tangled Up in Blue](#)

[Fire and Rain](#)

[One of These Nights](#)

[Carry On Wayward Son](#)

[Let's Stay Together](#)

[Have You Ever Seen the Rain](#)

[I'm Still in Love with You](#)

[Family Affair](#)

[Until You Come Back to Me](#)

[I Will Survive](#)  
[Bad Moon Rising](#)  
[God Save the Queen](#)  
[Heart of Glass](#)  
[Paranoid](#)  
[Inner City Blues](#)  
[Tonight's the Night](#)  
[The Long and Winding Road](#)  
[Respect Yourself](#)  
[You Wear It Well](#)  
[Tell Me Something Good](#)  
[School's Out](#)  
[Slipping Into Darkness](#)  
[Blumenkranz](#)  
[Something About England](#)  
[The Guns of Brixton](#)  
[The Magnificent Seven](#)  
[Train in Vain](#)  
[Guns on the Roof](#)  
[London's Burning](#)  
[Police and Thieves](#)  
[The City of the Dead](#)  
[Death or Glory](#)  
[Zu der Nacht des Krieges](#)  
[Don't Let the Sun Go Down On](#)  
[You Make Me Feel Brand New](#)  
[Killer Queen](#)  
[Turn Back the Pendulum](#)  
[Laughter in the Rain](#)  
[Fly Like An Eagle](#)

Can't Stand Losing You

Stairway to Heaven

Burning Love

Coat of Many Colors

Come and Get Your Love

After the Love has Gone

It Has to be This Way.

Never Can Say Goodbye

# Who'll Stop the Rain?

***Edited - November 6th, 2014:*** This is a new version of chapter one. As my story's progressed I went back and read this chapter only to find several glaring plot holes. The quality was also terrible (by my standards) so I rewrote most of it. If you're interested in the plot holes I'm afraid you'll just have to read the story. I would be more than willing to list everything I fixed BUT that would ruin the story for those coming in fresh and eager. One thing I will say is that this chapter's date has been changed to July 15 - which is Ichigo's seventeenth birthday.

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## Chapter 1 - Who'll Stop the Rain?

"Get your lazy ass down here, Ichigo!" The tranquil morning stillness was shattered completely by the piercing and annoying voice of Isshin Kurosaki, patriarch of the Kurosaki family, "I have important news!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming,"

Ichigo Kurosaki, seventeen years old and a former substitute shinigami, sighed and looked out the window of his room before sitting up with a groan. A little more than eight months had passed since he had sacrificed his shinigami powers to defeat Sosuke Aizen once and for all. Sitting on the edge of his bed, one hand rubbing his face, Ichigo looked at the calendar on his desk and scowled. Today was his birthday which meant his dad would be pulling all sorts of stupid tricks.

As he finished getting dressed, the scowl never leaving his face, Ichigo left his room and headed downstairs. If the past three years

had taught Ichigo anything it was that his dad never skipped an opportunity to 'train' his son. Body tensing in anticipation of his father's surprise attack Ichigo stopped and paused when he saw Uryu Ishida calmly sitting on the couch. Looking around, confident that this was a trick, Ichigo asked, "Why are you here, Uryu?"

"What makes you think I had a choice in the matter?" Uryu countered, a small amount of annoyance tinging his voice. Pointing his finger at Isshin he added, "Perhaps you should ask your father. He *is* the one that dragged me here, after all."

Turning to his dad, who to his credit had an innocent look on his face, Ichigo asked, "What the hell is going on? Why is Uryu here?"

"That's such a simple question, my lucky son!" Isshin proclaimed brightly as he jumped out of the chair, "You've been accepted into the prestigious Honnouji Academy, home of the brightest young minds in all of Japan, and it was all thanks to your handsome and extremely connected father!"

Ichigo turned to Uryu, who shared the same look of confusion, and let out a tired sigh. Raising a hand to his temple, a migraine threatening to erupt due to his father's idiocy, Ichigo growled and said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"It was back during my days as a young and attractive bachelor!" Isshin excitedly began as he wrapped an arm around his son's shoulders. Annoyed at his dad's childish attempt to include him in his fantasies Ichigo tried to pull free only for Isshin to tighten his grip, "Masaki was off at college so your lovable father was left all alone. To combat the increasing loneliness in my heart I decided to travel across the country on a well-deserved vacation!"

Uryu rolled his eyes at Isshin, "While your story is no doubt fascinating, Mr. Kurosaki, I fail to see why you had to bring me here."

Isshin chuckled condescendingly, causing Uryu to mutter obscenities under his breath, and sighed wistfully, "Your eagerness to hear my

story is appreciated, Uryu, but I'm just getting to the good part. Anyway, it was nine days into my vacation when I met an extremely funny and attractive woman."

"Hold on a minute," Ichigo interrupted. He was shocked that his dad, the bumbling idiot who never matured past childhood, was confessing to knowing another woman besides his mother. Rubbing his eyes, the sheer impossibility of his father's story overwhelming him, Ichigo asked, "You actually met a woman? Are you sure that she wasn't just a man dressed as a woman?"

Without warning Isshin let go of Ichigo before spinning around and attempting to kick his son in the face. Barely pausing in surprise at the unexpected attack before ducking down, the breeze from his father's attack rustling his naturally orange hair, Ichigo waited for his father's leg to pass overhead. Clenching a fist Ichigo swung his arm towards his dad's stomach only to be shocked when he missed. Leaping over his stunned son's head and landing on the couch, careful to avoid hitting Uryu, Isshin launched himself from the piece of furniture, tackling Ichigo and sending them both tumbling to the ground. Frowning disappointingly as he watched his son's struggles, the shouts and protests muffled by the carpet, Isshin cleared his throat and continued talking as if nothing just happened.

"As I was saying, it was when I was in Tokyo twenty two years ago that I met the woman. She was tall, beautiful and incredibly... well-endowed." To Uryu's horror Isshin began making suggestive gestures with his hands, "She was the incarnation of everything a man wanted in a woman but alas my heart was already taken by your mother!"

Fed up with having his face smashed against the floor Ichigo managed to gather enough strength to briefly overpower his father. As Isshin stumbled back, a look of mild surprise on his face from Ichigo having managed to escape his patented delinquent chokehold, he was sent flying into the wall as Ichigo kicked him in the stomach. Seething angrily Ichigo gave his dad, who was

currently lying dazed on the floor, an annoyed glare, "Goddamn idiot."

"How could you treat your father with such disrespect?"

Completely uninjured Isshin leapt off the ground and dusted his clothes off before giving Ichigo a stern look, "I suppose this means you don't want to know how your awesome father managed to get you into Honnouji Academy."

Ichigo scowled but didn't say anything. Truthfully he was interested for two reasons. The first was that he never heard of Honnouji Academy. The second, and much more important one, was that what he dad said would determine how badly Ichigo would kick his ass when this was all over. Folding his arms, the scowl never leaving his face, Ichigo rolled his eyes and said, "Just get on with the damn story already."

Isshin nodded sagely and coughed to clear his throat, "It all started one mysterious day twenty two years ago..."

## 22 Years Ago

*Sometimes Isshin couldn't help but wonder if sealing away his shinigami powers was the only way he could have saved Masaki's soul from disappearing from existence. If Kisuke Urahara was the genius everybody lauded him to be, than he should have been able to invent a gigai that allowed him to use some of his powers at the very least.*

*It was too late for him to do anything about it though. Isshin had willfully and gladly sacrificed his power to save Masaki even though she was a Quincy. If given the same choice once more, he would do it once more. He was in love with her and nothing anyone could say or do would change his mind. That did not mean he wanted to sit around and be helpless if Masaki ever got into trouble or danger. He had saved her life once already and he wasn't looking to fail a second time.*



*When he stopped by Kisuke's shop to ask about improving his gigai, the handsome bastard seemed to mull over his question for a few seconds before proudly declaring that he should be able to whip something up in a couple of days. The exuberance and excitement Kisuke emitted disturbed Isshin. Nothing good could come from the maniacal gleam in the former captain's eye, but left with no choice in the matter he nevertheless complied.*

*Stopping to pick up his new gigai a few days later, which had been modified to keep Masaki's soul safe from the hollow dwelling inside her, Isshin began to have second thoughts when Kisuke began giggling crazily while holding the gigai. The shop keeper informed Isshin that the upgraded gigai would have reflexes and strength triple that of a normal human. Kisuke lamented that he wanted to do more, but he would begin risked degradation of the spiritual thread connecting Isshin's soul with Masaki's.*

*" I'm really bored. I wonder if there's a movie theater nearby."*

*Isshin suppressed a yawn as he explored Tokyo. He had originally come to the city since he heard the Tokyo Fashion Week was about to begin. As he purchased the train ticket, his imagination was running in high gear as his mind was filled with images of hot and beautiful women modeling revealing dresses and bikinis. That did not mean he would ever touch. The only one for him was Masaki, but that didn't mean he couldn't go and enjoy the models as an art critic.*

*If he had known what he was getting into, he would have skipped coming to Tokyo entirely.*

*Instead of bikinis and dresses, he watched women strut out wearing clothing and outfits that boggled his mind. Who in their right minds would want to wear something that took four hours to prepare? It wasn't modeling, he quickly realized, but a subtle contest between designers to see who could make the most stupid outfit. He didn't know who was winning, but his interest was surely losing.*

*"What am I going to do for fun now?" Isshin grabbed his face in frustration. He had planned on staying in Tokyo for a week for the show. He even booked a hotel room for seven days, damn it. Now with the show a bust, he had literally nothing planned. Sighing miserably, he kicked his foot against the sidewalk and grumbled, "I suppose I could go to Tokyo National Museum or something."*

*So deep was he in his thoughts, that Isshin was completely unaware that his mindless walking had taken him directly past perhaps the most high-end and expensive hotel in Tokyo. The hotel, which catered to those participating in Tokyo Fashion Week, reserved the best rooms and penthouses for the designers and couturiers. As he waited to cross the street on the other side of the hotel, he was nearly thrown forward and into the path of an oncoming car as a large explosion hit him in the back.*

*"Damn, what was that?" Quickly picking himself off the ground, Isshin turned around and saw that the explosion had originated from the entrance of the hotel. Tongues of orange and yellow flames rose from the destroyed entrance and thick smoke was billowing out from the first two floors. As his ears picked up the far off sound of sirens approaching, Isshin threw caution to the wind and ran past the escaping civilians and into the hotel.*

*Almost immediately Isshin's nose was assaulted by the smell of burning flesh, forcing him to cover the bottom half of his face with his sleeve in an attempt to filter it out. All around him bodies of peoples unfortunate to have been caught in the explosion littered the ground. Isshin knew, with a morbid sense of realization, that if he could still see the dead, the air would be filled with the floating and broken souls of those surrounding him.*

*Shaking his head to clear it of the depressing thoughts, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted over the blaring alarms, "Hello? Can anyone hear me?"*

*He didn't see anyone, but his enhanced senses, courtesy of Kisuke, picked up subtle coughing coming from the lounge directly across*

*the lobby. Sprinting forward, careful to not step on any of the bodies out of respect for the dead, Isshin braced his shoulder and slammed the doors open.*

*The lounge, which had catered exclusively to millionaires and those able to afford bills ranging in the thousands of dollars, was a mess. Tables and chairs, made from the most expensive woods and materials, lay burnt and broken.*

*" Is anyone in here?"*

*Isshin's eyes noticed something moving near the back of the lounge. Covering his mouth with his sleeve to keep out the smoke, he pushed forward through the heat towards the survivor. Reaching them only a few seconds later, Isshin quickly determined that the person had been pinned beneath rubble when the explosion went off. Without much effort, he picked up the concrete and wood that must have weighed over two hundred pounds. Quickly pressing two fingers against the woman's neck, he was relieved to see she still had a pulse.*

*" Ma'am? Can you hear me?" When Isshin didn't receive a reply apart from a grunt of pain, his heart rate picked up. Quickly and carefully picking the woman up bridal style, he said to her in a comforting voice, "Don't you worry ma'am. I'm going to get you out of here."*

*Isshin hadn't even made it halfway to the lobby when there was another harsh coughing and a man shouted, "Drop the bitch and get on the ground!"*

*The speaker was a man dressed in full military camouflage and wielding a pistol. He had been part of a group that had planned to take the couturiers and designers staying at the hotel during the Tokyo Festival Week hostage for millions upon millions of dollars in ransom. That had all went to hell when one of the idiots set off the bomb that was supposed to be for the police. Now he was the only one left and he wasn't about to let his ticket out of here just leave.*

*Raising his shaking pistol towards Isshin's face, he snarled, "I said drop her and get on the ground!"*

*Isshin weighed his options. He was sure he could avoid the bullet the man fired, but he wasn't sure he could do so while holding the woman.*

*"I cannot do that," he answered stoically, "I'm a doctor. I cannot leave a patient behind."*

*"You think I'm fucking kidding around?" the man yelled before coughing up some blood. Wiping the bloody drool on the back of his free hand, he shouted over the flames, "I'm not joking around here!"*

*Isshin was about to answer when there was a sound similar to that of a whip before the man's arm was severed off at the elbow. As the man dropped to his knees, his remaining hand gripping what was left of his right arm, Isshin took the chance to flee. As he turned and ran back into the lobby, he could have sworn he caught a glimpse of a figure watching him leave. Ignoring it as a product of smoke inhalation, he ran through the lobby and back outside. As he took in several gulps of smoke-free air, he was instantly greeted with over a dozen police officers in full combat gear. Upon noticing the woman in his arms, they quickly raised their weapons and ordered him onto the ground.*

*"Don't shoot!" he shouted, "I found her inside. She injured and needs medical attention!"*

*The situation was tense for several seconds until one of the officers turned his head and pressed a finger against his ear. After speaking to someone over the radio, he nodded to his fellow officers to stand down and let Isshin pass. Racing down the steps of the hotel, Isshin was escorted by an officer to a waiting ambulance, where several paramedics were on standby. As he delicately put the woman on a gurney, Isshin turned to leave only to find a delicate hand gripping his wrist.*

*" Hold on..." the woman whispered to the paramedics. Turning her eyes to Isshin, who noted the exotic coloring, she asked, "Who are you?"*

*Isshin gave her a reassuring smile, "The name's Isshin Shiba."*

*" Isshin Shiba?" The woman closed her eyes for a moment before smiling, "I'm... Ragyo Kiryuin. Thank you for saving me..."*

*End Flashback*

Ichigo stared at his father in mute shock as the tale finally came to an end. After nearly a minute of absolute silence passed, his mind desperately trying to come up with something to say, Ichigo took a deep breath and said, "That has to be the biggest load of crap I've ever heard. Couldn't you have at least tried to come up with something more believable?"

"But it's all true!" Isshin argued impetuously like a child, "Your amazing father is a hero!"

Before Ichigo could come up with a retort he was stopped when Uryu spoke up in haste, "Hang on a minute, Ichigo, I remember reading something about this. I can't place the exact time but a little over twenty years ago there was a terrorist attack in Tokyo during the fashion week."

"You're kidding me," Ichigo turned to Uryu in surprise. He found it hard to believe that his dad, despite being a former shinigami, was capable of doing something like he described in his story.

"I find it hard to believe myself," Uryu conceded as he wracked his mind for the limited details he knew. The young Quincy had read up about the attack a couple of years ago but found actual details, not those propagated by the media, to be sorely lacking, "The details are sketchy but the goal of the terrorists was to kidnap and ransom several of the most powerful CEOs and couturiers in the world for hundreds of millions of dollars. Fashion companies twenty years ago

were quite wealthy, Ichigo, and Ragyo Kiryuin was one of the richest and most powerful even back then, before Revocs came to dominate the global market."

Ichigo gave Uryu a blank stare, "That's all well and good but explain that in simple words."

Uryu coughed into his hand and adjusted his glasses before explaining, "Ragyo Kiryuin is the CEO and founder of Revocs, the most powerful and influential clothing designer and distributor in the world. Revocs controls roughly ninety percent of all apparel sales, making Ragyo one of the richest people in the world."

That made a lot of sense to Ichigo, but he couldn't help but ask, "That makes things a lot easier to understand, but what's the deal with the blackboard behind you?"

Uryu turned around and saw, to his confusion, that he had somehow drawn a map of the world with various percentages across each continent on a blackboard that hadn't been there a moment ago, "I'm not quite sure..."

Ignoring the implausibility for the moment Ichigo looked at his dad and dryly asked, "How does your story have anything to do with me? You're not going to tell me Ragyo Kiryuin controls Honnouji Academy, are you?"

"Your intelligence makes me proud, my son!" Isshin raced out of the room, sounds of paper rustling and objects crashing to the ground in his wake, before he sprinted back with a framed piece of paper in his hands, "I got a call from Ragyo about a week after saving her life. She thanked me and wanted to know what she could do to repay me. I, the generous man that I am, could not accept payment and refused but Ragyo was a persistent woman. That is why it came as a big surprise when I received your letter of acceptance to Honnouji Academy along with a handwritten letter from Ragyo herself!"

"I don't know," Ichigo wasn't fully convinced by his father's absurd story. There was no chance in hell that his bumbling idiot of a father knew someone as rich and powerful as Ragyo Kiryuin, "I find it suspicious that she waited more than twenty years before paying you back. This seems too much like a scam to me. Are you sure you weren't scammed into giving up your credit card?"

"Do you take your dear old father for an idiot?" Isshin shouted passionately, causing Uryu and Ichigo to collectively facepalm. Upon seeing his son's lack of respect Isshin stepped forward and head-butted him, "Did you think this letter of acceptance was simply dropped in the mail? It was hand delivered by Ragyo's personal secretary. It came in a fancy case and everything!"

When Isshin noticed Ichigo simply staring at him, a look of both confusion and annoyance on his face, Isshin grumbled and folded his arms childishly, "What's wrong with you? You were invited, personally by Ragyo, to one of the best schools in Japan. You should be jumping in joy alongside your old man!"

"Thanks but no thanks," Ichigo ignored his father's shocked sputters, "I'm fine staying at Karakura High School. Why would I go to some fancy school in Tokyo when I can stay right here?"

"I find it difficult to say this, Ichigo, but your dad has a point," Uryu interjected, a sour taste in his mouth upon agreeing with Isshin, "This is an opportunity most people will never get. Honnouji Academy is one of the best academies not only in Japan but in the entire world. The selection process is notoriously difficult. Ragyo Kiryuin handing you a full scholarship is the educational equivalent of winning the lottery. You shouldn't refuse to go just because you're stubborn."

"Your womanly friend has a point, my ungrateful son," Isshin shouted, causing Uryu to sputter in embarrassment and rage at the comment.

"What did you say?"

Isshin sadly patted Uryu on the shoulder, "There is no reason to be ashamed of your secret. Sewing is a fine pastime! To think that my son was this open-minded about his friends! Tell me, does your father know of your dark and embarrassing secret?"

"My father?" Uryu sputtered, "Ryuken is the one that taught me to sew in the first place!"

"Ah," Isshin adopted a sagely stance, "That explains so much about my old friend. Such as why he didn't play sports or why it took him forever to get married. To be honest, I was kind of surprised he even got married. With his looks and fashion sense, I would have thought otherwise."

While Uryu sputtered indignantly, Ichigo rolled his eyes, "Do I even have a say in the matter?"

"Of course you do, my ignorant son!" Isshin exclaimed seriously, "You can say whatever you want but as of last week I've enrolled you as a third year student at Honnouji Academy. Now, there's no need for the stunned silence. Your awesome father deserves what's coming to him."

"Everything, huh?" Ichigo grinned maliciously while cracking his knuckles. His father deserved the beating he was about to receive wholeheartedly, but just as he began to sneak up on his dad, there was a sudden knock at the door.

"A guest this early in the morning?" Isshin pursed his lips as he tried to think if he missed any appointments. Ducking beneath a haphazardly thrown punch from his son Isshin knew that it was Monday, which meant the clinic was open, but he didn't have any appointments until the afternoon. Vaulting into the air, avoiding Ichigo's sweeping leg, Isshin decided to answer the door anyway. As a doctor he took the Hippocratic Oath. Turning away a potential patient, someone who might need medical attention, never crossed his mind. Slamming his feet into his son's back, forcing Ichigo back to the floor once more Isshin nodded his head and said, "Whoever's



outside must be important! Ichigo, stop lying down on the job and go see who it is while I entertain your friend with further tales of my manly exploits!"

"Whatever," Ichigo groaned as he pulled his body off the floor for the second time in five minutes. Ignoring the look of terror on Uryu's face as his father dragged him towards the photo albums Ichigo realized a normal person would have felt guilty. He personally knew how boring his dad's stories were. Usually he would not want anyone to suffer listening to his old man prattle on about stuff he made up but Ichigo decided that Uryu deserved whatever was coming to him.

Suppressing a yawn as he walked to the door, his mind making a mental note to get more sleep, Ichigo opened the front door to the clinic and was greeted with a teenager roughly his age with flat green hair and eyes. While the color of the teen's hair was strange enough it was his outfit that drew the full brunt of Ichigo attention. Instead of wearing what Ichigo, and most sane people, would call normal clothing the teen wore a full white trench coat and pants with several sets of spikes jutting forward from his waist and shoulders.

Wondering how the hell the teen could sit down without impaling himself Ichigo decided to cut his losses while he still could and began closing the door, "I'm sorry but I'm not interested in anything you might be selling."

Before Ichigo could fully close and lock the door the teen jammed his foot in the opening, "Perhaps I should have worn something a bit less unique. Anyway, the name's Uzu Sanageyama, Student Council Athletic Committee Chair of Honnouji Academy."

Ichigo gave Sanageyama a deadpan expression, "Who?"

Sanageyama looked at Ichigo in confusion, "Didn't you receive your letter of acceptance last week?"

Ichigo closed his eyes and let out an aggravated sigh as he tried to figure out a way he could murder his dad without getting caught. As

much as he hated admitting it he had to give his old man credit. Ichigo didn't think the bumbling idiot was savvy enough to transfer him to another school long enough in advance that he couldn't do anything about it. Either his dad was a genius or insane and Ichigo was leaning towards the latter option, "Look, I don't know what my old man told you but I'm not going to Honnouji Academy.

For a couple of seconds Sanageyama was surprised by Ichigo's refusal. This wasn't the first time he had to visit a prospective student. Usually by the time he explained why he was there Sanageyama had to shake the prostrating student off his leg. Smirking as his opinion of Ichigo increased Sanageyama gave a hearty laugh, "I wasn't expecting you to say that! Oh man, if Gamagori heard you say that he would try dragging you all the way to Honnouji Academy."

"Gamagori?" Ichigo had no idea who that was, "Who the hell is -"

"It is very rude to leave guests outside, Ichigo!"

Grumbling as the sounds of heavy footsteps drew closer Ichigo let out a sigh and leaned to the side. As Isshin came crashing through the air, his bare foot barely missing his son's head by only inches, Ichigo reached up and clenched his hand around his shirt. Spinning around once, his grip never faltering, Ichigo quickly let go and watched his father impact against the street with a hollow thud.

Huffing in irritation, both at his father's childish antics and the fact that he tried doing it when they had a guest, Ichigo gave Sanageyama a frustrated look, "I suppose you can come in if you want."

Sanageyama nodded and gave Isshin a cursory glance before taking Ichigo up on his advice, "What about your dad?"

Ichigo gave the unconscious body of his father a quick look before shrug

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Uryu watched Sanageyama walk into Ichigo's house and immediately suppressed a look of shock. He knew of Satsuki Kiryuin's Elite Four, if only in passing, and the exploits of Uzu Sanageyama, both during and prior to his enrollment at Honnouji Academy, were impressive. Glancing at the green haired youth's shinai Uryu extended his hand, "Uzu Sanageyama... I can't say this is a surprise considering who you work for."

"What can I say?" Sanageyama chuckled as he shook Uryu's hand. Looking around Ichigo's living room, missing the slight narrowing of the Quincy's eyes in the process, Sanageyama whistled appreciatively as he flopped down on the couch, "So who are you?"

"I am Uryu Ishida."

It would be a lie to say Sanageyama wasn't surprised by the name. He recalled Satsuki mentioning an Uryu Ishida several times in the past. What were the odds that he would meet the person Satsuki talked so highly of on his mission to gauge Ichigo Kurosaki's power and personality? Chuckling quietly at the irony of the situation Sanageyama folded his hands against the nape of his neck, "You're just as smart as Lady Satsuki said."

"Lady Satsuki?" Ichigo, confused by the strangely archaic honorifics Sanageyama was using, turned to Uryu in confusion, "Who is he talking about?"

Uryu gave Ichigo a tense glare as he fixed his glasses, "It's none of your concern, Ichigo."

"Don't pull that on me," Ichigo countered, "He obviously knows who you are."

Seeing no way to avoid having the conversation Uryu gave Sanageyama a curt glance before beginning, "Last summer my

father enrolled me in a two week internship at Revocs. I, of course, protested going but Ryuken insisted working under Ragyo Kiryuin would be a good learning experience and broaden my horizons. I met Satsuki Kiryuin on my first day. I only spoke with her a handful of times but she is an intelligent and driven woman who is not to be underestimated. However, I'm sure Sanageyama didn't come to Karakura Town to hear about my life."

If Uryu had to admit the truth he didn't want to explain what he did last summer.

When Ryuken informed him of his internship at Revocs blue he gave him only one day to get his affairs in order before he would need to leave. That wasn't even enough time to tell his friends, which made explaining why he disappeared when he came back extremely awkward. Luckily Orihime had been there. Her fantastical tale, accompanied with drawings that still confounded Uryu, that he had been abducted by aliens and brought to a world reduced to a nuclear wasteland where he had to collect bottle caps and fight mutated animals was enough to cause everyone else to shake their heads and collectively groan.

"True enough," Sanageyama smirked and reached into his Goku Uniform. Pulling out a thick envelope and tossing it to Ichigo Sanageyama explained, "Honnouji Academy's fall term begins in twenty three days. As a new student you're required to attend Student Evaluation Day. It's all simple stuff, really. Lady Satsuki will determine your initial placement and potential to wear a Goku Uniform."

"Goku Uniform?" Ichigo looked up from the papers in his hand, a confused look on his face.

Uryu grumbled, a look of mild irritation in his eyes, before he began explaining once more, "Goku Uniforms are the standard uniforms of Honnouji Academy and are imbued with special threads known as Life Fibers. The percentage of Life Fibers in a uniform indicates the

overall power. A higher percentage enables the wearer to accomplish feats of strength most people could only dream about.

Ichigo stared at Uryu, a deadpan look in his eyes, and asked, "Just how the hell do you know all this?"

"Like I explained..." Uryu smugly turned away from Ichigo with a grin on his face, "... I may have only spoken to Satsuki Kiryuin a handful of times but I never said our talks weren't productive."

Ichigo didn't need to know, and Uryu wouldn't tell him unless the situation was dire, that Satsuki attempted to recruit him. It wasn't as overt as simply asking him to come to Honnouji Academy but Uryu was intelligent enough to realize he was being led along during some of his conversations with Satsuki. If Satsuki's subtle prods at convincing him to enroll at Honnouji Academy weren't bad enough there was one other thing that caused Uryu to refuse to work with her.

During the last few days of his internship, after most of the others quit or returned home, Satsuki had pulled him aside and brought him to a highly secure room. Uryu remembered watching in more than mild interest as Satsuki inputted at least a twenty digit code before ushering him into the room, inside of which sat several high density bundles of Life Fibers. Satsuki allowed him to examine them, under the single rule that he not remove any of the Life Fibers from the room. A rule, in hindsight, that Uryu had been glad to follow. As he stared at the glowing red fibers, a nauseous feeling growing in the pit of his stomach, Uryu could feel the Life Fibers giving off a small but substantial amount of spiritual energy.

"That right," Sanageyama propped his feet on the coffee table and leaned back against the couch, "The strength of a Goku uniform comes from the number of stars stitched on it. The normal Honnouji Academy uniform contains no Life Fibers and those that wear them are called No-Stars. After that are the One-Star students and the Two-Star club captains."

Upon noticing Ichigo's attention on his Blade Regalia Sanageyama grinned as he pointed to the three four pointed stars stitched into the fabric, "This is a Three-Star Goku Uniform. Only the Elite Four of the Honnouji Academy Student Council has the right and privilege to wear one."

Ichigo frowned as he tried to think who in their right minds would allow students access to such dangerous things. It made no sense to him, "Isn't it a little dangerous to give students super-powered clothing?"

"You have to understand Ichigo," Uryu began with an overly exaggerated sigh. He couldn't fault Ichigo for his lack of knowledge. Not a lot of people left Karakura Town except for business trips and vacations. Turning to Ichigo, memories of what he saw outside of Karakura Town fresh in his mind, Uryu said, "Karakura High School is perhaps the most normal, or least if you look at it from a different perspective, school in the country. Despite how absurd it sounds most academies are completely controlled by the Student Councils, who are subsequently backed by their family's businesses. The Kiryuin Conglomerate is a good example. Through a mixture of espionage and blackmail Satsuki Kiryuin is indirectly controlling all but a dozen or so schools."

"I knew that."

Ichigo wasn't as stubborn as other people thought. He had been suspicious of his dad constantly making up excuses about why they couldn't leave Karakura Town for anything, even vacation. One night on patrol he decided to take a little detour out of Karakura Town. What he saw past the outskirts of the city stunned him into silence. It turned out that most of the world was a wasteland. When he confronted Kisuke Urahara about it, since the former captain knew just about everything, the man gave a frustration-inducing smirk and hinted that things were quite strange around the world. Needless to say Ichigo turned around and left without asking anything else.

"This place is quite nice. It reminds me a bit of home," Sanageyama admitted, nostalgia evident in his voice, "But you don't need to worry about anything like that. Lady Satsuki is aware of the power Goku Uniforms possess. Every student is carefully screened and tested before receiving a Goku Uniform. In the three years she's been the Student Council President Lady Satsuki hasn't made a single wrong decision. If anyone attempts to go around her orders they are immediately met with harsh and direct punishment."

"You kill people over stealing some clothes?"

"It's much more complicated than that, Ichigo," Uryu interjected again, letting Ichigo know he was about to start on another one of his lectures, "Goku Uniforms are designed and distributed by Satsuki Kiryuin, who modeled them after her mother's line of clothing. If anyone were to somehow acquire a Goku Uniform they could reverse engineer Life Fibers, which would lead to a global arms race involving increasingly powerful clothing."

"I still find this hard to believe," Ichigo crossed his arms and let out a heavy sigh, "Clothing with superpowers still sounds really stupid to me."

"I wouldn't worry too much," Sanageyama lightly tapped his Goku Uniform as he leaned forward and uncrossed his legs, "Lady Satsuki wouldn't allow you to come to Honnouji Academy if she thought you were a spy. Everything about you, from your history to who you know, has been investigated under Lady Satsuki's orders."

"Great," Ichigo grumbled and turned away, "I have a stalker now. That's just what I needed."

Sanageyama shrugged but his expression tensed upon hearing Ichigo's casual insulting of Satsuki, "I don't pretend to know what Lady Satsuki thinks but she was impressed with what she found. I'm more than sure you'll get at least a One-Star Goku Uniform once you arrive and take your evaluation. Hell, you might even make Two-Star

if you try out of the Kendo Club. I heard you're quite skilled with a sword."

"How do you know about that?"

"If you really want to find out, come to Honnouji Academy," Sanageyama looked at his cell phone and sighed, "Great, it seems my work is never done. It's been nice chatting with you but I have to get going. I hope you decide to go to Honnouji Academy, Ichigo. Perhaps we could have a little spar."

As soon as Sanageyama left, Ichigo turned on Uryu, "Why does it feel as if I'm out of the loop?"

Uryu seemed mystified as well. Eyes narrowed slightly and propping his fist in front of his face, the Quincy answered, "I am not quite sure. From my limited interactions with Satsuki Kiryuin, she does not seem like the type of person to take interest in anyone without similar mental fortitude and force of will as herself."

"You seem to know all about what's going on," Ichigo's eyes narrowed dangerously, "Did you have anything to do with this?"

"Who do you take me for, your dad?" Uryu seemed insulted by the accusation, "If I went through all the trouble of getting you into Honnouji Academy, wouldn't it make sense that I would get myself enrolled as well?"

"Oh, shut it already," Ichigo grumbled at Uryu's logic, "So who is this Satsuki person anyway?"

"Satsuki Kiryuin..." Uryu wracked his brain for the information, "She's driven, motivated and possesses an utter disdain for anyone that doesn't meet her own personal criteria and standards. When I started my internship at Revocs there were fifteen of us. The very first day we were brought into a room where Satsuki Kiryuin was waiting for us. Before we knew what was happening Satsuki began speaking about how all clothing is sacred to humanity and that it is



our fate to wear it. Right then and there half of the interns dropped out and I think Satsuki expected that to happen."

That was a rather terrible story, so Ichigo said the only thing on his mind, "Well... shit."

"That is exactly my point," Uryu nodded and looked out the window. He was surprised, perhaps even more than Ichigo, to see Sanageyama. Satsuki Kiryuin was an intelligent woman. She wouldn't have sent one of her most loyal followers to Karakura Town without a very good reason, "Her interest in you is quite surprising. Be careful, Ichigo. Satsuki Kiryuin is not someone to mess with so take my advice and stay far away from her if you do go to Honnouji Academy."

Ichigo scowled, more out of frustration than annoyance, and opened his mouth to say something when the front door began shaking. Ignoring the muffled protests from his father, demanding to be let back inside, Ichigo ran a hand through his hair, "Damn, why do I have to go to Honnouji Academy?"

"You should look on the bright side."

Ichigo turned to Uryu and was immediately annoyed by the smug look on his face, "And what exactly is the bright side to all this?"

"At least Honnouji Academy won't be boring." Uryu answered with an amused hint to his voice. He knew Ichigo well enough to realize trouble followed him like a magnet. It was only a matter of time, perhaps even days, before something surprising happened at Honnouji Academy, "Just try not to get into too much trouble."

"Go to hell, Uryu."

"Believe me, I'm in heaven right now," Uryu answered smugly as he walked past Ichigo towards the front door. Holding onto the handle of the door but not yet pulling it open Uryu turned around and snapped off one final comment, "I can't wait to hear you tell everyone where

you'll be going next year. I'm sure Tatsuki will be more than thrilled to hear about it."

As the weight of what he would need to do came crashing down upon his head Ichigo failed to notice Isshin quietly opening the window and letting himself back in the house. He did, however, feel the subtle change in the air and quickly spun around his father's meager attempt to tackle him. Grabbing Isshin in a chokehold before slamming the older man into the ground Ichigo gave Uryu a dry look and asked, "Why don't you go back home and sew something. I heard Orihime wanted you to make her a new dress."

"I told you, it's just a hobby!"

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In the darkened Student Council Chambers of Honnouji Academy several people watched the information scrolling across the screen in front of them. Situated on the screen, wearing the standard Karakura High School male uniform and a familiar scowl, was an image of Ichigo Kurosaki. The picture, which appears to have been lifted directly from Karakura High School's servers, took up the entire left half of the screen while data and statistics about Ichigo streamed down the right side.

"He looks like a delinquent," the largest figure in the room growled irritably as he stared at Ichigo's picture, "Just look at his hair! There is no doubt that his punkish attitude will bring disorder and chaos to this academy!"

"There's no need to raise your voice when we're standing right here, Gamagori," A shorter figure with teal hair chided from where he was sitting. Pressing a few keys on his laptop, the command instantly traveling to the screen, Houka Inumuta's collar automatically unzipped itself as he began speaking, "Ichigo Kurosaki - Age 16.

Third year student at Karakura High School and is currently ranks fifth in his class."

"Karakura Town?" a regal voice muttered quietly. Holding the nearly empty teacup gently in her hands she nodded her head, "I see... continue, Inumuta."

Inumuta nodded and immediately several pictures of Ichigo's family appeared on the screen, "Ichigo Kurosaki is the eldest of three siblings, the other two being Karin and Yuzu Kurosaki - Age 12. His father is Isshin Kurosaki, who runs a small family clinic. Hmm... it says his mother, Masaki Kurosaki, is deceased and yet..."

The regal figure turned away from the screen, her eyebrows raised in mild interest, "What is it?"

A frown marred Inumuta's face as his fingers raced across the keyboard. As he searched databases and servers, the data he was looking for conspicuously absent, Inumuta's eyes narrowed as he let out a frustrated sigh, "It says that Masaki Kurosaki was murdered nine years ago but there is a strange absence of media coverage. From all accounts Ichigo's mother was a well-liked woman in Karakura Town. There is only one police report and even that fails to mention the cause of death or any suspects."

"Is that why Strawberry is always scowling?" Nonon Jakuzure, Honnouji Academy Student Council Non-Athletic Committee Chair, stood up to get a better look at Ichigo. After a moment of staring at his picture, Nonon's mouth spread in a mischievous smirk, "He may have a stupid name but he's quite good looking."

"You dishonor yourself in front of Lady Satsuki, Jakuzure!" Gamagori shouted, his eyes gleaming a malevolent yellow.

The regal figure turned her gaze to Gamagori, her piercing blue eyes causing the argument to immediately cease, "Calm down, Gamagori."

Gamagori deflated slightly, "Of course, Lady Satsuki."

Satsuki Kiryuin, daughter of the illustrious Ragyo Kiryuin, stared at the image of Ichigo Kurosaki for several seconds. Three days ago her mother called to inform her that Ichigo would be attending Honnouji Academy yet Satsuki could not find a logical reason for the decision. Her mother may control the Board of Directors for Honnouji Academy but she was usually content to let Satsuki do what she pleased. To so suddenly show a vested interest in a random teenager implied she knew something about Ichigo that Satsuki did not.

"If I may continue," Inumuta's fingers were a blur on the keyboard as he rapidly typed in commands, "Pertaining to your request, Lady Satsuki, I expanded my search from Ichigo Kurosaki to his immediate family, both paternal and maternal, and found something quite interesting."

With one final keystroke from Inumuta the image of Ichigo vanished only to be replaced by several digital newspaper clippings. Leaning forward, her attention focused on the headlines describing a terrorist attack in Tokyo, Satsuki's blue eyes narrowed when she failed to find a single picture of the attack. Inumuta, sensing her irritation at the lack of evidence, adjusted his glasses and explained, "As you can see, Lady Satsuki, there are absolutely no images of the actual terrorist attack. All the media sources describing the attack come from third party witnesses."

Satsuki frowned before closing her eyes, "This is quite suspicious, Inumuta. Am I to assume this has something to do with Ichigo Kurosaki?"

"Not Ichigo but his father," Inumuta corrected before bringing up an image of Isshin, "While the lack of photographic evidence is suspicious every single source I could find agrees that Isshin Kurosaki, or Shiba as he was known back then, somehow saved your mother's life during the attack."

So it appeared her mother was inviting Ichigo Kurosaki to Honnouji Academy because his father saved her life more than twenty years ago. Satsuki, rather than being satisfied with that answer, only found her annoyance at the situation growing. If there was one thing she hated in the world it was nepotism. People should not advance due to familial ties but because they earned it through hard work and dedication.

"We must face the facts of the situation," Satsuki said after a moment of quiet contemplation, "Ichigo Kurosaki will be attending Honnouji Academy at the start of the fall semester. Gamagori, are the preparations for the next school year nearly complete?"

"Just about," Ira Gamagori answered proudly. As the Student Council Disciplinary Committee Chair of Honnouji Academy it was his duty to make sure those unworthy of wearing Goku Uniforms did not try to abscond with one. He could not count the number of times another academy sent a spy to steal a Goku Uniform, "All the new One-Star students have been announced and their uniforms are prepared and waiting to be picked up. The elections for the new club captains are nearly complete and Iori is distributing their Two-Star Goku Uniforms as we speak."

Satsuki sipped the last of her tea, the bitter liquid going down smoothly, as she listened to Gamagori's report, "Very good. Ichigo Kurosaki will be here in twenty two days. Let us make sure that he receives a warm welcome. Jakuzure, have one of the club captains meet him upon his arrival."

"Which club would you prefer, Lady Satsuki?" Jakuzure's pink eyes glinted maliciously as she thought of various ways to make Ichigo's life miserable.

"It does not matter," Satsuki answered calmly, her mind already focusing on other events, "My mother might have gone over my head to allow Ichigo Kurosaki admittance to Honnouji Academy but it is still my decision whether he is qualified to stay."

There was a pregnant silence as the three members of Satsuki's Elite Four allowed her words to sink in. After about a minute of silence a sharp ringing noise echoed from Inumuta's laptop. Looking at the ID of the caller Inumuta turned to Satsuki, "Sanageyama has finished his task in Karakura Town. Shall I connect him?"

Satsuki nodded, "Yes."

Inumuta pressed a single key before there was a slight rise in the ambient static in the room as his laptop connected to the speakers on the screen. After a moment, the static dying down to nothing, Sanageyama's voice filtered in, "Hey Inumuta, is everything working?"

"You are speaking to Lady Satsuki! Show some respect!" Gamagori rebuffed.

"Forgive me, Lady Satsuki," Sanageyama's tone was apologetic before he resumed speaking, "Anyway, I just left Ichigo Kurosaki's home. He's definitely an interesting guy to say the least. However... I got the feeling that Ichigo doesn't want to go to Honnouji Academy."

"What do you mean Ichigo Kurosaki does not want to attend this prestigious academy? Speak some sense, Sanageyama!" Gamagori shouted, his disbelief speaking for all four people currently in the room.

"It turns out his dad enrolled him without telling him about it," Sanageyama paused for a moment, causing only the ambient sounds of Karakura Town to come over the connection. After a few seconds of silence, interspaced by what sounded like someone muttering to themselves, Sanageyama's voice reappeared, "Ichigo seemed quite pissed off when he found out."

"We might be able to use that against Ichigo Kurosaki if the need arises," Satsuki announced as several plans came to mind, "Do you have anything else to report?"

Sanageyama was about to say no when he remembered Uryu's presence in Ichigo's house, "Yeah, I think he's close friends with Uryu Ishida."

That was a name Satsuki did not think she would hear again anytime soon. Uryu Ishida was a brilliant teenager whose theories and ideas concerning Life Fibers greatly intrigued her. It was his theory of using a zigzag cross-stitch, after all, that increased the power of her Goku Uniforms by nearly fifteen percent. After his internship at Revocs Satsuki had subtly tried to convince him to enroll at Honnouji Academy but Uryu had politely refused.

"Uryu Ishida is a name I did not think I would hear again," Satsuki closed her eyes and smirked, "Thank you for the report, Sanageyama. You are free to return to Honnouji Academy while the rest of you are to finish the fall preparations."

As the three members of the Elite Four bowed and left to complete their tasks, leaving Satsuki completely alone, the Student Council President stared at the screen in front of her with a scowl adorning her face. She was not naïve enough to believe her mother would have allowed Ichigo Kurosaki admittance to Honnouji Academy based simply on the actions of his father. Her mother was an extremely sophisticated and intelligent woman. There was something, a piece of the puzzle, she was missing that would help explain her mother's actions.

*"Who are you, Ichigo Kurosaki?"*

Satsuki steeped her fingers in front of her face. If her mother had a vested interest in Ichigo Kurosaki attending Honnouji Academy than Satsuki could not be too careful. As she focused on her plans, Satsuki paused when her ears picked up the subtle sound of someone walking towards her. Immediately recognizing the gait she asked, "What is it, Soroi?"

Soroi Mitsuzo bowed his head respectfully, "I know it is none of my business, Milady, but I could not help overhearing your interest in

that young man."

Satsuki smirked at the smell of freshly brewed tea, "Yes, I suppose Ichigo Kurosaki fascinates me. He has managed to garner my mother's attention yet I cannot find any reason for such respect."

A slight frown marred Soroi's face as he stared at the picture of Isshin Kurosaki, "I have spent years in the service of your family, Milady, yet the reasons behind Lady Ragyo's actions have always puzzled me. I do know, however, that Lady Ragyo's interest in the young Ichigo Kurosaki stems from the actions of his father."

Satsuki carefully scrutinized over the facts as she listened to Soroi speak. There were no images of the actual attack or Isshin Kurosaki rescuing her mother but the eyewitness reports obtained by Inumuta indicates he was able to save her mother's life without sustaining a single wound in the process. Such a feat of strength was something she was more than capable of doing herself but something about the situation bothered her. Satsuki wracked her mind, hoping that some small connection would allow the pieces to fall into place, but gave up after a minute. Leaning back in her chair, the fingers on her right hand strumming the armrest, Satsuki looked out the window and said, "Your words may hold a trace of the truth but I will not allow Ichigo Kurosaki to attend Honnouji Academy without proving himself first."

"As you wish, Milady," Soroi gave a soft bow of his head as he poured Satsuki a cup of tea. He had given his opinion on the matter, however small it may be, but once Satsuki made up her mind nothing anyone said or did could change it.



# If You Don't Know Me By Now

*As with Chapter 1, this is the new and improved Chapter 2. The changes in this chapter were mostly focused on Kisuke's fight with his opponent (no spoilers up here for you new readers!) When I wrote this chapter, Kill la Kill was only on episode 17 or so, which meant a lot of the relative powers and abilities of the characters were still mostly unknown. Now that the anime is finished (which is both a shame and a relief to me as a writer), I have gone back and rewrote EVERYTHING in the fight. From the beginning to the end is completely new dialogue and action. I even managed to make Kisuke even more Kisuke-ish than before, which is surprising.*

*As a callback to my original author's note. I hadn't expected the reaction to this story to be as great as it was. Even 18 chapters later, the amount of reviews, favorites and alerts continues to grow more and more each day. Thanks to each and every person that takes the time to review my chapters.*

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## Chapter 2 - If You Don't Know Me By Now

"Ichigo!"

From where he was standing in his front door Ichigo sighed. As the shouting coming from his friend, Keigo Asano, drew closer, he waited until the last second before stepping to the side and holding his arm out. Keigo, enraptured at seeing Ichigo, was unable to notice the arm until the last second and was harshly clotheslined. Ichigo, while still a normal human, possessed greater than normal physical strength and easily stopped Keigo's forward momentum.

While the teen's head and neck were stopped abruptly, the laws of physics dictated that the rest of him continue to move forward. Keigo's legs flew into the air before his entire body crashed to the ground in an undignified heap.

Lowering his arm, and looking at his friend with annoyance, Ichigo said, "Hey Keigo, Mizuiro."

Mizuiro Kojima stepped on the prone form of Keigo, eliciting a groan of pain from the teen, and waved back to Ichigo, "Hey Ichigo. Tatsuki said you were throwing a farewell party, right?"

"Unfortunately," Ichigo grumbled and folded his arms, "My idiotic dad wouldn't stop bugging me until I agreed to this. Then he had the nerve to try and hang out with us."

"Ah," Mizuiro muttered knowingly, "I suppose that is an issue."

As Mizuiro walked into his house, Ichigo turned and closed the door just as Keigo was about to follow them, causing the teen to slam face first into it and fall back onto the ground. Ignoring the cry of pain from outside, Ichigo walked back to the living room where everyone was either waiting for him to return or talking amongst themselves.

"So Ichigo," Tatsuki Arisawa grinned at him and punched his shoulder hard enough to make Ichigo wince, "Just when were you going to tell us you were transferring schools?"

Rubbing his sore shoulder, Ichigo scoffed, "It's not like I had a choice or anything. I only found out about it last week."

"That's no excuse for waiting five days before telling us," Tatsuki argued back. Before Ichigo could even retort, she reached to the side and pulled a bewildered Orihime Inoue in front of her body, "Did you even stop to think about how any of us would feel about it? Orihime was devastated when she found out you were leaving!"

"Come on, Tatsuki!" Orihime blushed in embarrassment and tried to desperately pull herself out of her best friend's grip, "Don't say things like that. If Ichigo wants to go to another school, I'm fine with that. Really! He shouldn't have to stay here because of me!"

"Damn it, Orihime!" Tatsuki turned Orihime around until she was face to face with the well-endowed girl and began shaking her like a rag doll, "It's been over four years! Tell him how you feel before it's too late!"

"How I feel? I... but... Ichigo..." Orihime's face turned a deep red from embarrassment before she managed to escape Tatsuki's grasp and ran out of the living room, her friend hot on her heels.

Watching them go, a bewildered and confused expression adorning his face, Ichigo just silently shook his head, "Damn it, I'm confused."

"You cannot possibly be this dense," Uryu sarcastically asked from where he was sitting.

"Oh shut up," Ichigo snapped back, "I don't see how this is any of your business."

"It is my business when you are so oblivious to what is right in front of your eyes," Uryu adjusted his glasses, a knowing smirk on his face, "I knew you weren't intelligent Ichigo, but I never thought you were this stupid."

Reaching to the nearby table, Ichigo grabbed the first heavy object he could and threw it at Uryu. The Quincy opened his eyes just in time to be beamed in the forehead by a coffee mug, propelling his body backwards along with the chair he was sitting on.

"Excuse me," Mizuiro casually stepped over Uryu's unconscious body. Sitting down on the couch, his cell phone once again in his hands, he asked, "So Ichigo, did you find out anything interesting about this Honnouji Academy?"

"Not much," Ichigo admitted, "Uryu seems to know a lot about it, but he's being awfully quiet about it. Most of what I know comes from that weird guy that came to the house last week. I think his name was Sanageyama or something like that."

"Weird," Mizuiro typed something on his phone before turning to look at Uryu's prone form, "Uryu's been out for a while now. Are you sure you didn't kill him?"

"He's fine," Ichigo walked over to Uryu's body before gently, to him at least, kicking the quincy. Sputtering back to the realm of consciousness, Uryu coughed and glared at Ichigo.

"That was completely uncalled for Ichigo!"

"I see you're awake," Ichigo replied, completely unbothered by Uryu's glare, "You know anything else about Honnouji Academy that you failed to tell me already."

Quickly standing up, the blood that was trailing down from his forehead mysteriously gone, Uryu fixed his glasses and began speaking, "There is not much that I could add to what Sanageyama told us last week. The only thing I can think of is that the number of stars affixed to your Goku Uniform determines more than just your ranking in the school. The more stars you have, and therefore the more power, the better your standard of living is. One-Star students live in standard dormitories while Two-Star students have houses all to themselves."

Their conversation was interrupted when Isshin's head appeared from the kitchen, "Ichigo, there's someone on the line for you."

Uncaring as to what his dad wanted, Ichigo waved him off dismissively, "Tell them to call back later."

Isshin disappeared back into the kitchen, and for a moment Ichigo and his friends could hear him talking to someone on the phone.

When he reappeared a minute later, he said, "Come on Ichigo! This girl sounds rather interested in speaking with you."

Ichigo had no idea who his dad was talking about, and judging by the looks on his friends' faces, no one else did either.

"Who the hell is your dad talking about?" Tatsuki asked as she walked back into the living room, a noticeably less embarrassed Orihime following her.

"I have no idea," he answered with an annoyed sigh, "I better go answer the phone before he decides to do something stupid like putting it on speaker. Hey dad, what line's the phone on?"

"None!" Isshin walked out of the kitchen, his new cell phone in his hand, "The girl called on my cell phone! How she got my number I'll never know. She's going to call back on the video phone!"

Ichigo's breath hitched in his chest as his dad just said the worst thing he could. A few weeks after defeating Aizen, Kisuke stopped by their house alongside his assistant, Tessai, and said they were there to work on something Isshin had asked them to do. After being shoved out of his own house for nearly two hours, Ichigo returned to find a new television in the living room. When he saw nothing else changed, he pulled Kisuke aside and asked what he did. The former captain, with an insufferable grin on his face, told him that he installed what the living call a 'video phone.' Using some of Soul Society's technology, they managed to adapt it for normal usage. Ichigo had asked Kisuke why the hell they would need it in his house, to which the shopkeeper had said:

*" Because Yoruichi wouldn't let me put it in my shop."*

When the television turned on with an all too familiar crackling of electricity, Ichigo turned and saw a stern-faced girl appear on the screen, "Ichigo Kurosaki I presume?"

Ichigo stared at the girl for a couple of seconds in absolute silence. With neatly cut black hair that fell to below her shoulders and a stern expression on her face, the resemblance between her and Byakuya Kuchiki frightened Ichigo. After taking a moment to assure himself that he hadn't somehow stumbled into a parallel universe where Byakuya was a woman, he crossed his arms and asked, "Who are you?"

"Hey Ichigo," Tatsuki squinted her eyes slightly and pointed her thumb at the screen, "You know her?"

"Satsuki Kiryuin," Uryu stared at the screen, "I did not think we would speak again."

"Uryu Ishida," Satsuki turned toward the Quincy, "It is a pleasure to speak to you once more. I was unaware that you were familiar with Ichigo Kurosaki."

Uryu adjusted his glasses with his index finger, "Must I repeat what I told you while I interned at Revocs? I prefer to keep my private life separate from my work. I'm sure someone such as yourself appreciates such a belief, or was I wrong in my understanding of you?"

Satsuki gave Uryu a barely-noticeable smirk but did not say anything. Turning her gaze across Ichigo's living room, making sure to make eye contact with each and every one of Ichigo's friends, she said, "You keep interesting company, Ichigo Kurosaki. Inumuta prides himself on being able to gather information, but it seems he failed to find out quite a lot about you."

"Am I supposed to be flattered?"

"You should be," Satsuki reached off the screen and when her hand came back, it was holding a cup of tea, "I'm going to be perfect honest with you, Ichigo Kurosaki. I do not appreciate having someone like you, who gets through life solely on the deeds of their

parent, attend Honnouji Academy. It is a disgrace and I will not tolerate your presence for one minute in my academy!"

"Oh please," Ichigo rolled his eyes at her veiled threat, "You think I even want to attend your stupid school? I was more than happy to stay in Karakura until I finished high school, but my idiot of a father enrolled me in Honnouji Academy without even asking me about it first. Just hearing your voice is making me wish I didn't have to go even more."

For a moment it looked like Satsuki was about to snap at Ichigo's defiance but instead, a smile graced her face, "Bold words Ichigo Kurosaki. It seems the information about you was indeed correct, but all you have done is bluster meaninglessly. Are you able to stand upon your two feet like a human or do you cower behind those with true power like a dog?"

Ichigo was about to reply when he realized that her anecdote made absolutely no sense. Sure the meaning was clear as day, but the way she phrased it just threw him off balance. Looking towards the only source of information in the room, he asked Uryu, "Do you have any idea what she just said? Is there anything I can say to make her go away?"

Purposely avoiding looking at Satsuki, Uryu answered, "What you just asked is as impossible as having Orihime keep herself from blurting out whatever exists in that nightmarish imagination of hers. The best course of action would be to listen to what Satsuki has to say. Anything else would most likely not be in your best interests."

"Fine," Ichigo sighed in defeat. Turning back to Satsuki, he said, "What do you want from me?"

Satsuki narrowed her eyes, "What I want from you is inconsequential, as I have already obtained all I needed to know. Watch yourself upon your arrival at Honnouji Academy, Ichigo Kurosaki. Not everyone will be as tolerant of your presence as myself."

With that last warning given, Satsuki's image disappeared from the screen. There was a pregnant pause before Tatsuki said, "God, what a bitch."

"Tatsuki!" Orihime cupped her hands over her mouth in shock, "That's not a nice thing to say. So she was a little mean... that doesn't mean you can call her that!"

"I have to agree with Tatsuki, Orihime. Satsuki Kiryuin was quite rude to Ichigo."

Everyone jumped slightly as Yasutora Sado, known as Chad to his friends, appeared out of nowhere behind Orihime. None more so than Orihime, who literally leapt in the air and into Tatsuki's arms out of fright.

"Chad," Ichigo's mind was trying to piece together how Chad had appeared out of thin air, "Where the hell did you come from?"

"The front door," Chad pointed behind him, "I was walking by when I saw Keigo crying near your house. I asked him what was wrong and he said you locked him out, but when I tried opening your door I found it unlocked. After that, I just let myself in. I hope you don't mind."

"It's not a problem," Ichigo didn't want to think about how such a large person could be so stealthy.

"Hey Chad," Mizuiro frowned and put his phone away, "Anyway, I don't know about the rest of you, but I got the feeling that Satsuki was threatening Ichigo."

Mumbling to himself, Uryu began explaining to the rest of them what he knew, "Satsuki Kiryuin holds a tight grip on Honnouji Academy. Ichigo's acceptance to the school and reluctant attendance has thrown a wrench into her plans that she has not yet begun to account for. This call was a way for her to gauge Ichigo's personality and intelligence. There is no doubt in my mind that she purposely



called when we were all here so as to see how Ichigo would react in the presence of those close to him."

Ichigo rubbed his face in annoyance, "This is just great. I haven't even left home and I already have an stalker. Hey, did any of you notice that she looked and acted a lot like Byakuya?"

Uryu nodded, "I noticed a passing resemblance."

"A little, although she had blue eyes," Chad answered.

"Oh! Do you think she's his daughter from an illicit affair with a human woman?" Orihime asked. In her head she was already imagining Satsuki as a shinigami, cutting down hollows while Byakuya and Rukia watched on with pride and awe. As Ichigo saw the glazed look in Orihime's eyes, signaling she was going to be gone for a while, he could have sworn he heard his dad suddenly choke and cough.

"Who?" Tatsuki asked.

Ichigo flinched subtly as he remembered that Tatsuki had never actually met Byakuya Kuchiki. Out of all his friends, she was the only one to have little experience with the Soul Society apart from when Aizen had arrived in Karakura Town after defeating the captains in the fake Karakura Town.

"It was just someone from the Soul Society, Tatsuki," he admitted. Turning to leave the room, he looked at Uryu, "I'm going to go kill my dad. Ignore everything you may hear."

"That will not be a problem," Uryu responded, "I was not too pleased to speak with Satsuki once more myself. Our last encounter did not end amicably."

Stalking out of the living room into the kitchen, where he knew his dad to be hiding, Ichigo was considering just what he was going to

do him when he heard his father's voice speaking to someone on the phone, "Are you sure about this? It's not too late you know."

Leaving the living room and entering the kitchen, Ichigo looked around for where his dad might be hiding but, to his surprise, he found the room completely empty. Scratching his head and looking around, he noticed the back door was slightly ajar. Walking over and looking outside, he saw nothing and was about to turn away when he heard his dad's voice.

"I know but..."

Ichigo frowned at the exhausted tone in Isshin's voice. When he tried and failed to hear whoever his dad was talking to, his dad spoke again, "I see your point. Are you sure about this? I mean... fine. I suppose I'll talk to him and send him over as soon as possible. Bye."

Pulling his phone away from his ear, his arm falling to his side, Isshin said, "Ichigo, you really need to learn some manners. It is impolite to eavesdrop on other people's conversations."

"Yeah, well," Ichigo put his hands in his pockets and walked outside, "You're one to talk. How many times have I caught you trying to listen in on me?"

"Too many to count," Isshin admitted with a chuckle, "But as your father, I am entitled to stripping you of your liberties and rights if it helps make you safe. Who knows what type of illegal activities you get up to when I'm not around to stop you."

Ichigo groaned and rubbed the bridge of his nose, "You know exactly what I was doing last year. Anyway, what was that all about?"

"It was Kisuke," Isshin's voice was somber, as if he had just heard a piece of bad news, "He wants you to come to his store as soon as possible."

"Why?" Ichigo was confused. Ever since he lost his shinigami powers, Kisuke had said that he didn't need to come by his shop anymore. It wasn't that he was no longer permitted to come so much as he didn't want Ichigo to remember everything he had lost in the process of saving both the Soul Society and the World of the Living. While he was initially incensed at that, he had quickly realized his point when Kisuke said that Rukia had stopped by when he was there. The fact that one of his closest friends, shinigami or not, was right next to him and he was unable to see or sense here gave Ichigo all the incentive he needed to leave Kisuke's shop.

"He wouldn't say," Isshin groaned and rubbed his chin, the early makings of a beard already apparent, "But he said it was very important that you come over as soon as possible."

Ichigo didn't see any reason why he shouldn't go. Kisuke wasn't one to drag him to his shop in the middle of the day without a good reason, "But what about my friends? I can't just ditch them."

"Don't worry," Isshin pat his shoulder in a comforting gesture, "I think I can take care of your friends while you're gone."

Ichigo stood there, thinking about what Kisuke wanted, as his father walked back into the house, a mischievous grin on his face. As he stood there, thinking about what Kisuke wanted, Ichigo heard his father shout, "Who wants to see Ichigo's baby pictures?"

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Nearly half an hour after Kisuke called, Ichigo found himself standing outside the former captain's shop. It had been so long since he had come by that Ichigo was confident that Kisuke had done something strange to the shop, like perhaps adding another floor or two.

"Hey Kisuke."

When Ichigo's greeting went unanswered, he frowned and knocked on the door. Didn't his dad say that Kisuke was waiting for him at his store? If that was the case, then where was that idiotic shopkeeper.

"Damn it, Kisuke," Ichigo growled and slammed his hand on the door, "This better not be another stupid joke."

Kisuke never left his shop unattended for even a minute. There was always someone there to manage the business of catering to shinigami and humans. It had originally been because if Aizen somehow managed to locate his hideout and came by while Kisuke was away, there would be no telling how much damage the traitorous captain could accomplish with everything hidden inside. That did not mean Kisuke always made the right choice. When he and Yoruichi went on their 'vacation' last fall, he had left an irritated Tessai in charge. After Ichigo received several subtle and several not-so-subtle threats by the behemoth of a man to volunteer at the shop after school or else, Ichigo had wisely decided to stay out of the way until Kisuke got back. That, however, was not nearly as bad as when he left Hiyori in charge for a few days.

Ichigo still did not comprehend how Hiyori set normal water on fire like that.

Slightly disturbed by what he might find inside, Ichigo braced himself and, to his surprise, managed to slide open the door without any resistance. As he stepped inside and his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he stopped and muttered, "What the hell...?"

The neatly organized rows of merchandise interspaced with items from the Soul Society hidden under weak illusions that would cause any human without the proper knowledge to skip over them lay in broken and destroyed piles on the ground. Ichigo carefully stepped over several opened cans of food and noticed something odd on the floor. Every few feet there were several strange gashes cut into the floor. Kneeling down to inspect them further, Ichigo ran a finger over one of the gashes and quickly drew his hand back. Whatever had

created the gashes had been sharp enough to leave the edges jagged and razor sharp.

"What happened?" he muttered before quickly leaping back as the sound of something crashing to the ground startled him. Eyes looking around for the source of the sound, his mind assuming that it belonged to whoever did this to Kisuke's store, he let out a breath of relief when he saw it was simply the door to the back of the shop falling off its hinges.

Cursing his inability to sense spiritual pressure, Ichigo cautiously crept towards the back of the store where Kisuke lived. Pressing his back against the wall near where the door had fallen off, he peered around the corner, his eyes darting through the darkness for any unexpected surprises. Seeing no one inside, he walked into Kisuke's room and flicked on the lights.

From just that one glance it was apparent that a fight had taken place. There were several spots of blood on the ground that led across the room towards the back door, which Ichigo noticed had been blown off the hinges from the inside.

As he carefully stepped across the room, Ichigo nearly tripped on something strewn haphazardly on the ground. Quickly regaining his balance before he fell, he looked down at what tripped him and saw that it was a pink umbrella cut neat in two. Reaching down to pick it up, he was surprised when it took both of his arms to lift it off the ground and even then Ichigo didn't think he could hold it for more than a minute or two.

When his cell phone rang, Ichigo nearly had a heart attack and dropped the umbrella, almost hitting his foot in the process. Fishing his phone out of his pocket and looking at the caller id, he was relieved when he saw it was Kisuke.

"Kisuke?"

"Hello Ichigo," Kisuke's voice came echoed out from the speakers on his phone, "By your tone of voice I assume you've seen the state of my shop. I would apologize for the mess but unfortunately I'm a little preoccupied at the moment."

"What's going on? Where are you?"

"Oh nothing much," Ichigo heard Kisuke wince over the phone, "I'm currently hunkered down in a construction building in the eastern part of town. If you're wondering why, it's because I had an uninvited guest arrive at my shop just a little while ago."

"Guest?" Ichigo might not have been able to sense spiritual pressure anymore, but he could feel something off about the whole situation.

From where he was leaning against a concrete support pillar twenty-three stories above Karakura Town, Kisuke looked at the trail of blood cascading down his left arm with a grimace. He supposed he should consider himself lucky that the injury to his shoulder was not deep enough to reach the tendons. Taking a deep breath and leaning his head back until it was resting against the concrete, he adjusted his hat and began explaining, "Before I say anything, I would like to point out that I had never seen this person before in my life, and that is saying a lot."

Kisuke's shinigami senses picked up movement nearby. Quickly turning his head, he let out a breath of relief when he saw it was just a rat. Focusing back on the phone, he began explaining, "I'm sure by now Uryu has mentioned where he was last summer. What he might have failed to tell you is that when he came back, he may have absconded with something that didn't belong to him. It wasn't like I expected him to bring me a bundle of Life Fibers, but he was quite adamant that there was something strange about them."

"Strange?"

"I'm not quite sure myself," Kisuke admitted. The attack could not have come at a worse time. Yoruichi was back in the Soul Society

helping Sui-Feng with something completely unrelated to her job as a captain while Tessai had taken Ururu and Jinta out somewhere. If even one of them were here, Kisuke was certain he would not have had to retreat, "But whatever the case may be, I'm fairly certain that my current predicament is related to the Life Fibers. I am unsure as to how she managed to find out I had them or even where I was. Luckily I was able to escape with only minor injuries."

"Who attacked you?" Ichigo demanded to know what happened. Even if he was currently powerless, it tore at him that he was unable to do anything to help.

Kisuke sighed and tipped his hat forward, casting his eyes in shadow, "To be perfectly honest I'm not quite sure that whoever attacked me was even a human. There was something... off... about them, but they were strong. At least at the level of a captain."

Back in Kisuke's shop, Ichigo's heart plummeted at that piece of information. He didn't know anyone, apart from the arrancar, that could fight a shinigami captain evenly. Who could have attacked Kisuke with enough power to not just injury the former captain, but also cause him to flee for his life? Nervously swallowing the bile rising in his throat, he asked, "Are you sure about that?"

"There is no doubt in my mind as to their purpose for attacking me," Kisuke answered seriously, but Ichigo could tell he was distracted by something, "I'm sure you want to know what I did with the Life Fibers. To be honest, it was just something I worked on in my spare time. Whatever they are, Life Fibers are something else. It took me months just to figure out how they work and up until a few weeks ago to get them to actually do anything. In retrospect, that might have drawn her attention to me. Perhaps there is some sort of security built into the Life Fibers that acts as a sort of homing beacon. Whether that is true or not, I'm pretty sure she didn't appreciate my answer."

Ichigo was just about to open his mouth to ask something when Kisuke interrupted him, "Ichigo, I need you to do something for me."

Biting his lip, Ichigo responded, "What do you need me to do?"

Kisuke was silent for a few seconds, "I need you to go into the Secret Training Room under my store. Once you're down there, walk straight away from the ladder and look behind a funny looking rock to the right. There will be something there that I think you will find to be of great use when you go to Honnouji Academy. I would say more but - "

Whatever Kisuke was about to say was cut off as a large explosion reverberated through the phone, "Kisuke! What the hell happened?"

There was silence before Kisuke's crackling voice came through, "Sorry about that Ichigo. It seems that she's managed to find me sooner than I anticipated. I'll talk to you later. Do not try and find me, and make sure she does not find what I left you."

"Kisuke!" Ichigo shouted at his phone but the former captain had already ended the call. His numb fingers quickly lost their grip on the device, causing it to fall and bounce off the floor. Ichigo stood there, in the middle of the darkened shop, for what seemed like hours before he took a deep breathe and headed towards where the entrance to the underground training room beneath the tatami mat was.

Kisuke was counting on him after all.

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In a burst of shunpo, Kisuke leapt over the rooftops across the industrial section of Karakura Town.

The sheer remoteness and lack of witnesses made this part of Karakura Town the best place to make a stand against his pursuer. While a battle between shinigami and other supernatural spirits weren't usually seen by normal humans, his opponent was quite



different. Kisuke had seen her stop following him for a few seconds just to kill a potential witness or two. Even Aizen wasn't as callous and amoral as to kill people left and right, but the girl chasing him already racked up a body count in the double digits.

*" I have to keep luring her away from any more innocent bystanders."* Kisuke jumped off the edge of a warehouse before tucking his knees up and breaking through a glass window. Rolling to a stop inside an abandoned factory, he quickly turned and began moving across the catwalk above the rusty and broken machines dozens of feet below.

*" I also have to stall her long enough for Ichigo to get to my shop,"* Kisuke slashed Benihime forward, slicing the steel door blocking his path to the roof in two. Quickly ascending the stairs and noticing he was alone, at least for the moment, Kisuke carefully took a couple of steps outside, *"This girl's sensory abilities are frightening. If she is so easily able to follow me, than it is no stretch of the imagination that she could easily track Ichigo."*

When she first appeared in the front room of his shop, Kisuke has sensed something off with her but chalked it down to his agitated nerves. He was still getting over Aizen finally being defeated after nearly a century of plotting and scheming against the Soul Society. When he saw her head towards the section where he kept his sweets, Kisuke decided to go into the backroom to check on some of his experiments. His shop was quite infamous for giving away candy at a large discount to children, so he didn't really think much of it. As he looked over the numbers coming out of one of his experiments, only years of training with Yoruichi saved Kisuke from a potentially fatal stab to his heart. While dodging to the side at the last minute, Kisuke didn't escape unharmed. Instead of piercing him through his heart, his adversary instead managed to cut deeply into his shoulder.

As Kisuke cautiously walked across the roof, his ears picked up the subtlest of changes in the air behind him. With his mind already analyzing his opponent's fighting patterns, he grimaced and leapt to the side just as a purple blade sheared through the concrete roof like

it was butter. Skidding to a stop across the roof from where his opponent was now standing, Kiuske raised Benihime in a defensive position. Going on the offensive against such a strong and unpredictable opponent would be tantamount to throwing his life away.

Noticing something out of the corner of his eye, Kisuke looked at his sleeve and frowned slightly at the small cut along the length, *"She nearly got me that time. While I am getting used to her speed and strength, it appears that she has something else up her sleeves. I'll need to be more careful from now on."*

A flash of light from the sun glinting off purple metal let Kisuke know that he needed to focus. Ducking and strafing to the side, he began parrying the precise and deadly strikes from his assailant. Whoever taught her how to fight was very skilled, if the difficulty he was having keeping up with her was any clue. Parrying the purple blade off Benihime and to the side, Kisuke spun around and swung his zanpakuto only to once again hit nothing but empty air.

*" She's too good."*

Kisuke's eyes widened as he was quickly forced to brace his forearm against his zanpakuto in order to block the overhead strike that came out of nowhere.

*" As much as I am getting used to her incredible strength, it's her speed and reaction time that makes everything so much more difficult. No one of her size and stature should possess the power to give a shinigami captain a difficult time. If she were a Quincy or a bount, then I wouldn't be surprised, but I'm feeling nothing from her."*

Jumping over the purple blade that nearly bisected him in two at the waist, Kisuke quickly stabbed his zanpakuto into the roof and spun around. As his sandaled foot shot out to connect with his assailant's face, he grimaced when he once again missed. Landing awkwardly on the roof to avoid leaving himself open to a counterattack, Kisuke pulled Benihime out of the roof and turned to his opponent.

*"How very interesting."*

Ever the scientist, Kisuke's mind began analyzing his opponent's abilities as best as he could, *"Even with less than a second of warning, she still managed to not only avoid my attack, but also widen the distance between us to lessen the chance of another surprise attack from me. The question that's bugging me is how she keeps managing to do it. It is illusions, clones, or some other type of technique?"*

Feeling a slight breeze through his hair, Kisuke reached up and noticed that his favorite bucket hat, the same one Yoruichi had given him many years ago as a gift, was missing. Looking down at the roof, Kisuke saw that it was neatly split in two from front to back.

"Well now," Kisuke drawled as he knelt and picked up the pieces of his hat, "I do believe you killed my hat. That wasn't very nice of you. While I would love to chide you about such rudeness, I must admit that I did not think you would track me down so quickly. Your ability to sense my location is truly frightening. If you don't mind me asking, how did you manage to find me so quickly?"

Kisuke's opponent looked oddly at him before smiling cutely, "That's easy! Nobody can stop me. I can go wherever I want to!"

"You don't say..." Even though he was smirking on the outside, internally Kisuke was grimacing. If this girl could track him, someone who Aizen couldn't find even if he wanted to, then he was going to need some extra help if he wanted to get out of this fight alive and in one piece. With both Yoruichi and Tessai gone, and Shinji's group either back in Soul Society or out of town on personal errands, it seemed as if Kisuke had picked the worst day to get into a fight.

Glancing at his injured shoulder, which was still bleeding quite heavily, Kisuke decided to stall for time, "It's been quite some years since I fought someone able to keep me on my toes. It looks like I'll have to take this fight seriously or I might actually die."

"That's quite the funny word - might," Nui Harime beamed happily at the praise Kisuke was giving her. Clapping her hands together and sticking her tongue out in a cute gesture, she added, "But that's a bad choice of words. You actually believe I'm not going to kill you? I didn't know you were delusional, Mr. Urahara."

"And you know my name. That's both disturbing and flattering."

Due to the lull in the fight, Kisuke took a moment to more carefully analyze Nui Harime's appearance. With exaggerated and long blonde hair pulled up into twin drill-style pigtails and a pink Lolita-style dress, she looked to be the epitome of what kids nowadays call a princess. It was odd, now that Kisuke thought about it, that Nui's attire reminded him of what Ururu had tried to pick out for herself a few months ago. While Kisuke wasn't against the idea, if you consider cheering her on to be neutral, Tessai had been the voice of reason and explained to Ururu the fallacies of such scandalous clothing.

Focusing on Nui's blue eyes, one of which was covered by an eye patch consisting of scrunched together katakana that he couldn't make out from where he was standing, Kisuke thought back to the moment he realized how dangerous Nui Harime truly was.

When Nui first appeared at his shop, she had been carrying a pink parasol that had been sturdy enough to initially block his zanpakuto. It was only after he released Benihime's shikai and sliced the parasol in two that Nui had brought out her current weapon. If that wasn't strange enough, Kisuke had noticed a dark look flash across Nui's face for the barest of moments after he destroyed her parasol.

The purple blade Nui wielded was perhaps the most dangerous variable about her. While she possessed superhuman speed and strength, her blade is what gave her a distinct advantage over him. Even Benihime's shikai cannot stand up to it for extended durations without developing chips and cracks along the edge.

"Do you mind answering a simple man's curiosity, young lady?"

Nui seemed to think about it for a moment, her finger tapping against her nose, before answering, "Sure!"

"It's about your name," Kisuke knew what he was about to say might be dangerous, but it should also give him some valuable information depending on what she said, "Nui Harime. That is quite the odd name if I do say so myself. Nui means 'sewing' and Harime 'stitch.' Those would be quite odd names in a normal situation, but given the fact that you seem to be after whatever Life Fibers are, I would have to assume there is a connection between you and them. Am I wrong?"

Nui blinked owlishly once before smiling. If someone who didn't know her saw the smile, they would assume she was happy about something. Kisuke, on the other hand, saw something extremely dangerous in it. He needed an avenue of escape.

"While I have enjoyed the time spent playing with you, I am a businessman. If I don't get back to my store soon, hooligans and ruffians are sure to break in and steal all my stuff. Do you mind if we continue this little play date of ours at another time? I know some people that would love to meet you."

Nui Harime plucked at her lip with her right thumb in an attempt to look cute. Kisuke, however, noticed something disturbing and odd about her movements. Whenever she moved or attacked, it was always her right arm or head that moved normally. Everything else seemed to not look quite right. Her legs seemed to bend stiffly at the knee and her left arm seemed to be perpetually stuck in the same position unless he looked away. It was as if she was trying, and failing, to mimic a human.

"Nope!" she said cheerfully, a smile slowly forming on her face, "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"I thought as much," Kisuke answered, a cold sweat breaking out across the back of his neck. There was something incredibly unsettling about that smile.

"Well..." Nui planted her purple scissor blade into the roof, the sharpened blade easily piercing through the concrete. Leaning upon it, she propped her cheek on her hand, "It's cute that you're trying so hard to run away, but I'm going to need those Life Fibers back."

"Life Fibers?" Kiskeya focused everything he had on predicting Nui Harime's next move. He knew without a doubt that she was about to attack him. Every single fiber of his being agreed with him on that, the only problem was that she was too damn unpredictable for his genius mind to figure out what it was she was going to do, "I must insist that I don't know what you're talking about. I am but a simple purveyor of goods and sweets. I wouldn't happen to know a thing about Life Fibers."

"Hmm..." Nui blinked before smiling widely, "It's so adorable that you're lying directly to my face. I'm going to have to punish you now."

Kiskeya blinked once and found Nui in the air directly in front of him with a psychotic grin on her face. Jumping back to avoid being hit, he quickly found himself rapidly exchanging blows with Nui's Scissor Blade.

"Amazing!" Nui's infuriating girlish voice announced with glee, "This is really fun, but are you going to tell me where the Life Fibers are?"

"I thought I told you already," Kiskeya ducked beneath Nui's purple Scissor Blade before jumping straight up in the air. As he waited for Nui to follow him, as he knew she would, Kiskeya added, "I don't know what Life Fibers are."

Disappearing in a burst of shunpo, much to Nui's surprise, Kiskeya reappeared behind her and purposely swung Benihime at her neck. Easily dodging the beheading strike, as Kiskeya anticipated, Nui was unprepared for the equally fast sandal to the face that threw her through the air and into the side of a nearby building with enough force to create an audible boom.

*"That should buy me some time to think of a more permanent solution for dealing with Nui."* For as much strength and power Kisuke put into that kick, the former captain knew that his opponent wasn't even hurt. It was quite strange dealing with an opponent who was either much more durable than a shinigami or arrancar, which was looking more likely by the second, or whose regeneration was so staggeringly fast that the moment his foot left her cheek, Nui was already completely healed.

As Kisuke waited for Nui to come bouncing out of the rubble and debris with a smile on her face and completely injured, he went over his limited options, *"Kidou is out of the question. I've already tried to cast a level 90 binding kidou on her and she didn't even feel it. Perhaps it has to do with the strange feeling I feel coming from her. Spiritual energy may simply not affect her. I need to get to Isshin as quickly as possible and inform him about what's happening. As long as Nui is allowed to run freely through Karakura Town, Ichigo will be in danger."*

"What are you thinking about Mr. Urahara?"

Kisuke's eyes widened in surprise as he felt Nui Harime appear directly behind him. Slowly turning around, he locked gazes with her single blue eye, which was filled with an unholy mirth. With a sickeningly sweet smile on her face, Nui swung down with her purple Scissor Blade and cut a large gash across Kisuke's back.

"Huh?" Nui looked at the blood dribbling off her Scissor Blade before looking at Kisuke, "How odd. I could have sworn I bifurcated you. You are really full of surprises Mr. Urahara."

"Ha... ha..." Kisuke breathed raggedly as he stared down Nui. What she did just now to get behind him was impossible, strike that, merely implausible. There should have been some warning before she appeared, but yet it was almost as if she simply imagined herself behind him. If Nui's abilities were actually based on imagination, it would be nearly impossible to beat her.

"You're still alive, huh," Nui pouted childishly and rocked on her heels, "This is becoming really boring, so I'm going to have to wrap things up now. Try not to die too quickly, Mr. Urahara."

Spinning around and laughing girlishly, Nui threw her hands out and exclaimed, "Mon-Mignon Prêt-à-Porter!"

As Kiseuke found himself surrounded by copies of Nui Harime, as weak compared to the original as they may be, he recalculated the odds of his survival and found it to be dropping by the second. As the Nui copies laughed and leapt at him, Kiseuke smirked and ruffled his hair.

"So, you're going to zerg rush me huh?" Raising Benihime up, spiritual energy coursing through the blade, Kiseuke prepared himself for perhaps the last fight of his long life, "That's fine by me, but you're going to have to work for it."

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"Ugh... this used to be so much easier when I could just jump down."

It was times like this that Ichigo realized how much he took his shinigami powers for granted. Kiseuke's Secret Training Room was nearly a quarter mile below the surface with the only way down being via jumping or taking the ladder so conveniently provided. In the past, Ichigo had taken the easy way down and simply jumped while using his spiritual pressure to soften his landing. Now that he was just a normal human, he was forced to take the hard way down.

Landing on the dirt with a soft impact, Ichigo massaged his hands to get the blood circulating through them once more, "When Kiseuke gets back, I'm going to have him install an elevator. This is just ridiculous."



Huffing in frustration, Ichigo looked around the training grounds. It looked just as he remembered it. The artificial sunlight emanating from some unseen light source kept the giant room in a state of perpetual afternoon, the painted clouds overhead only seeming to add to the fakeness of the room. Taking a few steps forward, his eyes surveying his surroundings for any surprises, Ichigo tried to remember where Kisuke told him to look.

"He said something about a funny looking rock..." he mumbled and began walking away from the ladder, "What could that mean?"

Ichigo's question was soon answered, much to his eternal annoyance. Kisuke had said it was a funny looking rock. What the bastard failed to mention was that by that, he meant it was a rock in a terribly bad caricature of Ichigo. It even made Rukia's drawings look like the work of a master.

"That bastard," Ichigo growled. If Kisuke survived whatever was happening to him, Ichigo was going to kill him for this terrible insult. Putting aside his completely rational hatred for the man, for the moment at least, Ichigo looked around the rock for whatever it was Kisuke had left for him. When he found it, Ichigo was caught completely off guard by what it was.

"The hell does that bastard take me for?"

Carefully wrapped in plastic and tied neatly together with string was a school uniform. Turning it over, in case Kisuke was playing mind games with him, Ichigo noticed a piece of paper fall gently to the ground. Ignoring the uniform for the moment, he reached down and picked the piece of paper off the ground. Unfolding it, he saw it was a letter addressed to him from Kisuke.

***Dear Ichigo,***

***If you are reading this note then I am either dead or missing...  
just kidding! I'm joking so wipe that frown off your face.  
Anyway, you may be wondering why this uniform is so special***

*or why I hid it behind this funny looking rock in my basement. Well, this uniform is quite special since I designed it using the Life Fibers your friend Uryu procured for me. If you see Uryu before I do, please make sure to thank him for his wonderful donation. The applications of Life Fibers are tremendous and I fear I have only just begun to scratch the surface of the possibilities.*

*Onto more serious matters, this uniform is made purely from Life Fibers, which Uryu claims make it a Kamui or something. I would have chosen something more awesome like Super Amazing Uniform of Unbridled Power but Yoruichi thought that sounded stupid. I feel I should mention that Uryu warned me about the inherent risks of attempting such a feat, but I think I managed to negate all possible ramifications.*

*This Kamui is tailored specifically for your body. You might be asking yourself how I was able to accomplish such a wonderful feat. The answer, my naïve pupil, is quite simple. I merely snuck into your room in the middle of the night, stripped you down naked, and measured each and every aspect of your body. I also took a few blood and DNA samples because you can never have enough of those lying around. Once I was done, I used a marker to doodle all over your face in ink that you cannot see.*

*That was another joke... or was it?*

*Actually, your father was kind enough to give me every detail about your body. So make sure to wear this special uniform when you go to Honnouji Academy. Oh! Don't forget the most important aspect about this Kamui... it's hand wash only, so be sure to brush up on your laundry skills!*

*Your Superior,*

*~Kisuke Urahara~*

***P.S. - I should probably mention that you shouldn't get blood on it, but it's not like you're going to get into a fight to save humanity or anything.***

***P.P.S. - Don't tell anyone what this is. Pretend like it is a normal uniform.***

***P.P.P.S - Oh, I almost forgot, you should begin thinking of a name for your uniform. I know what you're thinking, 'why the hell is crazy old Kisuke Urahara making me choose a name for a uniform?' Well, that is a stupid question Ichigo. Everything I do has a purpose, even something like what I just wrote. Didn't you say the same thing about your zanpakuto once? Stop thinking stupid questions Ichigo. And yes, I can read your thoughts even though I wrote this letter days ago. I am THAT good.***

"Idiot," Ichigo spat and tucked away the note in his pocket before looking at the uniform.

At first glance it looked like a normal school uniform except for the odd color scheme. It looked similar to the grey blazer and trousers that were standard at Karakura High School except that instead of being grey, it was white with black highlights along the legs, arms and near the collar. Tearing the plastic off the Kamui, he was not going to call it that, it just sounded stupid, Ichigo unfolded it and held it up at arms length.

There was something else strange about the Kamui, but it took Ichigo a few moments to realize what it was. Located near the collar, situated near the front of both shoulders, were designs in the shape of closed eyes.

"What's so special that Kisuke risked his life to hide you?" Ichigo flipped the Kamui around and even inside out, as if there was a secret he could only find if he looked hard enough. Not finding anything, he eventually gave up and began heading back to the ladder, the Kamui tucked firmly under his arm, "Ah, screw it. I'll find

out from him when he gets back. It's not like anything can kill that man. I mean, if Aizen couldn't take him out, then who can?"

# I'll Take You There

*So like I promised, I edited and revised Chapter 3. I personally feel that it's much better than what it was before. I mostly focused on editing and revising the conversations between Ichigo and Isshin as well as the very last part. You may be wondering why I did this. It is because this chapter was written before the end of the Kill la Kill anime and several facts came to light that contradicted what I wrote. Usually I could work around this and claim AU status, but I generally like to keep as close to the source material as possible.*

***Edited May 4th, 2016 - Some of you might notice a new introduction to this chapter. In reality, it's a section from later in the chapter that I revised and moved to the beginning since it takes place a few weeks prior to the rest of the chapter - the day after the events of Chapter 2. The original characterization of Ragyo and Hououmaru were atrocious and it was mentally painful to go back and read what I feel is subpar storytelling. So I rewrote the section from scratch while keeping both the original spirit and purpose completely intact. Nothing about the section has changed.***

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## Chapter 3 - I'll Take You There

Ragyo Kiryuin was a woman who preferred to flaunt her wealth and power.

Lightly swirling the half-filled glass of 1907 Heidsieck champagne as she stoically gazed over the sprawling compound that was Revocs headquarters, dozens of buildings rising from the ground around her office, the CEO of the most powerful clothing conglomerate in the world smirked in amusement. Most people would find the concept of

consuming champagne that cost nearly half a million dollars abhorrent, better relegated to a collection in a wine cellar never to see the light of day again. But she was *not* like most people. Such a paltry sum of money was pocket change when her company made that much every twenty seconds.

Nearly double their revenue from five years ago.

Her attention shifting minutely when a familiar presence respectfully walked into her office, the faint clacking of heels growing louder with every purposeful stride, Ragyo folded one arm underneath her bosom and asked, "I assume dearest Nui accomplished her mission?"

Rei Hououmaru calmly adjusted the pair of aviator sunglasses sitting upon the bridge of her nose at the inquiry. Flicking a finger against the PDA in her hand as she marched to a halt on the other side of Ragyo's desk, the Revocs symbol stitched across the lapel of her pure white uniform glittering in the brilliant lighting, the secretary politely bowed her head, "The Grand Couturier failed to retrieve the stolen Life Fibers."

"Quelle ironie," Ragyo wistfully sighed as the light shining from her silver hair, infusing every corner of her office with the brilliance of a rainbow, noticeably dimmed. It should have been more shameful that the Grand Couturier failed to accomplish such a trivial task, especially when one considered her impeccable record at recovering stolen Revocs property. But beyond a minor twinge of annoyance at the loss of the Life Fibers, the elder Kiryuin felt nothing more than frustrated apathy.

"Perhaps sending dearest Nui was the wrong choice..."

Aside from a brief but understandable sigh, the dark skinned secretary silently waited until Ragyo placed the half-finished glass of champagne down on her desk before asking, "Why did you send the Grand Couturier to retrieve such a trivial amount of Life Fibers, Ma'am? Over two hundred million dollars worth of Life Fibers and

related equipment were stolen in the last four months by government-sponsored organizations while another one hundred million was lost to the nudists. It seems out of place to order the Grand Couturier to Karakura Town when her services are far better used elsewhere."

"Vous avez raison..."

Marching slowly across her office, the extravagant white dress tightly hugging her body and accentuating her assets never once touching the floor, Ragyo stared at the sun rising lazily to the east and smirked dangerously, "But it is necessary to ensure Life Fibers spread across the planet. Despite my best efforts some countries still harbor suspicions about the success of Revocs. But leak a few classified reports on the physical benefits of Life Fibers and these same countries go out of their way to bring my clothing inside their borders. If only every annoying government would behave the same way..."

The multicolored light emanating from Ragyo's hair shifted brightness as the corners of her mouth twisting into an annoyed frown, "The problem, Hououmaru, is that these particular Life Fibers came from *here* ."

Hououmaru's posture stiffened at the reminder of the previous summer's disastrous events, an embarrassing blight on the company's image that had yet to be corrected. The breach in research and development, the most heavily guarded department in the building, had occurred several minutes after midnight. And whoever managed to infiltrate their state-of-the-art security system had known exactly when to strike. By the time the Grand Couturier arrived just over a minute after the alarm was triggered, both the intruder and nine bundles of Life Fibers had vanished into the wind.

After an extensively thorough investigation, all they could determine was that the intruder somehow moved *faster* than the cameras were able to track.

"Which is why I decided to send the Grand Couturier... despite my reservations on the matter."

The gradual shifting of Ragyo's tone from mild annoyance and irritation towards veiled interest momentarily took the loyal secretary off guard, her amber eyes widening in confusion at her boss's behavior. Chuckling under her breath at Hououmaru's not-so-subtle reaction, the CEO of Revocs leaned her head backwards and sighed, "Nui's mission wasn't simply to recover my stolen Life Fibers. I wouldn't dare waste the valuable time of an artiste over something so easily replacement. No... she was to find out *who* delivered them to a small shop in Karakura Town and *how* someone as inconsequential as Kisuke Urahara was able to activate them..."

Slowly trailing off when she noticed a particular absence, a presence that should have already arrived, Ragyo narrowed her eyes suspiciously, "Where *is* Nui?"

"I'm afraid the Grand Couturier is currently recuperating from her mission," Hououmaru informed the older woman, who quirked an eyebrow in confusion.

"Recuperating?"

Hououmaru briefly returned her attention to the PDA in her hands, the information displayed on the screen cycling through the events of the Grand Couturier's mission, "After sifting through her understandable anger, I was able to piece together a clear picture of what transpired in Karakura Town. It appears that Kisuke Urahara was an exceptionally intelligent and dangerous individual who deduced the Grand Couturier's origins and purpose from nothing more than her name. After failing to interrogate Kisuke Urahara in his empty shop, where she somehow lost her parasol, the Grand Couturier was forced to chase the man across most of Karakura Town."

"Quite the dangerous man, indeed," Ragyo chuckled in amusement before looking over her shoulder at Hououmaru, "Is there something



you're not telling me?"

"You are such a scamp, Ma'am. You knew I wasn't finished speaking," Hououmaru shook her head dejectedly. There were moments where the director's sense of humor came across as somewhat alien. Sighting lightly as she took a moment to recompose her emotions, the loyal secretary stoically continued, "Once she finished dealing with the man, who in her own words refused to cooperate, the Grand Couturier returned to his shop only to discover someone else had been there during her short absence."

Ragyo smirked sadistically at the supposedly unfortunate news, her amusement born more from rising interest in Kiskeya Urahara more than anything else, "This man must have been quite the cunning adversary if he distracted dearest Nui long enough for an acquaintance to retrieve whatever he was hiding. It's truly shameful he refused to speak before dying."

"There is some good news, Ma'am."

"When Kiskeya Urahara's acquaintance took whatever the man was hiding, they forgot to reseal the entrance to the hidden chamber underneath his shop," Hououmaru informed Ragyo without looking away from the PDA, "The Grand Couturier discovered a seemingly impossible room nearly four hundred meters in length filled with an assortment of equipment and machinery necessary to manipulate and safely weave Life Fibers into clothing."

"How interesting," Ragyo closed her eyes and chuckled as she sat down, the rainbow undertone from her hair shifting alongside her emotions, "There are so few facilities in the world capable of crafting the necessary equipment to properly contain Life Fibers. It should be fairly simple figuring out which organization is working with Kiskeya Urahara... although I do have my suspicions. I presume the Grand Couturier attempted to determine the serial number of the equipment in his shop?"

"From her... report... it seems Kishio Urahara custom-built nearly every piece of equipment. The rest, however, can be traced only indirectly to the nudists. And there is one additional piece of news," Hououmaru adjusted her sunglasses, an old habit she had never been able to break, and braced herself for the resulting storm, "The Grand Couturier has expressed her opinion that the man most likely created a Kamui."

The amused smirk on Ragyo's face instantly vanished, replaced by an expression of complete shock. Weaving something as godly as Kamui was impossible for a mere human, a work of beauty they constantly strove to obtain yet always failed to grasp. It wasn't as simple as weaving clothing of out pure Life Fibers and call that abhorrent creation Kamui. It required years for a human to obtain the necessary experience to manipulate Life Fibers with enough dexterity to avoid getting devoured. The knowledge of cross-stitching the Kamui's pattern appropriately took a careful eye, honed from countless failures and successes. And even *that* wasn't enough for a human to create the most holy of clothing.

"A Kamui, you say?"

There was no mistaking the subtle undertone of bitter vitriol in Ragyo's voice. Leaning back against the chair, the rainbow undertone permeating the office dimming, she furrowed her brow when something crossed her mind. A year. Kishio Urahara, an apparent stranger to the truth of Life Fibers, managed to create a Kamui from scratch in less than a year. And that wasn't counting the possibilities of failed attempts. Her maroon eyes narrowed furiously at the notion, an expression of anger that was quickly picked up by Hououmaru, "And we're sure he's dead?"

"The Grand Couturier's clones personally witnessed Kishio Urahara bleed to death," Hououmaru replied stiffly before hastily adding, "Do you wish for me to send a clean-up team to Karakura Town?"

"Non," Ragyo strummed her fingers against the side of the desk. Normally it would be a simple matter to investigate how much Kishio

Urahara knew about Life Fibers. Yet this type of situation required a more delicate approach, "Kisuke Urahara not only outsmarted dearest Nui but somehow managed to weave a Kamui. His intelligence, even after death, is not to be underestimated. Do we know how he contacted his associate?"

"A call from a phone registered to the Urahara Shop was registered during the period when the Grand Couturier temporarily lost sight of the man," the secretary briefly paused as she brought up the relevant information on her PDA, "However, it's proving somewhat difficult to trace the number."

Silence filled the office as Ragyo stared pensively out the window, maroon eyes narrowed in quiet contemplation. Kisuke Urahara was a man that should *not* have been able to weave a Kamui out of the blue. The skills necessary for a human to craft Life Fibers into such a garment required years of practice. He should have been on her radar *years* ago, especially if his knowledge about Life Fibers was so advanced. She found it difficult to believe that a single man... a stranger to the fashion world... learned enough about Life Fibers in only a year to craft one of the most holy garments in existence.

It *infuriated* her.

The rhythmic tapping of her manicured finger halting when something came to mind, Ragyo's tone was dangerously cold as she asked, "How was the Grand Couturier injured?"

"... a Bleach Bomb, Ma'am."

A fracturing *crack* echoed sharply through the office when the half-filled glass of champagne on the desk next to Ragyo suddenly shattered. Amber eyes widening fractionally behind the aviator sunglasses as she watched the director's expression shift from mounting annoyance to shocked bewilderment, Hououmaru nervously coughed into her hand while ignoring the increased beating of her heart, "The device was hidden underneath the floor of the room, Lady Ragyo. While the Grand Couturier managed to

escape the relatively contained blast in time, the injuries she sustained were enough to force her to retreat."

Sighing softly at the stifling pressure bearing down on her shoulders, a clear sign of Ragyo's building irritation at Kiskeya Urahara's final actions, Hououmaru took a brief respite and straightened her posture before calmly adding, "Perhaps I should clarify my earlier comment. The Grand Couturier is indeed still recuperating. However her wounds healed only hours after returning. She simply refuses to accept that another human tricked her at the last second."

"Such an épouvantable man..."

It was inconceivable to the CEO of Revocs that a pathetic man like Kiskeya Urahara could have gathered the necessary components to construct a working Bleach Bomb. She knew, of course, how to build such a weapon. It was a straightforward process provided one could properly cross-stitch the Life Fibers intricately woven throughout the device. Not to mention the dangers of the explosive prematurely detonating if a single Life Fibers was out of place. So for obvious reasons she never officially authorized research into Bleach Bomb beyond theoretical applications.

Not because she lacked the necessary resources. Rather, she simply didn't want to deal with the *constant* annoyance of nudists trying to either destroy or steal her research.

Kiskeya Urahara, on the other hand, was someone whose mere existence upon the face of the planet left the Kiryuin matriarch utterly bewildered. This seemingly unimportant man not only managed to weave a Kamui in under a year, a feat *none* of her employees other than the Grand Couturier could hope to duplicate, he also built a functional Bleach Bomb despite her moratorium on the necessary equipment. That he did all this with the *dérisoire* Life Fibers stolen from Revocs was impossible for her to comprehend.

There had to be another answer. She refused to believe Kiskeya Urahara was *that* competent and experienced at weaving Life Fibers.

"La vie est drôle."

Ragyo leaned against her hand and sighed, the tension draining from her features alongside the overbearing pressure in the air. There wasn't any point worrying about Kisuke Urahara when the man was long dead. She could deal with an errant Kamui in due time. However, the Grand Couturier was an entirely different matter. Dearest Nui hadn't been the same ever since that annoying man permanently disfigured her face, destroying one of her lovely eyes and shattering her mind with one traitorous swing.

"Please inform the Grand Couturier to come to my office. There are certain matters I *need* to discuss..."

An amused smirk slowly pulled at the edges of the Kiryuin matriarch's mouth as Hououmaru bowed respectfully before sharply turning around and leaving. Listening patiently to her secretary's heels as the rhythmic clacking faded into the distance, Ragyo closed her eyes and laughed. It was *painfully* clear to her who Kisuke Urahara called during his battle against dearest Nui. There was only one man who could have pulled off such a remarkable, and annoying, stunt like this so flawlessly.

And he just so happened to live in Karakura Town.

"I cannot wait to see how you've raised young Ichigo, Isshin. It should prove to be quite the enlightening experience."

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August 7th, 2002

Ichigo stared out the passenger side window of the car, his face periodically lit up a sickly yellow color by the halogen streetlights racing by along the empty highway. No matter how many times he thought about it, he continued to find it odd that as soon as they

passed through the outer limits of Karakura Town the lush forests and fields that he had visited many times in his life abruptly gave way to what could at best be described a desert and at worst a wasteland.

The landscape spanning for miles on either side of the winding highway was a barren and almost sickly brown with dust storms blowing the loose topsoil up into the air every now and then. The sky itself wasn't any different than what he was used to seeing back home, except that if he concentrated and narrowed his eyes he could just barely make out a hint of an unnatural red color permeating everywhere he looked.

"Ichigo," Isshin Kurosaki called out his son's name as he briefly pulled his eyes away from the road. He knew Ichigo wasn't sleeping, his son tended to snore in the car if he did fall asleep, but still decided to ask, "Hey, you awake?"

Ichigo waited a few seconds before answering, "Yeah. What do you want?"

Isshin sighed dramatically at Ichigo's lackluster reply. It was clear his son was still peeved at him for the sudden transfer to Honnouji Academy and away from all his friends, "I'm sure you must be curious about why the world outside Karakura Town is like this. Aren't you wondering why the thick and green forests gave way to this hellish landscape?"

"Not really, no."

"Well, if you really want to know," Isshin continued, completely ignoring the fact that Ichigo wasn't interested in finding out why, "No one really knows what happened. All that we, and by that I mean Kisuke and the Soul Society, have been able to find out is that someone or something decided to take out most of the world using nuclear weapons. The Soul Society was able to use Kido to clean up the residual radiation, but the damage was already done. Nearly

75% of the population was killed and only major towns and cities like Karakura and Tokyo survived the conflict intact."

Nearly three-quarters of humanity was dead? Ichigo couldn't believe something like that. His dad had to be making it up, "You're joking with me right? If that really happened, why didn't I know about it?"

Isshin gawked at Ichigo's question before breaking out into laughter, "Because, my dear boy, of the biggest cover-up in the history of the world!"

At Ichigo's continued perplexed expression, Isshin decided to continue explaining, "For about three years after the nuclear war the Soul Society, apart from cleaning up the radiation, set up what I might as well call Kido Amplifiers throughout each remaining city and town. Once they were all set up, they released a much more powerful version of the memory modifier your friend Rukia tried to use on me to convince the world that the nuclear exchange never happened. Instead of that, most of the world thinks everything that happened was the result of a massive, and costly, regular war like World War II was."

As Isshin finished speaking and changed lanes on the empty highway, Ichigo's mind was still trying to come to terms with what he had just found out. Sure he knew something was wrong with the world outside of Karakura Town. His forays into the outside world during his time as a shinigami was proof enough, but it was the realization that something of that magnitude of destruction happened that boggled him.

"Why would the Soul Society wipe their memories?" he asked trying to sort out the confusion in his mind.

"I'll start with the simple answer - it was to preserve the balance of souls between the living and the dead," Isshin answered mysteriously as he yawned into his hand. He had been driving for quite a while now, and a look at the dashboard clock said it was almost dawn, "You remember how the Quincy killed too many

hollows and threatened to destroy the balance of souls? Well, the number of people that died during the nuclear exchange put that to shame. As good as the Soul Society is, even they couldn't handle a couple of billion souls suddenly appearing all over the world. The shinigami did the best they could, even the captains had to help, but it took them nearly twenty years to konso most of the souls. Even then it left over five hundred million souls to transform into hollows and escape to Hueco Mundo.

Half a billion hollows? Ichigo couldn't believe there could even be that many hollows. He wasn't even sure he had killed a thousand of them when he was a shinigami. Still, something his dad said was still bothering him, "You said that was the simple answer. What else is there?"

"I see you are indeed sharp, Ichigo. It's no wonder you got accepted into Honnouji Academy," Isshin said proudly, a mock tear crawling down his cheek. As much as he wanted to hit his dad for being an idiot, Ichigo restrained himself. He could always hit his dad after he heard the story, "The truth of the matter is simple - The Soul Society was fearful of what could happen. The Captain-Commander may be the strongest shinigami alive, but he saw the devastation nuclear weapons caused and feared the consequences of someone doing it again. If he didn't order the erasure of humanities memories, someone would have the idea to start another nuclear war and perhaps this time it wouldn't be as limited as the first one. Apart from you and perhaps several hundred people scattered across the Earth, everything believes the only two nuclear bombs dropped were during World War II.

Ichigo was silent for perhaps half an hour after listening to his dad's explanation for the state of the world. How was he supposed to react after hearing that the world had effectively ended once and the Soul Society decided to give a do-over? As his mind circled around that concept over and over again, Ichigo decided to ask a question that had been bugging him for some time.

"Has there been any sign of Kisuke?"



Isshin sighed, letting Ichigo know all that he needed to hear, "Not yet. Yoruichi has been running herself ragged looking for him. From what he told you on the phone, it sounded like he was in a lot of trouble. Yoruichi checked out the area you thought he was at and found traces of his blood, but no body."

"Damn it!" Ichigo cursed and slammed his hand against the car door, "I should have gone to help him. I could have done something, anything!"

Isshin slammed on the brakes, bringing the car to a screeching halt in the middle of the empty highway. Turning to Ichigo, an angry look on his face, he said, "Since when was my son a coward?"

"Ichigo, I know Kisuke well enough to know that he must have had a good reason for making sure you stayed far away from him. I may not have any clue about what he was doing and quite frankly the thought of his experiments fills me with dread. I suppose the point I'm trying to make is that you should trust that Kisuke knew what he was doing. He risked his life to make sure you got whatever it was that was in his store."

Isshin started the car again but didn't speak any further, deciding that giving Ichigo some time to process what he just said was for the best. When several minutes had passed, Isshin rubbed the back of his neck with his hand and asked, "So what was it that Kisuke left for you? Was it a weapon or something? I told that man to leave you out of his nonsense but damn it all to hell if that bastard listens to a word I say."

Ichigo rolled his eyes in annoyance, "If I didn't tell you the first twenty times, what makes you think I'll tell you the twenty-first time you ask?"

"Aw come on!" Isshin's voice devolved into an annoying replica of a child's, "You can tell your father!"

"Shut it, old man!" Ichigo turned and looked out the car window in annoyance. The sun was just beginning to peak over the horizon to the east, bathing the red and brown landscape with the colors of dawn and causing the streetlights to begin turning off one by one.

"Ichigo," Isshin's voice returned to normal, "Whatever it is Kisuke wanted you to have, I'm sure he had a good reason for hiding it. Perhaps he thought you could get some use out of it or something. All I know is that the man was not someone to do something without a good reason. He knows just how much the Soul Society, the entire world, owes you for taking care of Aizen."

Ichigo looked at the Kamui he was wearing with confusion. The Student Evaluation Day was later in the afternoon, which meant his dad had to wake him up at the crack of dawn in order to drive him to Honnouji Academy in time. When he discovered that he would be required to wear the Honnouji uniform, he took one look at it before throwing it away in disgust. He could barely put up with wearing the Karakura High School uniform, and that was only because the school board allowed students to customize their uniforms to a certain extent. Honnouji, on the other hand, had such a strict dress code that wearing Kisuke's Kamui, the weirdly colored uniform it was, was by far the better option.

The Kamui was something that continued to plague his mind. At first Ichigo had been doubtful about the uniform since Kisuke made it for him. In fact, anything that man created caused Ichigo to take a step or two back and carefully observe the situation before trying it out. When nothing happened for a couple hours and the Kamui remained an inanimate article of clothing, Ichigo decided to try it on. As he put it on and finished zipping up the blazer, he found that it seemed to fit him perfect, perhaps even too perfectly. Another thing that bothered him was that it never seemed to get too dirty or stained. Anything that he accidentally spilled on the Kamui bled right off the clothing, usually onto the floor causing Ichigo to clean it up.

The minutes passed in silence but eventually Ichigo was brought out of his musings by the appearance of lights in the horizon. They were

nearing the bridges that led to Honnou City, which meant it would be less than an hour until they arrived. Perking up and stretching his sore neck at the thought of the trip almost being over, Ichigo was surprised when he dad said, "I feel that as your father it is proper to warn you that this world is not a safe place to live in."

Memories of the Winter War and the Soul Society briefly passed through his mind, causing Ichigo to sarcastically reply, "Gee, what gives you that idea?"

"Hey! I'm being serious here!" Isshin flustered and smacked Ichigo on the back of his head, eliciting an angry growl from his son, "I'm not talking about the Soul Society, hollows or anything like that. You're a teenager, despite everything you've been through, so your knowledge of the world is sorely lacking. Hey, don't give me that face! Tell me something Ichigo, if you had to guess the average number of hollow attacks on a town or city every year, what would it be?"

Ichigo seriously thought about the question before answering, "I don't know. I'd say about one hundred or so."

"Try one, if they're unlucky and they have a spiritually sensitive human living there," Isshin replied with a knowing chuckle, "It may shock you, but Karakura Town is basically the Bermuda Triangle of hollow attacks. I tend to chalk it up to how spiritually rich the land around the town is. It may shock you, but the number of hollow attacks in Karakura Town is roughly equal to about half of the rest around the world."

To be fair, Ichigo had always suspected something like that was true. Sure he was shocked, but the evidence had always been there. There weren't even ten thousand shinigami in the Soul Society to protect humans and souls from hollows. How could they possibly patrol and defend the entire world without stretching their forces thin? It would make more sense if hollows concentrated their attacks on one particular area in the world.

"Like I said, the danger I'm lecturing you on comes from the living," Isshin cracked open the window and allowed the cold, late summer morning air to quickly fill the car, "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation with Uryu about whatever Goku Uniforms are. I may be but an ignoring and bumbling father, but even I would be hesitant to take free power if you don't know the cost. You know, perhaps even better than me, what happens to those that are given power then aren't able or ready to control."

Ichigo glanced down at his Kamui, thoughts and memories of when his hollow took control of his body in Hueco Mundo racing through his mind. He didn't like to think back at what his hollow did to Ulquiorra, but he knew it would never have happened if he had just been strong enough to fight the espada. Sighing and running a hand through his hair, he leaned back and said, "Don't pull that stupid crap with me. If you're so worried about me then why are you sending me to Honnouji Academy?"

"The answer is quite simple Ichigo." Isshin's face was framed in shadows before he smiled goofily, "Sending you to Honnouji Academy is a tax deduction! By moving you across the country, I'm saving oodles of money every year!"

"Cheap bastard!" Ichigo smashed his elbow into his father's face, causing the car to swerve across several empty lanes before Isshin managed to regain control.

"That was a cheap shot, Ichigo!" Isshin whined childishly while he rubbed his sore cheek, "What did your poor, normal father ever do to deserve such retribution?"

"You know exactly what you did," Ichigo answered before adding, "And you're nowhere near normal."

Isshin huffed indignantly, "Remember my story about Ragyo Kiryuin?"

"The one you made up? Yeah, I remember it."

"I wasn't perfectly honest with you," Isshin admitted, "Ragyo is a very mysterious and complex woman. After I rescued her from the bombing, she and I kept in touch throughout the years. Masaki knew about this, of course, and knew that my correspondence with Ragyo was nothing more than a friendship between two adults. Did you know that Ragyo sent me a picture when her daughter, Satsuki, was born? Masaki was so torn up about it that she wanted to have kids as soon as possible."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Isshin sighed and gazed out the driver's side window, "What you don't know, and I hope Masaki never knew, is that something happened to Ragyo. When I first met her she was just a normal woman in charge of one of the largest companies in the world. She would laugh at my jokes and got along with Masaki, but as the years passed she seemed to change. She became cold, distant and more dedicated to her company. The birth of her daughter was perhaps the last time she sounded like the woman I first met. I don't know what happened to her, or even what could have caused it, but do not think for a moment that being admitted into Honnouji Academy is something she did out of generosity. Keep your eyes and ears open, Ichigo."

Ichigo stared at his father for several seconds as what Isshin said was processed. He had seen the look on his dad's face before whenever he visited their mother's grave. It was the look of someone who had lost something without ever having a chance to save it. As he opened his mouth to offer some sort of comfort, Isshin's mood quickly swung full circle.

"But that's enough talking about those sad memories!" Isshin exclaimed at the top of his lungs, "There is still some time before we get to Honnou City. Let's have a proper father and son talk! We'll start with the secret manly dating tips I used to woo your mother!"

Ichigo groaned in the palm of his hand and stared desperately out the window. Glancing at the highway only a few feet away, he

wondered if he could survive leaping from a moving car as a normal human without breaking his leg.

Dear god, he hoped so.

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"Ichigo..."

The elder Kurosaki's voice was stern and full of authority, a stark departure from his usual persona, as the sun rose over Honnou City. His face framed in shadows as he brushed dust off Ichigo's Kamui, he stared his son straight in the eyes, "I shouldn't have to explain your fortune this day. This is a big opportunity not just for you, but for your sisters as well. I have worked tirelessly to make sure you lived in a good home and received a proper education. Do not bring shame upon our family as you usually."

Ichigo slapped away the older man's hand and rolled his eyes, "Oh shut it, old man."

Isshin stumbled at the harsh insult before slamming his forehead against his petulant son's, "Why do you refuse to accept your father's helpful advice?!"

Equally annoyed and pissed off, Ichigo reared his head back and smashed it into his father's nose, "Helpful my ass! I only have a single shot at building my reputation! I don't need your stupid nonsense screwing that up for me!"

"But Ichigo - "

Isshin began protesting but Ichigo had already pushed his way through the crowd of parents and citizens of Honnou City towards the group of new and current students standing outside the entrance to Honnouji Academy. Adjusting the collar of his Kamui nervously, he

tried his best to ignore the pointed stares from the surrounding students. It wasn't as if he cared that his Kamui's colors were nowhere near the same as the standard gray of the Honnouji uniforms. What really irked him were the constant whispers about his short and spiky orange hair. It seemed as if people assumed he was a punk everywhere he went.

Standing in the midst of the crowd, his hands in his pockets, Ichigo wondered what everyone was waiting for. Peering over the crowd, he saw nothing blocking students from entering the academy, but something seemed to hold them back.

"Listen up!"

A man, taller than Kenpachi by at least another foot, appeared out of nowhere in front of the students. Flanked on both sides by at least twenty One-Star students, he had short and combed blond hair and dark skin. Ichigo may have been surprised by the massive man's height and size, but his attention was focused on the three black four-pointed stars emblazoned across his chest.

"I am Ira Gamagori! Honnouji Academy Student Council Disciplinary Committee Chair! I welcome you all to **Student Evaluation Day!** " The massive man shouted with enough force to cause the crowd of students to tense back slightly, "For those of you who have recently been granted the honor and privilege by Lady Satsuki to attend Honnouji Academy, there are three rules you must follow!"

"Rule Number One! All students are to bow down to Lady Satsuki whenever she graces you with her presence!"

" *Is this guy for real?*" Ichigo didn't know what to make of Gamagori. If he hadn't been paying attention, he would have assumed that he had somehow been conned into joining the military. If that was the case, then he was seriously going to kill his dad as soon as possible.

Gamagori held up two massive fingers as he continued, "Rule Number Two! Food and drinks are prohibited in the hallways and

classrooms except during designated times!"

"Rule Number Three!" Gamagori's eyes seemed to zoom in on Ichigo out of the entire crowd, "Honnouji Academy has a strict dress code. Uniforms are distributed solely by Lady Satsuki! Anyone caught wearing anything else shall suffer harshly!"

"You! Step forward!" Gamagori shouted at Ichigo. The crowd of students, seeing whom it was that Gamagori had singled out, quickly and quite mysteriously vanished from around Ichigo. When Ichigo made no motion to listen to Gamagori, apart from folding his hands in his pockets and adopting an expression of utmost irritation, Gamagori stalked forward, a yellow gleam in his eyes.

"You are violating one of Honnouji Academy's rules! Consider yourself lucky that this is your first day here. I do not expect a new student such as yourself to have already memorized the rules. You must change immediately!" Snapping his fingers, Gamagori reached out and took the standard No-Star uniform so conveniently provided by one of the One-Star students flanking him, "You will leave the premises of Honnouji Academy until you have changed!"

Leave the premises? If Ichigo understood what Gamagori meant by that, he would need to go with Isshin all the way back down to the base of Honnou City, get changed and then come back up. There were a few issues with that logic, first of which was that he didn't want to get changed and damn Gamagori to hell if he thought he was going to make him. Ichigo had fought people larger and tougher than him in the past. Well, he may have had spiritual powers when he did that, but the concept was still the same.

"You expect me," Ichigo glared at Gamagori harshly enough to make the massive teen flinch slightly, "To go back out there and change? I just spent the last five hours listening to my dad talk on and on about things I don't, nor will ever, care about. There is nothing you can do or say to me to make me do that again."



From somewhere in the crowd of people behind him, Ichigo could have sworn he heard his dad break down and start crying at his declaration, but his eyes were focused completely on Gamagori. The massive teen folded his arms across his chest, his left eye twitching slightly every second or two. As he looked ready to retaliate against Ichigo, he seemed to reel himself back.

Without taking his eyes off Ichigo, Gamagori reached out into the air just as a clipboard came hurtling through the air and into his hand. Flipping through the pages attached to it, he grumbled as he came across Ichigo's registration and profile.

"Ichigo Kurosaki!" Gamagori tapped his pen on the clipboard as he finally found the name he was looking for. He was curious about why the name sounded familiar to him and now he realized why, "It fill me with pride that you are right on time. I was convinced you would be tardy on your first day of class and I would have to hunt you down and subdue you."

"What?" Ichigo took a moment to process what Gamagori just said, "On time for what exactly?"

"It need not concern you!" Gamagori shouted bombastically, "I will give you a pass on your current attire for this day! Let the **Student Evaluation Day** begin!"

Ichigo mentally suppressed the comment he wanted to say. It wouldn't do to antagonize someone that looked to be at least five times his size at the moment. As Gamagori moved out of the way, allowing the new students to meander into Honnouji Academy, he heard a voice from the crowd that froze him cold.

"That's my boy! Ichigo, go and make your papa proud!"

Ichigo heard snickering and chuckles coming from the crowd and fellow students. Realizing he needed to nip this in the bud immediately, he grabbed the clipboard out of Gamagori's hands, located his dad in the crowd, and threw the piece of wood like a

lethal Frisbee. The clipboard sailed threw the air faster than most people could see and managed to nail Isshin in the forehead with an impact loud enough to echo through the air and disturb several nearby birds.

"Damn idiot," Ichigo seethed while dusting his hands off. Walking past several shocked and awed students, including Gamagori, Ichigo folded his hands in his pockets and entered Honnouji Academy.

His first thought was that there was too much space. The actual school buildings had to be nearly a quarter of a mile behind the entrance, leaving a large and suspiciously empty courtyard. As he followed the line of students, half of which seemed to be unnerved by the grandiose size of Honnouji Academy, Ichigo thought he sensed someone watching him. Glancing inconspicuously back and forth while making sure not to draw attention to himself, he eventually looked up at the top of Honnouji Academy and thought he saw someone, but the strangely bright light between them made it hard to tell.

*" Who is that?"*

Hearing excited breathing coming from his side, Ichigo looked down and saw a girl with brown eyes and hair staring up at his with stars twinkling in her eyes. Honestly a little scared by the fanatical look the girl was giving him, Ichigo asked, "Can I help you?"

It was almost as if the girl was waiting for Ichigo to ask her that particular question. Jumping in front of him and pumping her fist into the air, the girl began speaking rapidly, "That was so awesome! You came out of nowhere and stared down one of Lady Satsuki's Elite Four just like a sheriff from an old Western who had just strolled into town. I wish I could do that. Then I could clean up crime during the night as a masked vigilante!"

Ichigo watched in a mixture of horror and amazement as the girl began adding various stances and poses at specific times of her

speech. When she finally finished speaking, he could only stare at her in confusion and asked, "Who are you?"

"Oh! Silly me!" The girl slapped her forehead with the palm of her hand hard enough to leave a red imprint of her hand, "I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Mako Mankanshoku!"

Ichigo looked at her outstretch hand for a moment before hesitantly accepting it, "Ichigo Kurosaki."

"You're name is Strawberry?" Mako's eyes lit up and she seemed to drool a little out of the corner of her mouth, "I love strawberries! Strawberries are delicious, especially when they are dipped in home-made chocolate and with whipped cream-"

"My name means 'to protect one thing' not strawberry!"

"Ohhh," Mako let out a sound of understanding before she abruptly switched topics, "Oh! How do you think you'll do on Student Evaluation Day?"

"I don't know," he answered with a shrug, "I have no idea what it is."

"Student Evaluation Day," Mako began ranting again, "Is where students as lowly and meager as us are granted the opportunity to determine whether or not we will be given a Goku Uniform."

That explained some things, "So, it's like a physical or something?"

"Nope!" Mako answered a bit too enthusiastically, "If it was something like that, I wouldn't be here. I'm a dedicated underachiever. Something like that would make my delicate skin break out in a rash. All that you need to do is stick your arm out, close your eyes and wait ten seconds for the strange machine to determine your score."

Ichigo was getting close to the main building now. Looking up at Honnouji Academy, he frowned when the figure he saw earlier had

disappeared, taking with it the light that previously illuminated the top of the building "Score?"

"Yup!" Mako nodded vigorously, "They say it is out of 1000 but I'm proud of my all time high score of 30. When the proctor saw my score, he said it was the lowest one he had ever witnessed. Even in failure Mako Mankanshoku is a winner!"

"That sounds... fascinating," Ichigo found Mako's pride in failure quite terrifying. Perhaps in time he could get used to it, but for the moment he had other things to worry about, such as what this test actually was. He was having trouble separating Mako's fantasies from what was reality.

"What's with your uniform?" Mako switched topics and began teleporting around Ichigo at random locations, poking and prodding his Kamui in various places, "It looks so funny! Are those eyes? Why is it black and white instead of gray? Does it transform into a suit of armor when you flip a switch?"

"Hey!" Ichigo held his hand out in a stopping gesture, "What's with all the questions?"

"I don't have many friends. Actually, I don't have any. Will you be my first friend?"

Her question brought Ichigo out of his thoughts. Looking at Mako and seeing the innocent and hopeful expression on her face, he said, "I suppose."

Mako seemed to be on the verge of hugging him, which Ichigo would have prevented by leaping back, when a One-Star student began shouting through a megaphone.

"All students must split into two lines. Boys on the left and girls on the right! Please keep the lines orderly and in single-file."

"Ah! That's my queue to vamoose!" Mako began panicking and ran towards the line on the right, "I'll see you later Strawberry."

"For the last time, my name doesn't mean strawberry!" he shouted at her before realizing Mako had gone out of earshot. Muttering about it not being worth the effort coming to Honnouji Academy, Ichigo walked towards the line on the left.

It was surprising that he didn't need to wait long for his turn at whatever the examination was. Even though the line had to have been nearly one hundred students by the time he got on, it had taken barely twenty minutes for him to nearly reach the front. When it was his turn to go, he entered the room.

The student wearing a labcoat with a single black four-pointed star pointed for Ichigo towards the nearest empty chair. Sitting down in the chair, the One-Star student glanced at Ichigo's hair and then his face before saying, "Please roll up your sleeve and place your hand in the machine."

"Why?"

"Don't question the exam," the One-Star student warned Ichigo. Instead of wasting the effort of arguing back, which was something he was finding to look more and more worth it, Ichigo swallowed his retort before it could leave his throat and did as he was told.

With his right hand stuck in the machine, Ichigo propped his head on his left arm and waited nearly a minute for the machine to finish. When he was told he could remove his hand, he asked, "So what's my score?"

"Hold on," the One-Star said while the machine continued beeping. When it finally stopped, the One-Star looked at the screen conveniently hidden from Ichigo and gasped before rising out of his seat and rushing off out into the hall.

With everyone staring at him once again, although it wasn't at his hair this time, Ichigo decided to find out what had scared the crap out of the proctor. Getting out of his chair, Ichigo leaned over the table and looked at the computer facing away from him. Highlighted on the screen in bold red letters was:

**Student Name: Kurosaki, Ichigo**

**Life Fiber Resistance - 90.3%**

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"Give me a ticket to Honnou City."

The clerk sitting in the ticket counter looked over the top of his newspaper at the clump of wadded up money and coins placed on the other side of the glass. While he reached through the oval-shaped hole in the window and grabbed the money, he couldn't help but be surprised. No one bought tickets to Honnou City. The only people that traveled there were those that had annual passes and who paid up front. Punching a few keys on his computer, the familiar sound of the printer starting soon after, he looked at the girl staring impatiently at him and decided to ask, "I don't mean to impose, but are you sure you want to go to a place like that? Honnou City isn't exactly the best place for a proper young lady."

"Proper?" The girl rolled her eyes at the clerk's unwanted interference. Why did everyone she met think she was some delicate little flower that couldn't take care of herself? Motioning for the clerk to hand her the ticket, she said, "Thanks for the advice but give me my ticket."

Grabbing the ticket out of the clerk's reluctant hand and placing it one of the many pockets on her black and white jacket, Ryuko Matoi adjusted the silver case strapped to her back and walked towards the nearest bench. She had about an hour until the bus was

scheduled to leave so she had plenty of time to kill, which meant she was going to be quite bored until then. Plopping down with a loud sigh, Ryuko ran a hand through her black hair, her fingers brushing against the single red highlight in the process, and leaned back until her head was resting against the back of the bench.

"Great," she muttered in annoyance, "Two weeks in this city and not a single clue."

Ryuko had been so sure that a clue about the identity of her father's murderer would be here, in Osaka, but it appeared she was wrong yet again. Whenever she would ask, but mostly order, people to tell her if they'd seen a woman wielding a Scissor Blade, they'd either look at her funny or clam up. Placing a hand on the silver case holding her own Scissor Blade, colored red, Ryuko sadly thought back over the last six months and everything that happened.

"I'm beginning to think this is pointless," she moaned and kicked the silver case hard enough to dent it, "Twelve cities. I've been to twelve cities in six months and not one person knows anything! At this rate, I'm going to die before finding out anything about my dad."

Usually Ryuko would stay in a city for about a couple of weeks before moving on, but she'd only been in Osaka for four days. She had a lead concerning the identity of her father's murderer, her very first one since that fateful day, but she doubted the accuracy of the information. Stuff like that just doesn't fall into her lap. Ryuko wasn't used to having things going her way, so she was more than a little apprehensive about the whole situation.

She first heard the rumor when she was interrogating students at Naniwa Kinman High school for information. While she was shaking down two students who had the nerve to try and attack her, a third student had approached her with information about the woman with the Scissor Blade. When they asked for a lot of money for the information, Ryuko pointed her Scissor Blade at their throat and threatened to cut off something important unless they told her everything they knew.

The student, after wetting his pants out of fear, said the rumor mills placed a woman with a purple scissor blade in close proximity with the Student Council President of Honnouji Academy, Satsuki Kiryuin. Ryuko hadn't initially believed a murderer would be associated with the Kiryuin name and demanded to know the truth. The student, now shaking in fear, said he was telling the truth. The rumor was Satsuki Kiryuin was intimately familiar with the woman with the purple Scissor Blade. In fact, she might even be the killer.

Groaning in annoyance, Ryuko reached into her pocket and pulled out a lemon. Taking a bite out of it without even a hint of hesitation, she glanced at the nearby clock and realized she still had forty-five minutes.

*" I've almost found the woman who killed you dad. You just need to wait a little longer. The woman with the Scissor Blade will pay for what she did. I promise."*



# Instant Karma

*I present to you chapter 4 of **To My Death I Fight** . This chapter gave me a little trouble, all of which came about after Episode 18 of Kill la Kill was released and I witnessed first-hand just how evil and completely insane Ragyo is. So while I had this chapter done on Thursday, I had to rewrite a lot of it in order to not completely veer off canon. In retrospect, I think that made this chapter flow much better. And, for those of you keeping track, this is the last full chapter before the Kill la Kill anime starts so expect to see events that happened in Episode 1 appear in Chapter 5, with some modifications of course.*

*Oh, I have decided that the theme music of Ichigo's interactions with Mako is **Ditty for Daddy** .*

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## Chapter 4 - Instant Karma

"Be careful with those Life Fibers!"

Iori Shiro, president of the Sewing Club and designer of all the Goku Uniforms currently spread throughout Honnouji Academy, cursed behind his breathing mask as he watched the procession pass below. Leaning over the railing of the scaffolding that hung over the dozens of currently empty sewing machines below, Iori carefully watched as several members of his club in full biohazard suits moved a large bundle of glowing red Life Fibers that had recently arrived at the academy towards Concepts and Designs.

Turning towards the monitor to his right, Iori tapped a few keys and pressed a finger against his ear, "What is the status on containment?"

"No problems to report, sir," one of the Sewing Club members responded as she watched the Life Fibers being brought carefully through the steel door separating the rest of the club from Concepts and Designs, "Everything is proceeding nominally. Full containment will be achieved in less than three minutes."

"Good. See that you inform me once containment is obtained. I do not want a repeat of the last breach," Iori closed the connection and turned away from the railing towards the series of monitors behind him. It was from here that he was able to monitor and view the progress on every single Goku Uniform being created by the Sewing Club. Most of them, the One-Star and Two-Star uniforms, did not need him to constantly watch their progress. The only uniforms that Iori monitored beyond the initial creation were the experimental Goku Uniforms his club was currently trying to produce.

What they were creating was the culmination of months of effort and sweat. It had taken more time and money than he originally thought, but Iori was finally ready to move beyond the conceptual stage and actually sew a Five-Star Goku Uniform.

Iori had to thank Inumuta when he got the chance. If it wasn't for his financial backing, the sheer cost of the Life Fibers needed for this experimental uniform would have bankrupted the Sewing Club long before this point.

While he was observing the various cameras and monitors throughout the club, there was a hiss of static in Iori's year. Without looking away, he said, "What is it?"

"Containment has been obtained," the Sewing Club member from earlier informed him from outside the door separating her from the dangerous Life Fibers, "Everything is green down here."

"I'm getting the same readings up here," Iori rapidly pressed a few buttons and brought up three-dimensional model of the room, "Everything is working at full efficiency. Negative pressure has been

obtained. Have the team brought to decontamination before returning to work. It's better to err on the side of caution."

As he hung up on the club member, Iori leaned over the desk and groaned, "Creating a Five-Star Goku Uniform will be child's play compared to finding someone that can actually wear it."

Contrary to popular belief, while willpower and strength of mind were important for gaining control over a Goku Uniform, the real variable was the wearer's Life Fiber resistance percentage. Iori, as well as Lady Satsuki, did not understand what genetic factor made some people more resistant to the influence of Life Fibers than others. Lady Satsuki had financed genetic testing of twin students that had wildly different resistances in the hopes of finding some previously unknown genetic marker, but unfortunately apart from the normal differences between the genetic codes of twins, there was nothing to indicate such a wildly differing resistance value.

The common One-Star uniform, which is composed of only 10% Life Fibers, required a paltry 4.2% resistance for the wearer to not be consumed by the power. A Two-Star uniform, on the other hand, required the wearer to have a resistance above 16.5%, which was still less than the 29.3% that each of the Elite Four had to control their Three-Star uniforms. The fact that the resistances increased drastically with each level of Goku Uniform had Iori trying to guess how high someone's resistance needed to be to wear a Five-Star uniform and not go berserk.

*" The data from the experimental Four-Star uniform indicated that a minimum resistance of 45.4% was needed. If I extrapolate that value upwards, I should be able to obtain a reasonable volunteer resistance."*

When Iori heard the elevator doors behind him open with a pressurized hiss, he turned around and saw Satsuki Kiryuin walking towards him, flanked on either side by Nonon Jakuzure and Uzu Sanageyama. All three were wearing the same type of breathing apparatus as Iori in order to prevent breathing in any microscopic

Life Fiber fragments inadvertently released during the creation of Goku Uniforms.

"Greetings, Lady Satsuki," Iori bowed respectfully to the Student Council President as she walked towards him with a determined gait to her step, "I was not expecting you to respond to my message so quickly."

"I was informed by Inumuta that you have valuable information concerning Ichigo Kurosaki."

Behind Satsuki, Nonon Jakuzure turned to Sanageyama and whispered, "Who's Ichigo Kurosaki?"

"He's the kid that Lady Satsuki's taken an interest in," Sanageyama explained. When he saw Jakuzure still had a perplexed, and irritated, look, he continued, "He has short, spiky orange hair with a perpetual scowl. He's the one you have a crush on."

"I don't have a crush on him," Nonon squeaked as she kicked Sanageyama squarely in the shin, "I just didn't remember his name. That's all!"

Ignoring the argument between her two subordinates, Satsuki followed Iori over to the nearby monitor, who began feverishly typing in commands. After a few seconds had passed, without turning to Satsuki he said, "Here is Ichigo Kurosaki's profile. Until Student Evaluation Day it was normal, apart from his means of getting accepted into Honnouji Academy. Take a look at what his Life Fiber resistance value is."

As a picture of Ichigo Kurosaki, scowl and all, appeared on the screen, Satsuki leaned in, her eyes narrowing as she beheld the displayed data, "That is impossible."

"I'm afraid it's true," Iori didn't bother looking at Satsuki. He knew her long enough to know that she was displeased with what he was showing her, "It has been confirmed that Ichigo Kurosaki's resistance

to Life Fibers is close to 90.3%. A value, that I don't think I need to say, is higher than yours."

The origin of Satsuki's resistance to Life Fibers was a secret to all but her and the one who did it to her. While she publicly announced her resistance of 83.5% and how it was proof how far above everyone she was and why they needed her to govern them, internally it was a bitter gift from the one she hated the most. Yet out of nowhere came Ichigo Kurosaki, the son of someone who supposedly had nothing more than a chance meeting with her mother, with a resistance even higher than hers.

She did not believe for a moment that Isshin Kurosaki, Ichigo's father, only met her mother once and was able to live his life as he saw fit. Soroi had been adamant that her mother had been injured in the explosion before Isshin rescued her, a completely and utterly laughable notion to Satsuki, and yet she could not find any trace of her mother being admitted to a hospital. She needed to find out what the true connection between Isshin and her mother was, but it was not going to be easy or simple.

"Iori, have you double-checked the data?"

"As soon as Ichigo Kurosaki's resistance was discovered," The Sewing Club president answered, "We even triple-checked it before having him retake the examination a second time under the pretense of a mechanical issue. The same percentage was displayed on the second machine as was on the first."

"I see," Satsuki closed her eyes and evaluated how this discovery was going to affect her plans. She, of course, could adapt to many variables, but she needed more information. If Ichigo Kurosaki was special enough to warrant her mother's personal attention, it could only mean a few things. She needed to find out why he was sent to Honnouji Academy.

"Sanageyama," she barked out, catching the Athletic Committee Chair by surprise, "I believe it is time that we tested Ichigo Kurosaki's

resolve and worthiness of attending Honnouji Academy. Do you have anyone available for such a task?"

"Unfortunately I don't," Sanageyama chuckled nervously. It was never good to give Lady Satsuki bad news, "All athletic clubs captains are currently out participating in the Japanese Inter-school Sports Tournament and should be back by tonight. I would have been there myself if this business concerning Ichigo Kurosaki hadn't come up."

"You disappoint me, Sanageyama," Satsuki said, "But I suppose I will have to make due with what is available. I'm sure there are members of the athletic clubs that crave strength and power. You will choose one of them for this task. Tell them that if they want to remain a Two-Star, they need to dispose of Ichigo Kurosaki before the day is out."

"Yes, Lady Satsuki."

"I should be able to create the necessary Two-Star Goku Uniform within two hours," Iori chose that moment to give his personal input, "It should be finished before the academy finishes lunch."

"Good," Satsuki continued to stare at the data displayed on the monitor, her eyes never leaving the picture of Ichigo, "I don't want Ichigo Kurosaki to assume he is safe at Honnouji Academy."

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"This place sucks."

As he ate his lunch in relative peace and quiet, Ichigo quickly decided that his day had been anything from normal and, coming from someone like him, that was saying quite a lot. He still wasn't quite sure what had happened, but ever since he took that stupid exam he couldn't help but feel as if someone was watching him.

Perhaps he was being just a little paranoid, but his experience dictated that something was going to go down and, whether he liked it or not, it would most likely be involving him in some way or another.

"I wonder what dad is up to?"

After being forced to take his exam a second time due to so-called 'technical issues,' he had decided to go speak to his dad. Ichigo knew without a doubt that Isshin would be sticking around for as long as Ichigo would allow him to stay. That usually meant he would have to physically force him to leave. Once he made his way back to the entrance to Honnouji Academy, however, he found his dad long gone without so much as a goodbye. While he was silently grateful for the lack of a large, tearful and hammy goodbye from his dad, Ichigo couldn't help but feel just a little upset.

"Ichigo!"

Upon hearing the familiar voice rapidly approaching him, Ichigo turned and saw Mako Mankanshoku waving vigorously at him. Hesitantly waving back at her, he bore witness to an amazing scene as Mako literally sprinted at him, her body ducking and weaving through the crowd of confused students. Just as she reached Ichigo, Mako tripped over her untied shoelace, causing her body to hit the ground face first and roll for several meters, leaving a trail of dust in her wake.

Ichigo stared at her most likely unconscious body with a mixture of confusion and bewilderment evident on his face, "Are you alright?"

In one swift motion Mako planted her hands on the ground and pushed herself back onto her feet. With a trail of blood dripping down from her nose and several cuts on her face, she gave him a thumbs up, "I'm peachy!"

Ichigo looked at the blood on her face before shaking his head and focusing back on his lunch. He had already realized that Mako was

her very own breed of insanity. Asking any questions would be tantamount to encouraging her behavior. Just as he was about to take a bite from his food Ichigo, to his annoyance, found Mako hovering inches from his face.

"What do you want?"

With a wide smile on her face, Mako asked, "Good afternoon Ichigo! How did your Student Evaluation go?"

"Fine, I guess," he replied with nothing more than a passing shrug. He didn't see the point in telling her about the commotion that had occurred after he received his score.

"I did fine as well!" Mako thumped a fist against her chest, "I managed to break my all time high score with a 50!"

Ichigo was nearly blinded by the pride being emitted by Mako but, being the person that he was, he felt the need to point out the obvious to her, "I don't think that's something you should be taking pride in."

"Of course it is!" Mako exclaimed excitedly, "Being special isn't limited to just being good at sports, chess, or even public speaking. It can mean many things. I am special because of the impossibility of my low exam score. Mako Mankanshoku achieves the impossible despite all the odds stacked against her!"

Ichigo stared at Mako's reaction with a disturbed expression, "I think your definition of special is not the same as mine. Why don't you go and make some more friends or something?"

"Make more friends?" Mako brought a finger up to her lip and appeared to be deep in thought, "I suppose if I make more friends, since you're a boy it should be a girl so it all evens out. She will need to be friendly, selfless, a total badass and have a great figure."



As Mako's tirade devolved away from what type of personality her imaginary friend would have towards her chest size, Ichigo could only continue to stare at her, his mind trying to put together what was going on in front of him.

*"What the hell's going on in that mind of hers? She's worse than Orihime."*

Even though he was unfortunately focused on Mako, Ichigo's ears managed to pick up the faint whistling of something sailing through the air towards him. Without thinking, he quickly raised his lunch tray just as the thrown knife reached him, causing the steel weapon to become embedded up to the hilt in the tray.

"The hell is this?"

After blocking two more thrown knives, courtesy of his hidden assailant, Ichigo had decided that was enough. Standing up, Ichigo looked around the area for the perpetrator. It did not take him long to locate the thrower, but that was mostly because he either wasn't trying to hide or was simply doing a terrible job at it.

Ichigo stared up at the mysterious figure that had dared to ruin his lunch, "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Prepare yourself, Ichigo Kurosaki!" His mysterious assailant shouted brazenly with his tongue sticking out from between his sharpened teeth. Licking the knife held in his hand, he pointed the weapon at Ichigo, "I, Jack Naito, president of the Knife Throwing Club, will take you down!"

Even as Jack Naito was giving his introduction, Ichigo was already trying to figure out who the hell he was and what he wanted. Shifting his gaze away from Jack to his murdered lunch tray and then back, once again, to Jack, Ichigo decided that he didn't have a clue what was going on.

"Eh?" Ichigo scratched his ear with a confused expression on his face, "Who are you?"

"Are you deaf?" Jack angrily asked as he leapt down off the building, which had to be three stories high, and landed on the ground nearby without any difficulty. Spreading his arms to his sides, several knives magically sliding in between his fingers from somewhere deep in his sleeves, he grinned sadistically at Ichigo, "I am here to take you down, Ichigo Kurosaki! Your presence at Honnouji Academy is no longer permitted!"

Ichigo continued to stare at Jack in confusion. Determining that he was getting nowhere fast he turned to Mako, "Do you have any idea what the hell this guy is talking about?"

"He's a Club Captain," Mako began explaining in a sage-like tone, "That means he is wearing a Two-Star uniform. Although I thought he was part of the Acrobatics Club..."

"You are correct!" Jack said, "I was part of the Acrobatics Club until Sanageyama honored me with my own club. I get to keep this Two-Star uniform as long as I take you down, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

"Two-Star uniform?" Ichigo stared at Jack Naito's uniform with a discerning eye. It was the standard gray of Honnouji Academy, but embedded along his sleeves were dozens of knives. What made him stand out the most was the large, glowing red blade sticking out from his head, "From his ridiculous uniform, I thought he was just nuts."

With a twitch in his eyes, Jack swung his arms back and shouted, "Perish, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

The six knives held in between Jack's fingers sailed through the air towards Ichigo, only to be stopped when Ichigo, with a bored expression, brought up his lunch tray with a single arm and expertly blocked all of them.

"What?" Jack took a nervous step back before angrily asking, "How the hell did you do that? No one can block the attack of someone wearing a Two-Star uniform!"

What Jack Naito didn't know was that Ichigo was friends with someone that could fire over one thousand arrows a second. Compared to something like that, a few knives were nothing, even as a normal human, "Is that all you got? Because right now, you're just making yourself look like an idiot."

"That's the spirit!" Jack Naito grinned and leapt back, six more knives already between his fingers, "I wouldn't want this to be too easy! Let's see how you deal with the next salvo!"

"Hold on just one moment," Ichigo held his hands up in the universal symbol for 'timeout' and turned to Mako. As he handed her his knife-riddled tray, he said, "Get out of here."

"What?" Mako seemed shocked that Ichigo was telling her to leave. At first Ichigo thought it was because she was worried about him, but that quickly changed when she asked, "But what about your lunch?"

Quickly catching himself before he face vaulted, Ichigo sighed and said, "You can have it. I'm not that hungry anymore."

While Mako ran away to who knows where, Ichigo focused completely on Jack Naito. Upon seeing Ichigo staring at him, the club president crossed his arms across his chest and laughed, "You are either very brave or very stupid to fight against me without a Goku Uniform, Ichigo Kurosaki, but it wouldn't matter if you did! You will fall to my power!"

As Jack threw his knives at Ichigo, more appearing in his hands just as he threw the ones already held between his fingers, Ichigo quickly vaulted over the shoulder-high wall he had been sitting on. As knives rained down on the other side of the wall, Ichigo carefully analyzed his options.

*" I hate to admit it, but he has some skill,"* The problem Ichigo was facing wasn't so much Jack Naito's skills and power, but his own diminished powers. Seven months after he lost his powers fighting against Aizen, Ichigo sometimes needed to consciously remind himself that he was just an ordinary human without any spiritual powers. That meant no spiritually enhanced reflexes, strength or speed. If he had even one of those three things he could take someone like Jack down with his eyes closed but now, as a normal human, he needed to rely solely on his intellect. If he was going to beat Jack, and by god he wasn't going to be killed by this asshole, Ichigo needed a plan.

*" I can't get close to him,"* Ichigo began stealthily moving behind the wall. He couldn't afford to stay in the same spot. Eventually Jack Naito was going to get annoyed, and possibly pissed, that Ichigo was hiding, *" He doesn't seem to be that bright. I should be able to take him by surprise. "*

"Hiding like the coward you are, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

Ichigo's eyes widened as Jack Naito's voice mocked him. Looking up, he saw the Knife Throwing Club president standing on the wall above him, a disturbing smirk on his face.

"Did you really think you could hide from me?" Jack mockingly asked Ichigo. As he spread his arms open, dozens of knives appeared in a flash of light in Jack's hands, "Now, witness the true power of a Two-Star Goku uniform! Trillion Drive!"

"Damn!" Ichigo cursed and leapt back as the knives in Jack's hands suddenly shot forward accompanied by trails of smoke and fire.

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"Oh man," Sanageyama chuckled at the display hundreds of feet below, "Ichigo has guts, I'll give him that much."

"It is unbecoming of you to support an enemy of Lady Satsuki," Gamagori rumbled, "Shall I be forced to discipline you?"

"No need to get antsy," Sanageyama folded his arms and grinned, "I'm just saying it can't hurt to give the kid props when he deserves it. How many people do you know that would willingly stand up to a club captain?"

"Hmph," Gamagori grumbled but did not press the issue any further, "Ichigo Kurosaki is a fool if he thinks he can take on a Goku Uniform by just relying on his own strength."

"I would not worry too much about the outcome of the fight," Inumuta answered, the collar of his Goku Uniform automatically unzipping as he began speaking, "By my calculations, the probability of Ichigo Kurosaki successfully avoiding that last attack with only minimal injuries is less than five percent. The only conceivable way that he could survive is if he is hiding some innate talent or skill that my programs have failed to find. There is only one person in Honnouji Academy that could avoid such an attack without wearing a Goku Uniform, and that is Lady Satsuki."

"Are you suggesting that this hoodlum is in the same league as Lady Satsuki?" Gamagori growled at the much smaller Inumuta.

"I am just reiterating what the data hypothesizes," Inumuta defended without showing any signs of nervousness. Pushing up his glasses using a single finger, he began explaining to the relatively less intelligent Gamagori, "Although, I find it strange that Ichigo's behavior upon the start of the fight goes against both his appearance and personal history. Instead of simply rushing head on, he retreated to where he could not sustain any damage from the club captain's attacks. A bold, but curious, move on his part. I'm looking forward to analyzing the valuable data I will undoubtedly obtain later on."

"No one cares about your stupid data Doggy," Jazukure grinned mischievously at Inumuta's slight tick in his eye before turning back to the scene below. She had thought watching Ichigo Kurosaki get

the crap beat out of him would be boring. After all, who could stand up to a Goku Uniform? But Ichigo Kurosaki was surprising her, "This day is getting more and more interesting, wouldn't you agree Lady Satsuki?"

Satsuki ignored Nonon's question in order to focus entirely on the fight below. Standing on top of Honnouji Academy, her sword planted on the ground and her eyes locked squarely on Ichigo Kurosaki, she appeared to be the epitome of regality. In spite of her stoic outward appearance, Satsuki's mind could not help but notice something off about Ichigo Kurosaki. Upon first glance everything seemed normal, but soon enough she began to understand what it was that had caught her eye.

"Gamagori."

"Yes, Lady Satsuki?"

"When Ichigo Kurosaki arrived this morning," Satsuki's eyes narrowed imperceptibly as Ichigo's form was enveloped in Jack Naito's Trillion Drive attack, "Was he wearing the mandatory No-Star uniform?"

"No," the Disciplinary Committee Chair answered with a shake of his head, "Ichigo Kurosaki was blatantly ignoring the dress code of Honnouji Academy upon his arrival. When I ordered him to change, he refused."

"I see... and tell me, did he call his uniform by any specific name or refer to it as such?"

Gamagori thought back to his limited interaction with Ichigo Kurosaki before answering, "No. He seemed to view it as nothing more than a standard uniform. Do you wish for me to confiscate it upon the fight's conclusion?"

"No. Let him be for now," Satsuki ordered. Perhaps she was simply over thinking things. There was no way Ichigo's uniform could be

what she thought it was. The number of people in the world that could successfully create one could be counted on one hand, and they all worked for her mother. If Gamagori's knowledge was to be taken as accurate and correct, Ichigo was wearing nothing more than a uniform. If it happened to be what she thought it was, the answer should come soon enough.

Gripping the hilt of her sword, Bakuzan, tight enough to cause the leather on weapon to crackle audibly, Satsuki waited for Ichigo to make his next move. She would know soon enough whether he deserved to stay at Honnouji Academy.

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"Ha ha ha!"

Jack Naito gloated as he witnessed Ichigo Kurosaki take the full force of his attack, Trillion Drive, at point blank. Although, now that he thought about it in hindsight, Sanageyama had ordered him to test Ichigo Kurosaki, not kill him. Jack didn't care if his attack killed Ichigo as much as it might mean the loss of his new Goku Uniform.

Leaning forward on one knee, Jack Naito surveyed the dust floating in the air for any sign of Ichigo, "Don't tell me that did you in, Ichigo Kurosaki. The fun's only just begun!"

It was at that moment that Jack made a stupid mistake. When he had assumed Ichigo perished in his attack, he had stepped as close as he could in order to witness the results, which allowed Ichigo to reach out and grab his ankle.

"Fun, huh?" Ichigo's voice said from inside the smoke, "I guess I can work with that."

"Hey! Let go!" Jack tried to pull free from Ichigo's grip but it was like trying to escape a vice. Before he could even consider using his

knives, Ichigo pulled downwards, causing Jack's body to bounce on the wall before being dragged to the ground in an undignified heap.

As he shook his head to regain his bearings, Jack looked up and saw Ichigo looming over him. Ichigo had a gleeful look on his face and was cracking the knuckles on his hands in preparation for the beatdown he was about to give. Reaching down and grabbing the front of Jack's Goku Uniform, Ichigo lifted him off the ground before slamming his knee into his stomach. That should have ended the fight.

Key words being should have.

When Ichigo's knee made contact with Jack Naito's stomach, it had felt as if he had slammed it into a wall. Sure, by the gagging sounds, it had done some damage to Jack but there was no reason why his knee felt like it had almost been shattered.

"Inconceivable!" Jack gasped as he quickly recovered and appeared back on his feet. Leaping back up onto the wall, he pointed an accusing finger at Ichigo, "How did you survive my Trillion Drive? I threw hundreds of knives at you!"

"First of all, you only threw like thirty or forty knives," Ichigo nonchalantly corrected the new club captain as he brushed dust off his Kamui. Apart from a small cut on his cheek that was beginning to leave a trail of blood, he was completely fine, "Second, your attack wasn't even that special. Your knives moved in a straight line, which means that if your opponent happens to be faster than you, they can simply dodge it. Your attack caught me off guard initially, but I managed to avoid almost the entire thing."

What Jack didn't know, and Ichigo couldn't understand, is that more than one of his knives had hit Ichigo. While only one managed to graze his skin and draw blood, a few more made contact with his body but, to Ichigo's astonishment, were easily stopped by his Kamui without so much as a sting of pain. It was remarkable, and probably something he needed to keep a secret for the time being.



"Dodging is not fighting!" Jack Naito shouted to cover his nervousness. He had been sure that Ichigo Kurosaki had been hit by his knives and yet, here he was, standing in front of him with only a single scratch in his cheek as proof he had even been subjected to his attack. What the hell was Ichigo Kurosaki? Jack Naito didn't know and he wasn't about to let himself be caught off guard again. He had foolishly gotten too close to Ichigo after unleashing his Trillion Drive attack and had suffered because of it.

Jumping away from Ichigo along the wall, Jack flicked his wrists and summoned six more of his knives into his hands. He had been foolish to think that he could have memorized and learned everything his Two-Star Goku Uniform could accomplish after barely an hour. Trillion Drive was his most powerful attack but, as Ichigo so frustratingly pointed out, it wouldn't work against someone like him. Once he was done here, Jack thought, he would spend time working on upgrading Trillion Drive. All he needed was a target.

Perhaps he would go after that girl that Ichigo had been talking to.

Ichigo, on the other hand, was not looking forward to a fight on his first day at Honnouji Academy. Watching Jack jump away from him, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and decided to ask the question plaguing his mind, "I don't have time for this. Can you just tell me what I did to piss off Satsuki so I can go finish my lunch before Mako eats all of it?"

"Don't think you've won!" Jack jumped in the air and twisted his arms back, "Your luck can only last so long before I hit you, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

As the latest salvo of knives shot towards him, Ichigo sighed and decided enough was enough. He had hoped that coming to Honnouji Academy would allow him to have a semi-normal high school experience without the constant reminders of all that he lost as well as the gangs of thugs who kept trying, and failing, to kick his ass for stupid reasons. Seeing Jack Naito exhibiting superhuman abilities

due to his Goku Uniform meant Ichigo didn't need to hold back anymore.

He leaned his head to the side to avoid the first knife and sidestepped two more before shooting forward. Ducking beneath a fourth knife, Ichigo leapt off the ground and easily made it to the top of the wall. In one swift motion, he pushed forward and began sprinting along the narrow wall towards Jack, his body leaning to the left and right to avoid the obvious, and hastily, thrown weapons.

"Stay away!" Jack shouted as he continued to try to hit Ichigo with his knives. This was impossible! How the hell could Ichigo Kurosaki, who up until just a minute ago couldn't even stand up to him, be able to easily avoid his attacks? He was a club captain! His Two-Star Goku Uniform should have been able to deal with Ichigo Kurosaki without any effort. This shouldn't be happening!

"Shut the hell up!"

Ichigo's hand shot out and grabbed hold of Jack before he could jump away. As he pulled the bewildered president of the Knife Throwing Club towards him by his collar, Ichigo remembered what had happened the last time he had tried to hit him. So instead of trying to do the same thing a second time, Ichigo decided to go for the low blow. Picking his leg off the ground, Ichigo swung it back as far as he could before driving it forward into Jack Naito's groin.

Much like Ichigo expected, Jack collapsed as soon as his knee made contact. Letting go of Jack's Goku Uniform, Ichigo allowed the club captain to fall to the ground below, his hands holding his injured pride. Rubbing his sore knee, thankfully not the same one as last time, Ichigo watched with annoyance as Jack managed to get back to his feet, albeit on shaky knees.

"Don't... don't think you've won," Jack gritted out as he stood up fully erect, knives sliding back into his hands, "Can you fathom the difference between your power and my own? I don't need to get

close to you to hit you. As long as I keep my distance I can continue to attack you without worrying about your cheap shots!"

Ichigo stared at Jack before summing up his opinion on the matter, "Are you serious?"

With an exasperated sigh, Ichigo rubbed the blood from his cheek onto the sleeve of his Kamui. Kisuke did say that he shouldn't get blood on it, but Ichigo had made it a point to not take everything Kisuke said at face value unless given a very good reason. A hastily scrawled postscript at the bottom of a mysterious letter was not, to Ichigo, a very good reason. If avoiding getting blood on his Kamui was so important, then Kisuke would have told him why.

Hopping off the wall, Ichigo landed on the ground with a slight grunt and rotated his shoulder to loosen up the cramp in the joint, "Don't you have anything better to do than fight me?"

Jack growled fruitlessly at Ichigo. If he didn't beat Ichigo Kurosaki, then his new Goku Uniform would be confiscated and he would be demoted back down to a lowly No-Star. Jack was not going to allow that to happen ever again.

As he prepared to attack Ichigo, both of them missed the blood on Ichigo's sleeve slowly disappear into the Kamui until there was nothing but the original pigmentation remaining. They also failed to see the eyes near Ichigo's collar opened ever so slightly, exposing just a hint of red and black irises.

"Oh ho. This is completely unexpected."

Several stories up in the main Honnouji Academy building, a shaggily dressed man scratched at the back of his neck as he observed Ichigo's fight against Jack Naito through a pair of binoculars. It had been extremely fortunate that the angle allowed him to see Ichigo wipe the trace amount of blood onto his sleeve. A few more feet to the right and Aikuro Mikisugi would have never witnessed what just transpired.

"Oh man," Aikuro drawled out with a wistful sigh, "Talking to him is going to be really weird..."

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Singing in a terribly off-key tone as he drove down the nearly empty highway back to Karakura Town, Isshin was willfully ignorant of the strange glances he was receiving from his fellow drivers. He was fully aware that he had an awful singing voice, as Masaki made sure to point out several dozen times during their marriage, but he refused to let something like that deter him. Tapping his hands against the steering wheel as he continued singing along to the song in a voice that could shatter glass, Isshin abruptly froze when he detected a new presence in the car.

"Gosh, you really can't sing."

Isshin stopped tapping his fingers at the hauntingly familiar voice. Glancing into the rearview mirror at the teenager sitting right behind him, he frowned and asked, "How did you get back there? The doors were locked."

Sitting in the backseat with her hands folded cutely across her lap, Nui Harime giggled playfully as she turned her attention away from the rather interesting cloud passing in front of the sun. She could feel the amount of annoyance permeating the vehicle rising, which brought a saccharine smile to her face, but the Grand Couturier really wished she had managed to record Isshin's awful singing. Having something like that was priceless. It would have made the perfect blackmail material or, better yet, a Christmas gift!

"That's a silly question, you old goat," Nui bobbed her head back and forth, smirking at Ichigo's nickname for his dad, "I can go anywhere I want. Nobody can stop me! I thought you of all people would know that by now, you know."

"I am aware of that," Isshin reluctantly admitted, pulling his eyes away from the rearview mirror and back onto the road.

Nui Harime huffed and pouted at Isshin's rather callous dismissal of her grand entrance. Didn't he know how polite she was being? It wasn't every day that she decided to introduce herself instead of getting right down to business. Leaning backwards in the seat with her single sapphire eye focused solely on the back of Isshin's head, the Grand Couturier playfully kicked her feet through the air and sighed dramatically, "Gosh, I guess you don't have a sense of humor anymore. Anyway... I'm only here because Lady Ragyo wants to see you."

"Is that right?"

Isshin drummed his fingers against the steering wheel while resisting the urge to look over his shoulder at the Grand Couturier, who was undoubtedly smiling. He should have known there was more to Ragyo's plans besides using her position as the chair of Honnouji Academy's board of directors to admit Ichigo on a full scholarship. But wanting to meet him after what happened last time? That came as a complete surprise. Subtly clearing his throat while adjusting the rearview mirror in order to better see the blonde teenager sitting right behind him, Isshin waited until the sole oncoming vehicle passed them before remarking, "I thought I made it perfectly clear that I never wanted to speak to her again. Not after what she did to Ichigo..."

"Gosh, you really like thinking about the past!" Nui exclaimed with a hint of annoyance, her face twisting into a beaming smile as she clapped her hands together and leaned forward in the seat, "Lady Ragyo forgives you for betraying her trust, you know. She told me so herself! So you don't have to worry about her trying to kill you!"

Whether or not Ragyo was still upset, and likely plotting to either kill or horribly maim him, after all this time didn't bother Isshin in the slightest. Stuff like that came with the job. He was more concerned about what she had in store for Ichigo, "Well... Ragyo has quite the

imagination. If my memory is correct, and it is, she was conducting inhumane experiment on unwilling volunteers. Including her own daughters."

"That's not a very nice thing to say, you old goat! Besides, it's not like Ichigo died or anything!" Nui's singsong tone contained the barest traces of menace and annoyance before she sat up and reached down into her pink Lolita-style dress. Pulling out the crisp and unblemished photograph she took just a few hours ago during Student Evaluation Day, the scowling visage of Ichigo as clear as day, the Grand Couturier hummed thoughtfully and added, "But that's all in the past! What's really important is that Ichigo is at Honnouji Academy where I can see him any time I want!"

"Don't patronize me," Isshin attempted to glare at Nui Harime only to give up when she stuck out her tongue in response, "Whenever you take an interest in something, it always ends up badly. So I *strongly* recommend that you stay far away from Ichigo."

The Grand Couturier's saccharine expression forcibly tightened at Isshin's blatant threat, the sapphire color of her remaining eye slightly darkening. Pouting childishly while kicking the back of his chair with her pink boots, Nui tilted her head and mockingly sighed, "Golly, that was quite that rude thing to say! I know when I'm not wanted, you know. But I can't help wondering what Ichigo will think when he finds out the truth about you and Lady Ragyo."

A small frown pulled at the corners of Isshin's mouth as he scratched his chin, "The truth, huh? I already regaled Ichigo with my heroic exploits the day I met Ragyo."

"Don't be coy, you silly old goat."

Nui's single eye widened dangerously as she giggled childishly and leaned forward, a deranged expression on her face, "I bet you told Ichigo the old story about how you saved Lady Ragyo from a bombing! That's really cute, but we both know that's simply not true!

You must really be scared of telling Ichigo the truth if you're lying about something as silly as that!"

"There are some things that should only be learned when the time is right," Isshin answered, refusing to play along with the Grand Couturier's mind games. Truth be told, she actually had a point. But as much as he wanted to tell Ichigo the truth about how he really met Ragyo twenty-two years ago, Isshin knew it would be far better for his son to figure it out on his own, "Ichigo might not be a genius like Ryuken's son but he's a lot smarter than you think. I'm sure he'll be able to figure out everything about Ragyo given enough time."

"Aw, that's really sweet of you," Nui's voice dripped with saccharine happiness as she clapped her hands together. While she would love to keep talking with Isshin, especially since it was all about Ichigo, she did have a job to do. It would be really disappointing, not to mention a large and ugly blemish on her nearly perfect record, if she returned to Lady Ragyo without the old goat. Shuffling over in the backseat until she was sitting exactly in the middle, the Grand Couturier cutely fixed her dress before smirking, "But you're worrying over nothing. Lady Ragyo just wants to hear about Ichigo, including all the intricate and personal details. That's all! I super promise there's no ulterior motive!"

"She could have called."

Isshin's answer was punctuated with a small shrug of his shoulder, one eye focused on the visibly pleased Grand Couturier in the backseat while he subtly reached towards the hidden compartment underneath the steering wheel. Given Ragyo's propensity for overly dramatic reveals, not to mention her fashion sense, he figured something like this would eventually happen. Coughing lightly as he pressed a finger against the concealed latch, the compartment silently sliding open, Isshin arched an eyebrow, "But it's interesting that Ragyo sent you of all people..."

A deathly silence filled the vehicle as Isshin trailed off while raising his hand, the miniaturized Bleach Bomb clasped firmly between his

fingers. Based on the same designs as the one Kisuke constructed in the hidden chamber underneath his shop, which detonated and injured Nui Harime when she decided to investigate, glowing blue circuits intersected across the device's pure white surface. Holding his thumb over the button that would trigger a five second countdown before the Bleach Grenade, one of only three in existence, went off, Isshin narrowed his eyes and jokingly chuckled, "Of course, this will hurt... a lot. After all, it *is* a grenade. But I'm sure it'll hurt you a lot more."

Nui's sapphire eye widened in shock and fear at Isshin's thinly veiled threat before she recomposed herself and cutely pouted. It wouldn't be proper for the world's best couturier, whose designs are worn by most humans, to get all riled up about something so trivial. A smile once more stretched across her face as she crossed one leg over the other and leaned forward, the Grand Couturier's voice was full of venom as she spoke, "Gosh, that is a real thoughtful gift but Lady Ragyo knew would be a stick in the mud! I think her exact words were 'Isshin is not a man that can be bullied' or something. So I went on a little field trip and did some extra credit!"

Cautiously staring into the review mirror when Nui gleefully reached into her dress, the saccharine smile plastered on her face widening, Isshin choked and nearly dropped the Bleach Grenade when he saw what she pulled out, "Those are - "

Held mockingly in each of the Grand Couturier's hands were Karin and Yuzu's most precious keepsakes. There was the special mint-condition autographed card Karin received from her favorite football star, which Isshin was absolutely sure she always kept next to her bed, as well as the stuffed animal Masaki had given to Yuzu only a few days before she passed away. Isshin knew his daughters were too smart to fall for any of Nui's tricks, so the only way she could have gotten her hands on them was if...

"I see you understand now, you silly old goat!" Nui announced cheerfully, cutting off Isshin's train of thought in the process, "You may be super strong but your family is an entirely different game!"



Isshin gripped the steering wheel hard enough to turn his knuckles white as he let the Bleach Grenade fall harmlessly into the passenger seat. Leaning back against the headrest while letting out a deep sigh, he hunched his shoulders in defeat and muttered, "I suppose I really don't have a choice. So when does Ragyo want to see me?"

As Nui Harime leaned forward and happily explained that Lady Ragyo wanted to see him right away, because it was super important that they meet and talk about Ichigo, they failed to pay any attention to the bus traveling in the opposite direction down the highway. Yawning loudly as she propped her head against the window, one hand curled protectively around the handle of the guitar case at her feet, Ryuko Matoi stared out over the bleak landscape with an absolutely bored expression on her face. She was bored out of her mind. After nearly five hours of traveling, with only a single pit stop along the way, she could feel her mind beginning to unravel.

Stretching her back while stifling another yawn, Ryuko looked away from the window and closed her eyes. It wouldn't be much longer until she reached Honnou City. If she wanted any shot of avenging her dad's murder and hunting down the bitch that killed him, she couldn't afford to be at anything less than one hundred percent.

## Go Your Own Way

*I present Chapter 5 of **To My Death I Fight** . Man, having to wait each week for the next episode of Kill la Kill is a real bummer. On one hand, I want to get this out to you, my readers, as quickly as possible. On the other hand every week I get punched in the face with a wham line, character reveal or, as this week pointed out, what actually happened to a specific character. I hate having a chapter done and finding out that half of it had been rendered AU from the new episode of Kill la Kill. Luckily for me, and you, this week wasn't that bad. I hardly had to change anything.*

*I made a slight edit to Chapter 3 in Ragyo's conversation with Rei. For those of you who have seen this week's episode, it will make sense why I did it. Oh, and FYI, it will be a cold, cold, COLD day in hell before I have Ichigo's Kamui be anything like Senketsu or Junketsu.*

***Edited January 18, 2015 - I fixed up most, if not 99%, of the grammatical tense and spelling mistakes. There may be one or two remaining but I think I've gotten most of them. One of the most prevailing things I fixed was my consistent spelling of 'Bakuzen' instead of the proper 'Bakuzan.' Several scenes have been cleaned up, including the dialogue and descriptions, which should help you, my readers, to easily follow what is going on. So enjoy this newly updated Chapter 5, containing more than 1,000 words of additional stuff!***

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### Chapter 5 - Go Your Own Way

"I will not be defeated by the likes of you!"

Jack Naito's breath was heavy and ragged as he glared at Ichigo Kurosaki. His fight against the orange haired youth was just about to reach the ten minute mark but he had yet to score a second hit against the new student, which should have been impossible. He was wearing a Two-Star Goku Uniform, granted to him by Lady Satsuki to deal with Ichigo Kurosaki, yet they seemed to be evenly matched.

"Don't you know when to quit?" Ichigo asked while taking a deep breath. Bringing his arms back up into a standard defensive stance, his muscles already feeling the initial effects of exhaustion, Ichigo scowled when he saw Jack Naito beginning to angrily grit his teeth.

"You think you can beat me?" Jack Naito sneered as he flicked his wrists and prepared to once again use Trillion Drive. He could see Ichigo was starting to get tired. Perhaps this was the time the new student's freakishly inhuman stamina would actually fail him, "I don't know how you're still standing Ichigo Kurosaki, but you can't dodge forever! Eventually you'll screw up! When that happens you're going to die!"

"You keep thinking that," Ichigo grumbled as he slid his right foot backwards along the ground, "Just use your next attack already. I want to try and get something to eat before lunch is over."

"Why you son of a -"

Jack's curse was cut short when a brilliant burst of light shone down from the top of Honnouji Academy. As the courtyard of the academy was bathed in the white light, the shadows fleeing from the abrupt change in illumination, the two combatants paused and turned towards it for differing reasons. Craning his head upwards, one hand held over his forehead, Ichigo squinted his eyes and thought, *"Who the hell turned on the floodlights?"*

As he grew accustomed to the abrupt change in brightness Ichigo was able to barely make out Satsuki Kiryuin slowly descending down a flight of translucent steps. Glaring imperceptibly at the Kiryuin

heiress as she approached him, her Elite Four flanking her on both sides, Ichigo had to admit that Uryu was completely right about her. Satsuki radiated strict mental control, her face set in a grim expression that conveyed power and authority to those around her. If he hadn't fought against and alongside people with similar personalities Ichigo knew he would have been cowed, if only a little, by Satsuki's expansive presence.

Her heels clicking softly against the ground as she reached the courtyard, her Elite Four walking solemnly behind her, Satsuki didn't take two steps before two rows of One-Star students appeared out of nowhere and bowed deeply to her. Momentarily settling her eyes on Ichigo, her brow creasing at the lack of fear on the former shinigami's face, Satsuki turned her focus on Jack Naito.

"Jack Naito!" Satsuki bellowed with authority as she slammed her sheathed blade against the ground, "You have failed in your mission!"

"B-But I still have time, Lady Satsuki!" Jack Naito fruitlessly pleaded, his body shaking with fear. Taking a nervous step backwards, the knives in his fingers clattering to the ground, he loudly gulped and muttered, "You said I had until the end of the day to deal with Ichigo Kurosaki. I still have a few hours left!"

Satsuki's eyes narrowed in response to Jack's excuse before slamming Bakuzan against the ground once more, "You, who have been granted the power of a Goku Uniform, dare ask for more time when you cannot even wound someone like Ichigo Kurosaki? How will more time change that? The answer is simple. It won't! You are weak, Jack Naito! You do not deserve the power of a Goku Uniform!"

"N-No..." Jack broke out into a cold sweat as he turned and fled from Satsuki Kiryuin, using his Two-Star Goku Uniform to force a path through the columns of One-Star students surrounding him and rushed towards the entrance of Honnouji Academy. Unfortunately for the flee Jack Naito his impromptu escape wasn't as surprising as he wished.

Ichigo only managed to catch a glimpse of Ira Gamagori rushing past him, his brown eyes barely tracking the larger student's movements, before the Disciplinary Committee Chair leapt into the air and crashed back into the ground in front of Jack Naito. Towering over the cowering student, his form nearly tripling in size, Gamagori spread his arms out as several spiked whips emerged from his sleeves.

"Why are you running? Gamagori rhetorically asked, his booming voice reverberating throughout the courtyard. Glaring at the sweating student kneeling on the ground in front of him, his eyes nothing more than gleaming yellow points of light, Gamagori twisted his wrists as he began smashing Jack Naito with his spiked whips, "You are not worthy of wearing one of Lady Satsuki's Goku Uniforms! Take it off!"

For nearly twenty seconds Gamagori continued to assault Jack Naito with the whips from his Goku Uniform, the club captain's body flailing back and forth almost comically from the many impacts. Eventually Gamagori raised his arm above him and, accompanied by a roar, swung his whip downwards with enough force to crater the ground underneath Jack while at the same time strip him of his Two-Star uniform. While the Knife Throwing Club president lay unconscious and injured on the ground, a trail of drool and spit leaking out of his mouth, and nearly naked apart from his underwear, Gamagori stared down at him derisively.

"Jack Naito, from this moment forward you are hereby demoted to No-Star," Gamagori informed the unconscious former club captain, uncaring about his state of being. Dusting off the captain's Two-Star uniform, which had mysteriously been folded during the commotion, Gamagori extended his arm as a One-Star student appeared at his side to take the uniform.

"You seem perturbed by what you just witnessed, Ichigo Kurosaki."

Ichigo turned away from the beaten and bruised body of the former Two-Star student towards Satsuki, who had started approaching him while his attention was focused on Gamagori. Noticing her uniform

lacked any of the black, four-pointed stars most of the student body possessed Ichigo waited until Satsuki placed the sheathed sword back on her waist before answering neutrally, "He said you were the one that gave the order to attack me. Why the hell would you do this to him?"

"Someone like him who has been given power is nothing," Satsuki said, nearly halfway to him by now, "He was nothing but a pig in human clothing, fit for nothing save wallowing in his own powerlessness. Those without power will inevitably flock to those that have power. That is a cardinal rule of the world. Why would you even care about someone like that?"

"To be honest I really don't care," Ichigo retorted, his answer causing Satsuki to quirk an eyebrow in mild curiosity, "That guy was a real pain in the ass but he didn't deserve what Gamagori did to him. What gives you the right to do that?"

"What gives me the right, you ask?" Satsuki's voice was cold as she finally came to stop several feet in front of Ichigo. Crouching down as she drew her sword, Bakuzan's black metal gleaming malevolently in the sunlight, Satsuki burst forward and attempted to decapitate Ichigo.

Ducking under the first swing Ichigo was forced to immediately lean to his left when Satsuki followed her initial attack with a vertical swipe aimed at severing his left arm from his body. Rolling along the ground away from Satsuki, hopping backwards when she stabbed Bakuzan into the dirt, Ichigo scowled and raced towards the Student Council President. Leaning his neck to the side as he closed the distance, Bakuzan shining brightly inches from his neck, Ichigo attempted to smash his elbow into Satsuki's face only to be surprised when she avoided the blow and retaliated by slamming her foot into his chin.

Ichigo stumbled back from the surprise attack but quickly recovered. He hadn't been expecting her to have such flexibility, and now his chin was paying the price for his stupidity. Spitting out a wad of blood

from when he bit his tongue, he quickly retaliated with a kick to Satsuki's side that was blocked at the last minute by her sword. However, it still caused her to skid several feet along the ground from the force behind the kick.

"That was a cheap shot," he muttered and wiped the trail of blood leaking from his lips onto his sleeve.

"Your skills are quite impressive, Ichigo Kurosaki," Satsuki stoically announced as she turned around and sheathed Bakuzan with an audible click. Walking back towards the flight of stairs, the rows of One-Star students bowing as she passed, Satsuki paused as she reached the first step and looked over her shoulder, "But fighting someone of your level is beneath me. Consider your admittance to Honnouji Academy... approved."

Ichigo watched her go, but there were many things he wanted to find out, starting with why she had decided to attack him. There was something strange going on at Honnouji Academy, and he was sure Satsuki Kiryuin was at the center of it all. Taking a step forward to demand answers from her, he found his path blocked by Gamagori, who had literally appeared out of the sky.

"Ichigo Kurosaki!" Gamagori's voice echoed through the area before it quickly changed into that of a businessman's, "In order to attend Honnouji Academy, you will need to fill out these forms in triplicate. I do not expect you to finish every single form today, so I will start you off with the Student Residential Contract, Heating and Electric, Amenities, Health Insurance, Life Insurance, Proof of Citizenship and the down payment on your dormitory room. The total cost for everything comes out to 102,000 yen."

While Gamagori was listing various things Ichigo didn't care about, One-Star students had begun piling stacks of forms in his arms until he could barely see over the top. When he heard about a bill in the hundreds of thousands of yen, Ichigo stuck his head around the stack of forms, "What the hell are you talking about? Doesn't my full scholarship to this stupid school mean I'm here for free?"

Gamagori's eye twitched, "Indeed."

With almost restrained reluctance, Gamagori grabbed the total bill off of the stack of papers and promptly ripped it in half, "Due to the actions of Lady Satsuki's mother you pay for nothing. I do not like that. Watch yourself, Ichigo Kurosaki. If you step out of line even a single time, I will be forced to administrate punishment unto you."

"Punishment unto me?" Ichigo couldn't help but wonder what the hell Gamagori was trying to say. He had an idea, a terrible one, of what Gamagori meant and it sent shivers down his spine, "That better not mean what I think it does. Just to let you know, I'm not into that kind of stuff."

After hearing Ichigo's words, Jakuzure and Sanageyama burst into laughter, Nonon actually falling to the ground while holding her sides. When Gamagori turned towards them, a furious look on his face, they quickly stopped and began whistling innocently.

"Man, I think I'm going to like you," Sanageyama gave Ichigo a two finger salute before turning around to follow Satsuki, "Don't forget to sign up for the Kendo Club, Ichigo. I could use someone like you as the club president."

Ichigo watched Satsuki and her Elite Four walk away before he dropped the forms on the ground. The stack of papers had to weigh at least fifty pounds and Gamagori expected him to sign them all before the end of the night? Jack Naito might have been insane but Ichigo couldn't understand why Satsuki had intervened in the fight.

"Ichigo!"

" *Oh, damn it...* "

Appearing out of nowhere, her feet kicking up trails of dust off the ground, Mako Mankanshoku slid to a stop next to Ichigo with one of Jack's knives lodged harmlessly in her hair. As she ate the



remainder of his lunch, using another of the knives as a makeshift fork, Mako looked at Ichigo with starry eyes, "That was uber cool!"

"Uber cool?"

"Yeah!" Mako threw away Ichigo's lunch tray, causing it to beam a One-Star student in the face, and began mimicking Ichigo and Jack Naito's poses from the fight, "You were all like 'pow pow pow' and he was all 'you cannot defeat me' and then you were all like 'this fight is beneath someone of my stature!' It was so amazing! If Lady Satsuki hadn't stepped in, you would have totally won for sure!"

"No I wouldn't," Ichigo admitted, causing Mako's face to freeze in shock. As Satsuki, and the light she constantly emitted, disappeared, he continued, "Jack had the advantage in both strength and power over me. I may have been faster but it was only a matter of time until he managed to get a lucky hit."

Mako waved her hand in front of her face, "Don't drag yourself through the mud Ichigo! You would have won for sure! Wait just a second! Could it be...?"

Before Ichigo could protest or stop her Mako dove into the stack of forms and contracts and began throwing them haphazardly into the air. Eventually finding what she was seeking Mako let out a shout of triumph as she pulled out a single piece of paper, "You got a room in the Honnouji Academy dorms! That is awesome! I heard the standards of living there are way above the One-Star Residential District! Only those with oodles of money can afford to live there. Let's go check out your right, Ichigo! My family is going to be so jealous!"

"I don't think that's a -" Ichigo tried to tell Mako not to, but the hyperactive girl was hearing none of it. Grabbing Ichigo's wrist, she began pulling him in the direction of the dorms.

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" *Ichigo,*" Isshin's voice came through the phone in a serious tone, *"Sorry that I couldn't stay to say goodbye. Something important came up back home and I needed to rush back to Karakura Town."*

"Like I was worried," Ichigo grumbled into his phone. From where he was lying down, he had to admit that his dorm was a lot classier than he would have assumed. When he heard he would be living in a dorm, he had been expecting something along the lines of a single room. Instead, as he opened the door he found that he had a kitchen, living room, bedroom and several other things he hadn't expected to find. It was more of an apartment than a dorm, "Just don't do anything stupid when I'm gone."

" *What?*" Isshin shouted into the phone loud enough to cause Ichigo to hold it away at arm's length, *"How can you dare to say that?"*

"You know damn well why."

" *I don't want to hear that you obtained the love of several women, but if it happens, makes sure you pick out your favorite,*" Isshin paused for a far greater time than he should have before finishing, *"I have to go. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Ichigo. Goodbye and have fun."*

Staring at his phone for several minutes after his father hung up, his mind trying to understand what had just happened and what he should do, Ichigo eventually decided to lie back down and stare up at his ceiling. He was sure his dad knew more about why he was here at Honnouji Academy but Ichigo wasn't going to confront him about it. Ever since finding out his dad was a shinigami of such power that he could effectively fight Sosuke Aizen, a feat that he couldn't do before training in the Dangai, Ichigo had decided that allowing Isshin some leeway was the right thing to do. If his dad decided he needed to know something, he would make sure Ichigo would find out.

Letting a weary sigh escape his lips, the clock in his dormitory kitchen faintly ticking in the background, Ichigo was about to try and go to sleep when he glanced to his left and noticed something odd

about his Kamui. As he focused on the white uniform hanging limply on the wall across his bedroom, the fabric lightly shifting in an unfelt breeze, Ichigo sat up and narrowed his eyes, "That's different..."

What drew his attention and pushed away any remaining weariness were the two half-opened eyes on the collars of his Kamui. When he first saw his uniform Ichigo had been completely certain Kisuke's strange designs were of closed eyes, without a trace of the iris or pupil, yet now he could clearly see rings of orange, blue and yellow in those sleepy-looking eyes.

Ichigo stared at the Kamui for almost a minute, the clock in the background adding to the tension permeating his dormitory, before he decided to take a closer look at it. The lack of light in his bedroom apart from the meager illumination his orange desk lamp provided was causing the shadows to jump chaotically around the Kamui. Walking slowly across his bedroom Ichigo grabbed the Kamui from its hanger and held it at arm's length, his eyes scrutinizing every detail he could see.

"Something's not right here..."

Leave it to Kisuke to make a school uniform without telling him it wasn't normal. As his thoughts drifted back to the annoying letter the shopkeeper left for him Ichigo decided to lean in and get a closer look at the Kamui's eyes. When his face was less than a foot away from those mysterious eyes, the individual threads of the Kamui nearly visible, Ichigo was thrown off guard when the Kamui's eyes suddenly shot open.

"What the fuck?" Ichigo dropped the Kamui out of surprise and backpedaled as his uniform began moving on its own.

" **More...** "

If Ichigo wasn't surprised that the voice was clearly coming from the Kamui, he was in for a shock when it began warping and changing before managing to mimic standing up. After it managed to bring

itself up off the floor, the Kamui's bloodshot eyes darted around his room before focusing solely on Ichigo.

**" *Blood... feed me more blood!*"**

In one swift motion the Kamui leapt at him. While that should have been an impossible feat, Ichigo was more concerned with the fact that it was apparently gunning for him and he did not want to know what would happen if it caught him. While he knew there was an afterlife, he didn't want his cause of death to be 'my clothes ate me.' He knew without a doubt that everyone in the Soul Society wouldn't let him live that down. He would take fighting Aizen over something like that any day of the week.

Quickly rolling out of the way as the Kamui reached him, its sleeves twisting through the air, Ichigo sprung back up and immediately darted towards his bedroom door. Thankful that he had decided to leave the door open, he raced through it, his hand grabbing the handle as he went, and slammed it shut before locking it.

"The hell is going on?" Ichigo braced his body against the door as it began shaking and creaking from the Kamui throwing itself against the frame. How could something that is essentially clothing be so strong? It was impossible and yet, if Kisuke was involved, Ichigo wasn't surprised something like this had happened. As he tried to make sense of what was happening, Ichigo came to two conclusions. Either Kisuke, through some godless ritual, managed to bring his uniform to life or someone here at Honnouji Academy managed to spike his food with something.

The Kamui continued to fruitlessly attempt to break through the door for several more minutes, the wooden frame holding firm under the assault, but Ichigo wasn't going to let that thing out no matter what it took. Bracing his shoulder against the door his hand firmly holding the handle on the off chance the Kamui figured out how to open the door, Ichigo scowled, *"Fuck this. I'm going to call Yoruichi and Tessai and explain everything. They must know something about what's happening to my Kamui."*

Reaching to his pocket for his cell phone and quickly cursing when he realized he left it in his bedroom Ichigo waited for the Kamui's escape attempts to slow and eventually stop. The door might have been closed but the Kamui was essentially clothing. It might try to escape by sliding underneath the door if it realized it could. Carefully stepped away from his bedroom towards the kitchen, his eyes glancing back and forth between the kitchen phone and the bedroom door, Ichigo heard the same feminine voice begin begging at him.

***" Don't go... please don't go..."***

Ichigo paused in mid-step at the desperate tone. Turning around, his mind trying to figure out if he went insane, Ichigo decided to ask, "What the hell are you?"

***" I don't want to go back to sleep..."***

The voice was starting to sound more and more desperate with each word. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Ichigo knew he should just wait for it to go back to sleep. It was the most sensible thing to do, after all, but his time as a shinigami and dealing with the Soul Society and everything else had opened his mind to things he would rather have forgotten. Really wishing he wasn't about to say what was on his mind, he asked, "Damn it all. If I open this door, do you promise to not attack me?"

***"... Yes..."***

Mentally noting to kick himself in the morning for considering what he was about to do Ichigo groaned and swung the door open. He had been prepared for his Kamui to leap out and attack but when nothing happened he took a hesitant step back into his bedroom. That was when he saw the Kamui.

Against common sense, as well as every law of nature Ichigo could remember, the Kamui was standing up under its own power in the middle of his room. While it still retained the same colors as his normal black and white school uniform the rest of its body had

shifted into something completely different. The bottom of his Kamui was hovering just off the floor using some unseen source of power. The sleeves of his jacket were hollow and deflated, yet were held stiffly in the air, almost as if there was something filling them. What drew his attention was the pair of eyes that had started this whole mess. The orange, blue and yellowed ringed irises were completely focused on him, the intent in his uniform's gaze causing apprehension to grip Ichigo. Lastly the chest area of his jacket had opened up and shifted into a gaping maw full of several fang-like structures.

"I'm not going to ask again. What are you?"

The Kamui brought a hollow sleeve up to its collar, which seemed to be functioning as its forehead, and rubbed it before the gaping mouth answered in a feminine voice, ***"I am a Kamui."***

"I already knew that," Ichigo should have known his uniform was different from the very start. It had been made by Kisuke, after all, and that insane shopkeeper never made anything normal when he could help it, "But what exactly are you? I don't know what being a Kamui means but I'm pretty sure clothes aren't supposed to talk, move or crave my blood like a vampire."

***" I don't know..."*** the Kamui seemed almost depressed, its eyes closing sadly, as it answered, ***"I remember my creation by Kisuke Urahara and then nothing until I tasted your blood earlier. I need more! I will not go back to sleep again!"***

With a crazed and bloodshot look in its eyes the Kamui leapt through the air at Ichigo. Shifting his stance while mentally berating himself for falling into such an obvious trap Ichigo reached out and tried to grapple with the Kamui. To his shock and surprise the Kamui not only managed to weave itself around his fingers, which being made of clothing made sense, but also began wrapping its sleeves around his arms.

***" That's it! Wear me! Put me on! Let me drink your blood!"***

"Like hell I will!" Swinging his arms to the side, Ichigo slammed the Kamui into the wall of his bedroom hard enough to crack the plaster, but at the same time daze the Kamui. As its sleeves limply slid off his arms, and its eyes adapted a dazed look, Ichigo quickly grabbed it and tossed it in his closet before slamming the door closed.

As the Kamui quickly recovered and stared slamming its body against the closet door, loud echoes reverberating through his room, Ichigo leaned against the door and rubbed his face, "I'm being attacked by my own clothing. This is a freaking nightmare. When I find Kisuke I'm going to kill him."

There was a more pressing issue for Ichigo at the moment. If his Kamui was technically alive, he was going to need to get a new school uniform. Bracing a chair against the closet door to prevent it from escaping, Ichigo began walking out of his bedroom. He would have to be an idiot to try and sleep there with that thing in his closet, "Damn it, I'm here for barely a day and my clothes come to life and try and eat me. I'm going to have to ask Mako tomorrow where I can get a new uniform."

" **No!**" The Kamui slammed itself against the closet door hard enough to move the chair, **"You cannot wear anything but me. I won't allow it!"**

"Give it a rest. There's no way you're getting out of there," Ichigo said before realizing he had effectively just ordered his clothing to shut up, "I must be hallucinating. I know I'm going to wake up tomorrow morning in my bed and my uniform will be nothing more than normal clothing."

" **Please!**" To Ichigo's shock the Kamui sounded like it was crying, **"Let me taste your blood! I don't want to go back to sleep!"**

Ichigo stopped in the doorway, "Is sleeping really that bad?"

When he received nothing but silence from the Kamui Ichigo sighed and banged his head against the wall. Why did his life, even as a

normal human without any spiritual powers, have to be so screwed up? After thinking things over for a moment he asked, "Do you have a name? I find this whole situation odd enough without knowing my school uniform's name."

There was an almost pathetic scratching at his closet door as his Kamui spoke, **"No... I don't have a name."**

"No name huh..." Ichigo, despite his best efforts, could not help but be reminded of Zangetsu. He remembered when his zanpakuto had scolded him for trying to wield him without knowing his name. Ichigo had seen what happens when a shinigami ignores his zanpakuto. Kenpachi had been enough of a wakeup call for Ichigo to never take Zangetsu for granted again.

Ichigo didn't want to have to think up a name on the fly. It was too hard to think of something good and he wasn't about to go the Kon route and give his Kamui a ridiculous name. He needed to call it something appropriate, "Alright, I've decided on a name. It comes from an old friend that sacrificed a lot for me. I think he would appreciate it if I named you after him... Mugetsu. How does that sound?"

**" Mugetsu..."** The Kamui seemed to mull it over for a moment, **"That is an acceptable name."**

"Now that you have a name, I have another question. Why do you want my blood?"

**" Your blood is the only thing keeping me awake,"** Mugetsu replied almost nostalgically, **"Without your blood, I will soon go back to sleep."**

"So why do you need me to wear you?" Ichigo asked, folding his arms across his chest.

**" My creator made me specifically for you to wear. No one else can wear me. That is why I will never allow you to wear anything**



***else! I shall be the only thing you will ever wear!"***

The way Mugetsu seemed excited to be worn by him was a little freaky but Ichigo put that on the backburner for the moment, "Why did Kisuke make you?"

***" I don't know," Mugetsu confessed, "All I remember upon my creation is Kisuke Urahara standing above me before sealing me away..."***

"Kisuke, you bastard," Why did that idiotic shopkeeper have to do something like this to him? Ichigo had to leave it to Kisuke to complicate his life even now. Sitting down on the ground, Ichigo grumbled, "Just to let you know, Mugetsu, I find the whole concept of wearing something living and breathing both horrifying and embarrassing. If you truly are alive wearing you would be wrong on many different levels. You are your own person... or Kamui, I guess. Why should I wear you instead of sending you back to Kisuke's store?"

***" Wearing me will give you great power," Mugetsu answered, "Those cheap Goku Uniforms will not stand a chance against our combined power!"***

"I don't need power," Ichigo said, "What's the point of having power if there is no reason to use it? Although I would be happy living a normal life I think at this point that is nothing but a pipe dream. I have a sneaking suspicion that Satsuki Kiryuin is soon going to come after me. I've known people like her. They never stop until they get what they're after. If you are as powerful as you claim I could easily stop her before things get too bad."

Ichigo had noticed the looks Satsuki gave him when she confronted him earlier. Usually that wouldn't faze him, but it was the fact that she seemed to be more interested in his Kamui than himself. It didn't make much sense to him at the time but now that Ichigo found out his Kamui was alive, he had the feeling that Satsuki knew what it was.

"Damn it," Ichigo cursed before sighing audibly. Banging his head against the closet door Ichigo rubbed the bridge of his nose and groaned, "Fine, I'll wear you but only under one condition."

Mugetsu couldn't hide the excitement in her voice as she slammed her body against the door, ***"What is it? I'll do anything!"***

"Kisuke Urahara was attacked about a week ago," Ichigo informed his Kamui as a scowl developed on his face, "One of the last things he mentioned was about Life Fibers. After speaking with you I have the sinking feeling whoever attacked Kisuke was actually trying to get to you. If I wear you I want you to promise to stick by my side as I find out what happened to him. After that I'll let you decide if you want to continue sticking with me. How does that sound?"

***"That's not a problem!"*** Mugetsu exclaimed as her sleeves began fumbling with the handle to the closet door, ***"I will follow your ambitions no matter where they lead! Use my power any way you want, Ichigo! Just please don't let me go back to sleep again!"***

Ichigo didn't know what to blame for his decision to wear Mugetsu. Perhaps the lack of sleep was finally getting to him or maybe it had to do with being attacked for no reason only a few after arriving at Honnouji Academy. Whatever the case may be if he was really starting to lose his grip on reality it couldn't be any worse than having a murderous and insane hollow living within the depths of his souls.

Carefully moving the chair away from the closet door, his fingers tightly gripping the handle, Ichigo took a moment to brace himself before asking, "Ok, so how does this -"

Whatever he was about to say was cut off as Mugetsu literally jumped on top of him and began putting herself on his body.

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"Please do not try to escape meeting with Lady Ragyo by jumping out of the elevator... again," Rei Hououmaru strongly cautioned while absentmindedly smoothing out a crease on her sleeve. Turning towards Isshin, who had just finished speaking with his son and was now staring out the window, she added, "The glass surrounding us is reinforced to withstand barrage from an Anti-Tank rifle. By the time you successfully breach the elevator we would have already arrived."

"I think I'll take my chances," Isshin answered as he turned towards the surprisingly thick glass. Rapping his knuckles against the mostly transparent material, a hollow echo permeating the elevator from the contact, he sighed once he saw what floor they were already passing, "I know the second we step into her office Ragyo will try to kill me. She is the type of woman to hold grudges... really long grudges."

Rei Hououmaru didn't bother replying to Isshin's ridiculous accusations against Lady Ragyo. Staring at the digital readout above the elevator doors, the number approaching triple digits, the Revocs secretary hid a satisfied smirk when she felt a subtle shift in her uniform. Stepping forward as they arrived, her white heels clicking softly against the ground, Hououmaru turned around and swept her arm towards Ragyo's office, "The Director is right this way."

"I remember my way around," Isshin mumbled while staring apprehensively down the hallway. Taking one final look at the elevator behind him, his mind quickly calculating his chances of escape to be roughly zero, Isshin hung his head dejectedly as he began the short trek towards Ragyo's office. Folding his hands in his pockets as he purposely dragged his feet, Rei quickly passing him to open the doors, Isshin hoped Ragyo wasn't still upset at him about their last meeting.

Isshin's hopes were dashed the moment Rei Hououmaru finished opening the doors to Ragyo's office. Quickly ducking when he saw several rainbow colored strands of Life Fibers whipping towards him, the threads skewering the wall behind him as they missed, Isshin

frowned and cautiously stood back up, "It's great to see you again, Ragyo."

"I would prefer if you didn't greet Isshin so vigorously, Ma'am," Rei sighed as she closed her eyes and reached into the breast pocket of her white suit. Pulling out a pair of aviator sunglasses, the reflective tint on the lenses blocking the bright rainbow light illuminating the office, the Revocs secretary stepped backwards as she mentally calculated the cost of repairing the damage, "It seems I will need to call your interior designer."

"Forgive my enthusiasm, Hououmaru. I just remembered Isshin so rudely leaving last time without saying goodbye."

Curling her index finger into the palm of her hand, the strands of rainbow Life Fibers rapidly retreating back into her body at her mental command, Ragyo Kiryuin allowed a smirk to grace her features as she stared at Isshin for the first time in years. Tilting her head to the side, her cheek propped up against her hand, the rainbow light emanating from the Kiryuin matriarch's silver hair intensified as she gazed at the man standing in front of her, "It's been quite some time since we spoke, Isshin. How have you been?"

"I've been better," Isshin answered dismissively as he looked around Ragyo's office, "But did you have to send your little helper? You could have just called if you wanted to see me."

Ragyo chuckled as a silver eyebrow quirked upwards in feigned shock. Regally standing up, the entire office quickly illuminated by the rainbow light shining from her silver hair, the CEO of Revocs slowly walked around her desk with her arms clasped under her bosom, "I hope my precious Nui didn't trouble you too much. You know how difficult it is to give orders to an artiste as free spirited as the Grand Couturier."

"I'm not as into artwork like Masaki was. It felt like every other weekend she was begging me to take her to a different museum or gallery!" Isshin closed his eyes as he laughed boisterously. It took

the better part of five years, and a few subtle threats from his wife, but he managed to develop the ability to hide his boredom whenever Masaki held a flyer for a new exhibit in front of his face. Subtly aware of Ragyo's footsteps drawing closer, the rainbow light permeating the office continuously growing brighter by the second, Isshin pointed a thumb over his shoulder at Hououmaru and said, "It's been bugging me for some time now but Hououmaru's not wearing a normal suit."

"Oh?" Ragyo glanced over at Hououmaru, who had silently turned her attention to Isshin, and asked, "And what, my dear Isshin, makes you think that?"

Isshin ignored Ragyo as she continued to approach him before answering, "It wasn't until the elevator that I managed to get a good look at it but there is definitely something off about her suit. I may have a terrible sense of fashion but even I know someone working for one of the biggest companies in the world shouldn't be wearing shorts with a business suit."

"Comment tres amusant! You always preferred to play the part of the fool, Isshin," Ragyo's eyes were filled with a look that set Isshin's nerves on edge. He had seen that look many years ago. It was the exact same one that made Masaki very, very upset with him for a variety of reasons. As the Kiryuin matriarch circled around Isshin, her lips curled upwards into a facsimile of a grin, she continued, "Even back then you hid your sharp mind behind the façade of a jester, projecting an idiotic persona to throw others off guard. It is only when the audience is gone that the true brilliance locked deep in your mind shines forth but I'm curious about one thing. For almost twenty years you've known about COVERS yet you haven't made a single move to stop me. I wonder why that is..."

"Perhaps I hoped someone else would see how insane you are and stop you before *it* could fully awaken," Isshin countered with a reluctant shrug, "Souichiro might have done some truly disturbing things but eventually he began to see you for the monster you are. It's just a shame he realized it far too late to actually do anything to stop you."

"You always say the nicest things, Isshin," Ragyo coyly teased. Placing a hand on his shoulder, her chin resting next to his ear, she whispered, "Then again, you were the only man I ever truly loved. When you so callously ignored my feelings I was forced to settle for Souichiro."

Isshin frowned and pulled his shoulder out of Ragyo's grasp, "You know my heart has been, and always will be, for Masaki. The fact she is no longer with us does not change anything."

"Must you be as defiant and hard-headed as always?" Ragyo half-asked before sighing dramatically and leaning forward, the light emanating from her hair intensifying, "But I wouldn't expect anything else from a man such as yourself. You are, after all, the only person on Earth I will allow to talk to me like that."

"I know you didn't call me just to catch up on old times," Isshin pointed out as he looked at his watch and noticed the time. Turning towards Ragyo, his eyes locked with hers, he added, "If that was all you wanted to do you would haven't sent your little helper to come get me. The last time we saw each other I had just rescued my son from your clutches and Masaki was standing over your crippled body. It's a miracle Ichigo managed to survive and live a healthy and normal life after what you did to him."

"Ichigo Kurosaki..." Ragyo dragged out each syllable as she strutted forward and stood next to Isshin, "It was quite the pleasant surprise to find out the experiment didn't kill him. I do so want to see how well your son has thrived."

"You stay away from my son," Isshin's voice was tinged with anger before he scoffed and pushed Ragyo's hand away from his arm, "Let's cut through the crap, Ragyo. You see Ichigo as nothing more than an experiment, don't you? I may not have recognized some of the machines in the room where I found Ichigo but I sure as hell noticed the Life Fibers. What were you trying to do to my son?"

"The same thing I tried on both of my daughters, of course," Ragyo replied without a hint of remorse, "I attempted to infuse my daughters with Life Fibers but unfortunately they were too weak. There are so few people in the world able to merge with Life Fibers and live. Satsuki was too incompatible while my second daughter was too frail and died before the procedure was finished."

Isshin knew all this already but hearing Ragyo say it without a remorse or care was almost too much for him. Pushing past the Kiryuin matriarch, his footsteps heavy as he headed towards the exit of her office, he paused and looked over his shoulder, "Sometimes I wonder if you still have a soul, Ragyo. Now unless you have anything else to say I'm going home."

Ragyo turned her body fully towards Isshin, her lips curled into a maniacal smile, and held an arm out, "I will permit you to leave, Isshin, but do not assume you were victorious. My interest in your son has only increased now that I know he has both lived and thrived these past seventeen years. Perhaps I will even have my daughter court him. The merging of our bloodlines will be truly magnificent. Hououmaru, please escort Isshin out of the building. It would be rude to keep him around when he has more important places to be."

As she watched Isshin leave her office, Hououmaru gently closing the door behind her as she left, the smirk on Ragyo's face dropped ever so slightly. Maroon eyes closing as she listened to Isshin's footsteps fading into the distance Ragyo didn't turn around when she sensed another presence in her office, "I take it you heard everything?"

"Of course I did!" Nui Harime cheerfully stated while sitting on the edge of Ragyo's desk, her feet kicking freely and lazily in the air. With a large grin plastered on her face, the purple eyepatch hidden beneath a bang of blonde hair that managed to escape her pink bow, the Grand Couturier stuck her tongue out and giggled, "It was super interesting to meet him after all these years! That old goat is just as strong as I remember!"

Ragyo chuckled in amusement as her thoughts focused on the man that just left her office completely unscathed. Looking over her shoulder at the petite Grand Couturier, her lips curled upwards into a smirk, the CEO of Revocs asked, "Is that so? I hope you didn't do anything to provoke Isshin. You know quite well what happens to those that truly manage to get on his bad side."

"You don't have to worry about me," Nui huffed and puffed out her cheeks. Kicking her feet against Ragyo's desk, her pink boots tapping lightly against the polished metal, the Grand Couturier clapped her hands together and leaned forward, "It was really easy to go to Isshin's house when he wasn't around. I just waited around and took his daughters' most precious things! Nothing else would bring him here, you know. Isshin seemed really upset after I showed those things to him so I made sure to leave them in the car before I left!"

"La vie est drôle," Ragyo replied as she walked across her office towards the windows circling the wall, her heels clicking softly against the marble floor. Crossing her arms under her bosom, the white dress never shifting for a moment, the Kiryuin matriarch gazed out over the expansive building complex stretching out into the distance, "I am ordering you to stay away from Isshin and his two daughters... at least for the moment."

Nui leaned her head back, her single sapphire eye blinking owlishly, and smirked, "Can I still play with Ichigo? I really want to meet him and introduce myself, after all!"

The rainbow undertone from Ragyo's hair flared brightly as she considered the Grand Couturier's request, "But of course. You can play with Ichigo as much as you want. Just make you remember to behave yourself."

Clapping her hands together once more as she leapt off the desk, her body gently floating down to the floor with nary a sound, Nui Harime's mind immediately began planning every possible thing she could do with Ichigo in the future. Puffing her cheeks outwards as



she remembered the other business she still needed to do, memories of six months ago fresh in her mind, Nui Harime huffed as she left Ragyo to her thoughts, "It really bums me out that I cannot play with Isshin anymore! He's way more fun to hang with than the other Isshin."

Ragyo's eyes narrowed as the smirk on her face dropped, "How much longer are you going to keep referring to that man as Isshin?"

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"You seem quite pleased with the day's events, Milady."

Sitting in a chair, clad in a form fitting white robe tied gently around her waist, Satsuki gently smiled as she sipped the tea Soroi offered her, "You know me far too well, Soroi."

Satsuki was quite pleased with how the day's events progressed. Not only was Iori's research into improving her Goku Uniforms pushed forward by Jack Naito's ignominious at Ichigo Kurosaki's hands, every blow and attack landed upon recently demoted No-Star recorded in detail by Inumuta, but she was finally able to confront the teenager that garnered her mother's personal interference in Honnouji Academy's matters. Although she was impressed with Ichigo Kurosaki's ability to fight a Two-Star Goku Uniform, a feat previously achieved only by her Elite Four, she hadn't expected the orange haired teenager to track Bakuzan's movements.

Soroi Mitsuzou took a step back, the sterling silver tray held delicately in his hands, and bowed his head slightly, "Forgive my bluntness but I can't recall ever seeing you so fixated on another person."

"Fixated you say..."

Satsuki's smirk vanished as she stared through the large windows taking up the entire wall of her private chambers. Gazing at the moon lazily hovering in the sky overhead, the nearly dark room illuminated with a pale white glow, the Kiryuin heiress paused momentarily before finishing, "I will admit my initial impression of Ichigo Kurosaki was inaccurate. He is far more skilled and intelligent than Inumuta's data indicated but there are still too many variables about his transfer to Honnouji Academy. That is not to mention the uniform he was wearing..."

Despite the impossibility of the situation Ichigo Kurosaki was in possession of an actual Kamui. She had first noticed the peculiarities of his uniquely colored uniform during Ichigo's fight against Jack Naito but it was not until she confronted the orange haired teenager that she could confirm her hypothesis. During that confrontation the question of where Ichigo managed to acquire his Kamui was forefront on her mind. Kamui, by definition, were woven completely from Life Fibers, which had to come from Revocs. Either someone at Revocs created Ichigo's Kamui or there existed a third party that possessed the required expertise and Life Fibers to create such a masterpiece.

How he managed to tame his Kamui was another question that plagued Satsuki's mind. According to her mother's rather morbid explanation humans that Kamui find unworthy of wearing them are slowly and painfully shredded and eaten by the Life Fiber uniform. That Ichigo could wear a Kamui so casually without showing any sign of fatigue or exhaustion spoke wonders about his mental fortitude. Junketsu, the Kamui her father called her wedding dress, required someone with great spiritual and mental fortitude to tame it.

"You say that I am fixated on Ichigo Kurosaki?" Satsuki muttered as she closed her eyes and leaned back, "Perhaps there is some truth in your words, Soroi, but no matter how I feel on the subject Ichigo remains a thorn in my side. If he turns out to be an enemy I will not hesitate to ruthlessly cut him down. If my mother saw fit to send him to Honnouji Academy I can only presume she is aware of my plans."

Soroi's eyes drooped down at Satsuki's words before he respectfully asked, "What do you plan to do about Lady Ragyo?"

Folding her hands in front of her mouth Satsuki's lips curled into a smirk as she replied, "My mother knowing of my plans might work to our advantage. If she believes she knows the full extent of what I have planned her moves will become predictable. While she continues to think I remain in the dark, unaware of her machinations behind the scene, Inumuta and the others will activate several contingency plans to make sure everything proceeds as scheduled."

"Very well, Milady," Soroi placed an arm across his chest and bowed his head, "Will there be anything else?"

Satsuki shook her head, "I wish to be left alone."

As Soroi left Satsuki to her own thoughts, the aged butler placing the pot full of tea on the stand before leaving the room, she tilted her head towards the large windows overlooking Honnouji Academy and the city stretching out into Tokyo Bay. There was a storm approaching on the horizon. Satsuki didn't know when it would arrive but she was certain all those involved would feel its impact. In order to emerge as the only victor in the upcoming conflict Satsuki needed to make sure her forces were adequately prepared.

# I Can't Help Myself

*So here is the revised version of chapter 6. It's at least 1.300 words longer than the original chapter but the main point is that I've fixed grammatical errors, plot holes, sentence and conversation structure, weird character interactions or characterizations and, lastly, edited in a few subtle foreshadowing clues and hints that will really have you guessing. I hope you enjoy this chapter since I really took the time and effort to fixing it up.*

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## Chapter 6 - I Can't Help Myself

Two days after he agreed to let Mugetsu be worn by him Ichigo was starting to regret not thinking things through. The problem wasn't that it, or rather she as Mugetsu's voice suggested, lied to him. On the contrary, ever since the moment he had put on the fully awakened Mugetsu Ichigo had felt power course through his body reminiscent of when he was a substitute shinigami. Of course there were subtle differences between his shinigami powers and Mugetsu but it was quite the refreshing feeling to not feel completely powerless anymore.

**" I just felt your blood pressure and heart rate spike, Ichigo,"** Mugetsu's feminine voice had a hint of concern to it as the eyes on her uniform blinked and looked up at Ichigo, **"Are you feeling ok?"**

"I'm fine. Don't worry about it," Ichigo mumbled while covering his mouth as if to yawn.

That right there was the main problem he had with Mugetsu. While he could hear every word his Kamui said with absolute clarity, the problem was that no one else could. When Mugetsu had first spoken

to him outside of the privacy of his dorm room, it had been in the middle of one of his classes and nearly scared the shit out of him. Ichigo had quickly looked around, thinking the other students would be looking at him weirdly. To his surprise, none of them looked like they had heard anything. Apparently he was the only one who could hear Mugetsu's voice, which was a relief. He didn't want to have to explain why his school uniform was talking.

The issue was talking back to Mugetsu without looking insane. He had tried many things to preserve the image of his sanity, ranging from covering his mouth when talking to Mugetsu or waiting until he was alone before responding. That didn't stop the looks he was beginning to receive from the other students, despite his precautions. The only one to not find his behavior odd was, of course, Mako, who said she found nothing wrong with Ichigo making friends with his school uniform.

***" Are you still concerned about Satsuki Kiryuin?"***

"Yeah," Ichigo turned towards one of the windows overlooking the Honnouji Academy courtyard below before speaking, "I have a feeling she knows about you, including what you are."

***" What do you plan to do?"*** Mugetsu's eyes swiveled upwards in an attempt to make eye contact with Ichigo, ***"You know that with my power, she doesn't stand a chance against you."***

"I don't want to fight her," Ichigo said with a sigh, "If she knows that you're a Kamui, then there is nothing I can do about it until she confronts us. If you're right, Mugetsu, about your power being too much for Satsuki, then she won't confront us for a while. That should give me enough time to think of a plan."

***" You have a point Ichigo,"*** Mugetsu conceded before adding, ***"When are you going to give me more blood and transform into my true form?"***

"When I feel like it," Ichigo reminded Mugetsu with a hint of annoyance in his voice, "Like I told you a few minutes ago, there's no reason for me to transform into your true form without a good enough reason. Why do you keep pestering me about it?"

" ***Because you do not understand,***" Mugetsu sounded both insulted and upset as she spoke, ***"Kamui are made for fighting. Wearing me and not fighting is a direct insult to my power. Do you not like wearing me, Ichigo?"***

"Hey," Ichigo felt a pang of guilt upon realizing that he had somehow upset his Kamui, "I didn't say I would never transform. It's just that without having a good reason to do so, transforming would be a complete waste of your power."

Mugetsu looked up at Ichigo for a long and tense moment before her eyes closed and he heard her mentally sigh, ***"I understand your logic, Ichigo, but promise me that within the next day or two you will wield my full power. I don't know why I didn't activate my true form upon being worn by you so can you please do that?"***

The pleading in Mugetsu's tone made Ichigo feel as if he was talking to a child. Sighing and rubbing the back of his neck, he acquiesced and said, "Fine, I guess I can do that. I just have to figure out a way to do it without anyone noticing though."

" ***You won't be disappointed!***" Mugetsu practically shouted in joy and Ichigo was glad no one else could hear her voice. It would have been really hard for him to explain why his school uniform was speaking, ***"With my power at your disposal there will be no limit to what you can do!"***

"Don't get too excited. We still have to figure out why -"

"Hi Ichigo!"

To Ichigo's complete and total surprise Mako Mankanshoku slid up out of nowhere right next to him. As he looked down the hall that had been empty just a moment ago, Mako smiled and saluted Ichigo, "Good morning, Ichigo! I slept great last night! Did you enjoy your first day of classes? The first day is always the hardest because Lady Satsuki makes the Disciplinary Committee intimidate everyone."

"It's been fine so far," Ichigo answered with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders, "It's just getting around in this place is so damn confusing."

"You don't need to worry about that," Mako waved her hand in front of her face, "Everybody gets used to the twists and turns of the school eventually. If you don't, then your body will be found one way or another."

"That's disturbing," Ichigo found Mako's lack of regard for the lives of her fellow students disconcerting, but then again, Gamagori did beat the crap out of that student yesterday before stripping him naked and killing him. If stuff like that happened on a daily basis at Honnouji Academy then Ichigo could see why Mako might not find the situation morally repugnant.

"So what class do you have next?" Mako clapped her hands together and asked, "I just came from math. I don't see why people always think I don't belong in the class. I don't really pay attention but everybody was really upset at me last year."

Ichigo knew he shouldn't ask but he still did, "What did you do?"

Mako thought deeply for a couple of seconds before answering, "I don't know. The teacher was going over Riemann something and said no one had been able to solve the number thingy. I remember frowning, saying that he was wrong and then I blacked out for a while but apparently I talked and talked for a really long time. When I was done the teacher seemed really shocked! His mouth was open and everything and I told him that if he didn't close it flies would go

right into it like it was a cave or something. When he asked if I wrote anything down, I said yes and showed him a picture of my house. I don't know why he started crying afterwards."

"That sounds... interesting, Mako," Ichigo didn't know what to make of Mako's story but going by the way she tended to exaggerate things around him, he was leaning towards her making the whole thing up.

"It sure is!" Mako gave Ichigo a thumbs up before gasping, "Oh! I nearly forgot! Guess what happened to me today, Ichigo!"

"I give up. What happened?"

"I made a brand new friend!" Mako exclaimed happily as she reached off to the side and pulled back a visibly confused Ryuko Matoi, who seemed just as perplexed about what was going on as Ichigo. Blissfully ignorant of her new friend's state of mind, Mako pointed to the red bang in Ryuko's hair and continued, "This is Ryuko, my new friend! She's in almost all of my classes and everything! I met her this morning after teaching Mataro a valuable lesson about skipping school and mugging people!"

Still getting used to Mako's randomness and seemingly infinite energy, Ryuko weakly raised a hand and said, "Hey."

"Don't worry about Mako," Ichigo waved off Ryuko's half-hearted hello as Mako turned towards the window, "She not really all there."

Mentally sighing in relief upon realizing Ichigo was nothing like Mako and was actually quite normal, Ryuko gave a relaxed smile, "Actually, I kind of like having someone like her around. Compared to everyone else in this city, Mako's not that bad."

"Tell me about it," Ichigo groaned. Personally, he was trying to grasp the concept of how all the One-Star students looked and even sounded identical.



"Hey, what's up with your uniform?" Ryuko leaned in to get a closer look at Mugetsu's eyes. As Ryuko examined Mugetsu, Ichigo was glad Kamui don't need to blink, "Weird, it's almost like it's watching me. Freaky."

" ***Ichigo,***" Mugetsu said with concern, "***She's scaring me.***"

"Huh?" Ryuko turned towards Mako, who was staring at a butterfly flying outside, "You say something Mako?"

"What?" Mako blinked owlishly as she looked away from the butterfly, "Did I say something? I don't remember saying anything."

"Never mind," Ryuko rubbed her forehead and closed her eyes, "So what's your name?"

"Ichigo Kurosaki."

"Ichigo, huh?" Ryuko grinned mischievously, "That's quite the name you have, strawberry."

"It means 'to protect one thing' not strawberry!"

"Ichigo's right Ryuko!" Mako interjected, "He hates it when people call him Strawberry. Why, just yesterday he beat up several One-Star students who wouldn't stop calling him that. It was an amazing sight to see five people heaped into one pile."

"One-Star students?" Ryuko looked upwards as she tried to remember something, "Aren't they those people that look like clones or something?"

Ichigo tried to answer but Mako suddenly slid in between him and Ryuko, a determined look on her face, "Ryuko is just like you, Ichigo! She is a transfer student that arrived just this very morning."

"I actually arrived yesterday," Ryuko corrected, "So you're a transfer student as well, Ichigo?"

"Yeah, my dad and I arrived a few days ago for that stupid Student Evaluation Day crap," Ichigo complained, "It was a total waste of time."

"It is not a total waste of time," Mako protested defiantly, "That exam is what determines your initial status here at Honnouji Academy! Only an idiot would ignore the score they get!"

There was an awkward silence as Ichigo let what Mako just said sink into her head. After finding out what his score was, Ichigo had been visited by Gamagori. The behemoth of a teen had said that his score was high enough to grant him a One-Star uniform. Ichigo had taken one look at the uniform with a single four-pointed black star on it before saying he didn't want it. To say that Gamagori had been peeved would be an understatement.

"You would like Ichigo's dad, Ryuko," Mako said excitedly, "He is so cool!"

Ichigo's eyes widened in fear as the thought of Mako meeting his dad entered his mind. It had taken him years to learn to deal with his dad's own brand of stupidity and insanity. If Mako were to meet his dad, it might turn out to be too much for him, "When did you meet my dad?"

"It was during Student Evaluation Day!" Mako exclaimed exuberantly, "After I finished the test and went for a stroll outside, I saw this old man showing pictures to a bunch of the students. I wanted to see the pictures so I asked him, politely of course, if I could. The nice man blushed and showed them to me. He said that if I were to ever go to Karakura Town, to come by the Kurosaki Clinic, 'cause Isshin Kurosaki's door is always open to a friend of Ichigo!"

Ichigo groaned and face palmed at the description of his dad's behavior. Just when he thought his dad left him in peace and without damaging his reputation any more than he already did, he finds out that nothing had changed. He could only hope that what his dad did or said would not spread through the school grapevine.

"Your dad's name is Isshin?" Ryuko's hair overshadowed her eyes as she asked the question.

"Yeah," Ichigo shrugged, "The bastard's always doing things like this just to piss me off. The man's a doctor and yet he acts like a child when I'm not around to beat some sense into him. The incredible thing is that he's never lost a patient. Why do you want to know?"

"It's just that..." Ryuko turned and began walking away from him, "... my dad's name was Isshin."

Ichigo caught the meaning of Ryuko's statement but said nothing as he watched Ryuko walk away with Mako hot on her heels, oblivious as ever to her surroundings. As the two girls disappeared into the crowd, Ichigo groaned, "Man, I feel like an ass."

**" You couldn't have known her father was dead or that he shared a name with your own father,"** Mugetsu stated factually.

"Yeah," Ichigo admitted, "But I still feel like I should apologize to her."

**" Apologize for what?"** Mugetsu questioned, **"You did nothing wrong. It seems as if her father has passed away quite recently. It might be best to allow her some time to calm down before talking to her."**

"I suppose you're right, but I still want to apologize."

As Ichigo began to go after Ryuko and Mako, he found a firm hand on his shoulder stopping him.

"Hey now," an older voice drawled out, "Just where do you think you're going, young man?"

Ichigo turned around and saw Aikuro Mikisugi standing behind him. The lazy-looking and perpetually scruffy history teacher stared at Ichigo from behind his thick glasses before running the hand not currently holding Ichigo's shoulder through his shaggy blue hair,

"Orange hair... you must be Ichigo Kurosaki. It's such a relief that I finally found you. You're like the only person in Honnouji Academy with such unique hair but it was quite hard to find you."

"What do you want?" Ichigo pulled his shoulder out of Aikuro's grip and scowled, "I have somewhere to be."

"Ah, not so fast," Aikuro wagged a finger knowingly, "There is a slight issue that came up involving your transcript. It turns out that there was a mix up between your record and another student's. While that's not a bad thing, it'll take at least a week for your proper records to be faxed over. In the meantime you need to take a placement test to determine what classes you take."

"Placement test?" A feeling of dread seeped into Ichigo's soul at the thought of standardized testing, "Are you sure about that?"

Aikuro leaned forward and pointed at his face, "Does this face look unsure to you? Now come on, Ichigo. The test isn't that bad. Your transcript said you're a smart kid so I'm sure you" figure out everything quickly enough."

"Oh!" Aikuro exclaimed as he remembered something important, "You don't need to worry about missing your next class. I've already cleared it with your professor. Now come on, my class is on the sixth floor."

Realizing that he wouldn't be able to apologize to Ryuko until at least after he finished taking the stupid placement test, Ichigo reluctantly followed Aikuro through Honnouji Academy.

**" *Something about this doesn't sit well with me,*" Mugetsu stated, *"Be on your guard Ichigo."***

"I know, Mugetsu," he whispered.

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"Hey wait up Ryuko!"

Mako Mankanshoku raced through the hallways of Honnouji Academy in pursuit of her new best friend. Catching up to Ryuko just outside the building, she waved her arms frantically in the air as Ryuko groaned and smacked her hand against her face, "Huh? What's wrong, Ryuko?"

"I acted like a complete idiot!" Ryuko grumbled beneath the palm of her hand. Why did she have to overreact like that when she heard the name of Ichigo's dad? A lot of people were named Isshin in Japan. The fact their fathers had the same name was merely a coincidence but the way she acted made Ryuko feel like an inconsiderate jerk.

"Don't worry about it!" Mako answered nonchalantly as she seemingly tried to wave away Ryuko's troubles, "Ichigo may seem like a delinquent but he's actually really nice! I'm sure he doesn't even care about what happened!"

Ryuko frowned as she remembered something important, "Hey Mako, who's the top dog at this school?"

"Why that's simple!" Mako clapped her hands together and took a deep breath, "It's - Bow, Ryuko! Bow!"

Ryuko didn't have time to understand why she was panicking before Mako, with a surprising amount of strength, grabbed the back of her neck and forced her head downwards. After several seconds of struggling, Ryuko managed to pull herself out of Mako's grip. Crouching down below the line of students that had quickly formed around the two of them, Ryuko looked and saw a large man slowly walking towards them.

"He looks like he's in charge here," she mumbled.

"Yup!" Mako said while still bowing, "He's a Three-Star!"

Ryuko looked carefully at the man. Sure he looked strong and could probably defeat her in a straight up fight, but whatever it was that made him special boggled her, "What the hell's a Three-Star?"

"His name is Ira Gamagori, one of the Elite Four and the Disciplinary Committee Chair of the Student Council," Mako explained, "He's really, really tough and strong. Compare to No-Star students like you and me, he could defeat us with both hands tied behind his back!"

"No-Star?"

"I forgot that you're a transfer student!" Mako smacked herself in the face before explaining, "Honnouji Academy school uniforms are quite special and can grant you awesome powers if you wear one. These Goku Uniforms can make you a superhero. Student Council President Satsuki Kiryuin gives students Goku Uniforms based upon their abilities and willpower. To sum up a really short story, Goku Uniforms are awesome! Do you want me to explain again?"

Everything was beginning to make sense to Ryuko. Shaking her head and narrowing her eyes in contemplation, she paused momentarily before asking, "So what you're saying is that she's the one in charge of this place?"

"Yes, yes!" Mako nodded enthusiastically, "Lady Satsuki is in charge and everything but if you're looking to make her your friend, she's already taken. I've heard from a desk neighbor that Lady Satsuki's taken an interest in our dear friend, Ichigo!"

Ryuko turned her attention from the increasingly bright light emanating from to her left, "Ichigo? How does he know her?"

"It's one of the nine big mysteries of Honnouji Academy," Mako answered cryptically, "No one knows why Lady Satsuki is interested in Ichigo. He's only been here a few days and every time I see him he's by himself reading or talking to his uniform. Once I saw Lady Satsuki talking to him almost like they were equals! It was such a strange sight since I'm like his only friend!"

"You don't say..." Ryuko paused as she thought back on her limited interaction with Ichigo. He hadn't seemed like the kind of person to be dating the head of Honnouji Academy but then again she wasn't somebody who knew this sort of thing, "So they're like a couple?"

"Nope!" Mako shook her head, "Ichigo may be special in his own way but Lady Satsuki is in a league of her own. There are only one or two people in the entire world that can compare with her elegant radiance."

Ryuko tried and failed to wrap her mind around Mako's logic. Stopping her train of thought before it could cause her to develop a headache she stared at the ground and mumbled, "So Satsuki Kiryuin likes to hang out with Ichigo?"

"Who knows!" Mako confessed, "But Ichigo doesn't seem to like being around Lady Satsuki all that much. The day before yesterday, which was two days ago, I was hanging out with Ichigo when Lady Satsuki appeared in a shaft of blinding light! She tried to talk to him but Ichigo kept his mouth shut and said as little as possible. The tension got so bad that I thought Ichigo's scowl would be permanently etched on his face. Ah, speak of the devil! Here she comes now!"

Realizing that the bright light that she had earlier ignored had not vanished but actually grew brighter, Ryuko turned around and saw a girl about her age slowly descending the translucent steps. Narrowing her eyes as she noticed the content look adorning Satsuki's face, as if to say that everyone was unworthy of her attention, Ryuko growled deep in her throat as she steadied her nerves. If she was going to confront Satsuki about her dad's death, she needed to make up her mind now. She couldn't afford to let such an opportunity pass without at least trying. Standing up and ignoring the strange feeling of weakness in her knees, Ryuko stepped forward directly into Satsuki's path.

"So you must be the big shot here?" Ryuko sneered haughtily while holding her hands within the pockets of her blazer to hide the

nervousness she felt, "I have a question for you."

"You bitch!" Several of the One-Star students surrounding Ryuko leapt out of place towards her, "How dare you speak to Lady Satsuki like that!"

Ryuko allowed the silver guitar case on her back to fall to the ground with a thump. Gripping the handle while spinning around on her ankle, she slammed the case into the face of the closest assailant before using her momentum to knock him into the rest of the students. As the One-Star students flew backwards away from her, either unconscious or close to it, Ryuko undid the latches on the case and drew out a shining red blade.

"Oh no! Ryuko!" Mako shouted in surprise as she watched her newest and best friend spin the weird blade that was in the case instead of a guitar around her wrist. As much as Mako wished she could do something cool and awesome like that, she knew if she tried she would end up having a horrible industrial accident, "Oh my gosh, it's a huge scissor!"

"That's right, Mako. This blade came from a giant pair of scissors," Ryuko didn't take her eyes off of Satsuki's Kiryuin deepening frown as she explained, "I'm guessing by the look on your dear president's face she's seen something like this before. Am I right, Satsuki Kiryuin?"

Satsuki looked down at Ryuko derisively while her mind spun into high gear. To think that after all this time the other half of the Scissor Blade, the weapon designed to cut and destroy Life Fibers and a critical tool for her plan's completion, would end up being delivered right to her doorstep. The irony was so poetic that Satsuki allowed herself to smirk, "So what if I have? What are you going to do if I have... Ryuko Matoi?"

Something about the way Satsuki spoke filled Ryuko with rage, "Damn it. You're the woman with the Scissor Blade, aren't you?"



"Perhaps," Satsuki coldly shrugged before asking, "If I said that I was, what would you do about it?"

Ryuko grit her teeth and charged up the stairs towards Satsuki with her Scissor Blade held aloft at her side. There was no doubt in her mind that Satsuki Kiryuin was the woman who murdered her dad in cold blood all those months ago. She would have died that night as well if she hadn't run out of the manor before the bomb went off. Jumping into the air, her Scissor Blade held in a reverse grip, Ryuko descended towards Satsuki while shouting, "Damn you!"

"Ten! Ken! Fun! Sai!"

Just before the tip of her Scissor Blade could touch a single hair on Satsuki's head, Ryuko found herself blindsided by an enormous boxing glove that sent her body cartwheeling through the air in the opposite direction. Flipping along the ground several times, her face and body accumulating several cuts and scrapes, Ryuko dug her Scissor Blade into the ground as she skidded to a stop. Staring up at her new opponent as Satsuki Kiryuin continued to watch carefully, Ryuko spat on the ground and pushed her body to stand back up. Whoever the hell hit her had a really strong punch. Turning the Scissor Blade over in her hands so that the edge was facing upwards, Ryuko ignored the pain lingering throughout her body and prepared to face her newest challenger.

"Come on then!" Ryuko shouted as she raced towards her diminutive opponent.

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"My, my," Aikuro drawled out while staring out through a pair of binoculars down at the courtyard, "Kids these days. They have no idea how things work."

Ichigo ignored Aikuro's attempt at small talk in order to focus on his test, but as he answered question after question, it was becoming increasingly clear that something strange was going on. Aikuro had said this was a placement test, which meant it should contain material of about the same level as what Karakura High School offered, but it was too easy. Apart from maybe one or two questions that he needed a few minutes to think about, Ichigo hadn't found anything difficult about it. It was almost too easy.

"But then again," Aikuro continued rambling, ignorant to Ichigo's growing annoyance with him. Ryuko Matoi and Mako Mankanshoku had just appeared out in the courtyard and it appeared as if Satsuki Kiryuin was about to make her way down for some reason, "Growing up, I didn't have anything as fancy as a Goku Uniform to increase my strength and speed beyond that of a normal human's. It's almost unfair, but you cannot say the same thing, can you Ichigo? After all, a Goku Uniform is nothing compared to your Kamui."

The pencil in Ichigo's hand nearly snapped in half as Aikuro lazily admitted that he knew he was wearing a Kamui.

" ***How does he know Ichigo?***" Mugetsu said in a panicked voice. If a Kamui was able to sweat, she would be dripping with it, "***He shouldn't know about me!***"

Realizing that the whole test had been a farce to get him alone, Ichigo stood up and glared at Aikuro, "How do you know about my Kamui?"

"The answer to your question is quite simple, Ichigo," Aikuro removed his foggy glasses and suddenly he was surrounded by a bright purple light, "I know almost everything about Kamui and the Life Fibers composing them!"

"The hell is going on here?" Ichigo was both frightened and disturbed by what he was seeing. One second Aikuro was a lazy and unmotivated teacher and the next he suddenly de-aged and turned into someone that looked like he should have been a model. Seeing

Aikuro strike a pose, Ichigo voiced his concern, "What the hell are you doing?"

" ***Why is he stripping Ichigo?***" Mugetsu asked in a frightened voice.

"The school uniform you are wearing is what is known as a Kamui," Aikuro explained, ignoring Ichigo's shocked reaction. Quickly changing to a different pose, he continued, "Kamui are clothing created purely from Life Fibers. They are, in essence, the ultimate Goku Uniform in terms of power, speed, and strength. While there are many flaws and weaknesses in Goku Uniforms, Kamui have none of them. They are also able to adapt and change to fit most situations the wearer finds themselves in."

"That's all very good," Ichigo averted his gaze from the increasing disturbing Aikuro, "But put your damn clothes back on."

"Do not be disturbed by my body, Ichigo," Aikuro sternly warned. As his shirt suddenly became unbuttoned and fell down his shoulders, he continued explaining while ignoring the twitch developing in Ichigo's eye, "Kamui require the blood of their wearer in order to function at full power. If the wearer is not worthy or refuses to give blood, the Kamui will not be able to achieve its full power and will fall back into hibernation."

"To hell with this," Even though the information was incredibly useful, Ichigo wasn't about to stand around and watch a grown man strip. Making his way to the door, he said, "I don't need to stand here and watch you strip like a damn pervert."

Before he was even halfway to the door, Aikuro slid in front of him. The teacher's shirt was now entirely missing, meaning that the only thing between Ichigo and a visit to a therapist was a pair of pants. Shifting poses once again, Aikuro asked, "Do you know what a Life Fiber is, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

"Gee," Ichigo answered sarcastically, "That's a tough one. Why don't I think about it and come back some other time?"

"Life Fibers..." Aikuro trailed off as the purple light shining around him grew in intensity, "... are fibers that have somehow gained a life of their own. This newly found life allows them to be woven together into clothing for both offensive and defensive situations. No one knows where Life Fibers originally came from or how they can accomplish such magnificent feats. Some believe they are merely a trade secret of Revocs. A mere invention that has allowed them to become the major distributor of clothing and other apparel throughout the world. Others think that Life Fibers are alien in nature and have come to earth for a sinister purpose."

Ichigo folded his arms, his eyes firmly closed as he took in what Aikuro was telling him, "What's the point of telling me all this?"

"The point, Ichigo," Aikuro posed before continuing, "Is that your Kamui is more special than you think. To my knowledge there should only be three Kamui in existence and yours is not among them. The question of who could have created your Kamui intrigues me."

"Does it really matter who made Mugetsu?" Ichigo asked, annoyance evident in his voice.

"I suppose it doesn't," Aikuro admitted seriously before he, much to Ichigo's horror, began unzipping his pants, "There is just one last thing I should mention. Since I found out about your Kamui in such short notice it took a little greasing of palms but I have -"

It was at that point in time that Ichigo, in an effort to both preserve his masculinity and keep his sanity intact, drew his arm up and punched Aikuro square in the jaw. As the undercover nudist collapsed to the ground while rubbing his cheek, Ichigo stepped forward and loomed over him.

"Let's get one thing straight," Ichigo growled while cracking his knuckles, "You take off one more piece of clothing and you won't be

waking up for a week."

Sitting up and rubbing his cheek, Aikuro gave an unsatisfied pout as he pointed to his desk, "In the second to bottom drawer is something you will find to be useful in the future. Think of it as a gift from someone who understands your situation."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because, Ichigo," Aikuro leapt to his feet without a trace of pain on his face, "Unlike what you may want to believe, my interest in you is purely academic and intellectual. To find a Kamui being worn by someone with no connections to Revocs is a surprise not just to me, but with the group I work for. I want to see how far you will go with Mugetsu."

While he was still suspicious of Aikuro, especially after he started stripping, Ichigo walked over to his desk and opened the drawer. Inside he found something completely unexpected. Sitting alone in the drawer was a spaulder. Picking it up and turning it over in his hands, he frowned and asked, "What's this for?"

Zippering up his fly in order to keep up his disguise as a normal, but lazy and unmotivated teacher, Aikuro answered, "That, Ichigo, is how you will feed blood to Mugetsu. Normally a Kamui can draw out enough blood through the skin to stay awake but that is only after they've transformed once. Judging from the scowl on your face I see you still haven't worn Mugetsu's actual form."

Grabbing the spaulder out of Ichigo's hand, Aikuro pointed to the two glowing blue bands wrapping around it. As he pressed them inwards, causing the twin needles hidden within to emerge, Aikuro explained, "When you press your hand down on the spaulder, it will fire two extremely sharp needles into your shoulder. That should allow enough blood to reach Mugetsu to initiate its transformation. Although..."

Ichigo didn't like the way Aikuro trailed off, "Although what?"

Aikuro chuckled nervously as he handed the spaulder back to Ichigo, "I don't know how to sugarcoat this so I'll just say it. Kamui are meant to cover as little skin as possible... for various reasons too long and complex for me to explain. If that's not bad enough, every one of the three Kamui I know about were specifically designed for the female body. I'm not quite sure what will happen if you activate Mugetsu."

A cloud of depression hung over Ichigo's head as he tried to not visualize what an extremely revealing Mugetsu would look like. Having the power of a Kamui meant nothing if he had to fight half-naked all the time. Eventually it was Mugetsu who managed to bring Ichigo out of his funk, ***"Do not worry, Ichigo. I was woven together by Urahara Kisuke specifically for you. There is no doubt that he tailored me for a male wearer."***

"I hope you're right," Ichigo muttered as he strapped the spaulder onto his left shoulder and locking it into place. Rotating his shoulder and making sure his movements wouldn't be impeded by the new accessory, Ichigo paused and asked Aikuro, "Wait a second. You're just a teacher. How do you know all this?"

"I believe that's a question for another time," Aikuro answered cryptically as he pointed to the window, "Since I do believe your attention is about to be focused on something else."

Focusing Aikuro's line of sight, Ichigo looked out the window and noticed a large crowd of students gathered below. While at first he was unable to make out what was happening, his eyes widened in shock when he saw Ryuko on the receiving end of a rather brutal beating.

"What the hell's going on down there? Why isn't anyone helping her?" Ichigo growled in outrage as he watched Ryuko get hit repeatedly by a barrage of quick punches from her diminutive opponent. Forcing open the window and shattering the lock in the process, Ichigo stepped onto the frame and motioned to his spaulder, "Hey pervert, how fast does this thing work?"

"It should take no more than a second," Aikuro explained as he buttoned his shirt back up and reached for his glasses, "Although I recommend you -"

Ichigo had stopped paying attention to whatever Aikuro was saying as soon as he got an answer. Before he leapt out of Honnouji Academy and began freefalling towards the ground, he asked, "You ready Mugetsu?"

**"Of course Ichigo,"** his Kamui answered, **"But you should know that you will only have four minutes since this is the first time I've transformed. Make it count."**

"Right!" Ichigo jumped out of the window and slammed his right hand into the spaulder covering his left shoulder and winced slightly as the needles entered his skin. Immediately following that, his body was enveloped in a bright white light with several stars.

Up in the classroom, once more clad in his lazy disguise, Aikuro sighed as he watched Ichigo make a beeline for Ryuko, "... take the stairs. I guess Ichigo just isn't one for patience, but did he have to punch my beautiful face? Oh well, as much as I'd like to see little miss Satsuki get embarrassed I have to get going. Things to do and secrets to reveal and all that nonsense. Now where did I put the trapdoor remote control? It's been so long since I've tested it I need to make sure the batteries are still working."

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"This is it!" Takaharu Fukuroda drew his arm back as he prepared for the final punch. As much as he had been dominating the fight he had to give the transfer student credit for lasting this long. He'd already hit her with several volleys of punches and yet she was still conscious and on her feet. There were One-Star students who hadn't lasted as long as her.

"Here comes the stinger!"

Takaharu shot towards Ryuko, who could barely stand on her feet. Weakly gripping the red Scissor Blade in her hands, the blade shaking every few seconds, Ryuko gasped for air painfully as she watched Takaharu rush at her with his right arm cocked back. She couldn't believe all her ambitions and goals were about to end at the hands of some lackey of Satsuki Kiryuin. As she stared defiantly at Takaharu, Ryuko felt everything crawl to a stop as a bright flash of blue light appeared in her peripheral vision.

"Where is that light coming from?"

Using one of his oversized boxing gloves to block out the light, Takaharu turned around and squinted in an effort to make out what was happening. Although he was not able to see anything Takaharu was able to tell that whatever was emitting that bright light was falling rapidly towards the ground from the main building of Honnouji Academy.

"What... what's going on?" Ryuko stared up at the light before she felt her knees starting to buckle. Stabbing her Scissor Blade into the ground, the hardened Life Fiber blade easily piercing the rock and soil, Ryuko grit her teeth as she made a conscious effort to not fall down. Her beating from the Boxing Club captain had all but exhausted her and Ryuko knew if Takaharu hadn't been distracted by the light, he would have easily finished her off and she would never find out who killed her dad.

As every student, including Satsuki Kiryuin, stared transfixed on the falling light, they were suddenly brought back to reality when a sonic boom reverberated through the air and a large crater appeared on the wall of the academy just a few meters above the ground. Takaharu, unable to even see what the object was, was not prepared for whatever it was to rocket towards him faster than he could possibly react. Eyes wide as a burst of pain spread across his face, the diminutive Two-Star was sent clear across the courtyard into the far wall as a white armored fist slammed into his face.



Ryuko didn't know what to think as her opponent, the same person who had been kicking her ass, was sent clear across the academy by a single punch. Staring transfixed at where Takaharu had crashed into the wall, she turned her attention to the enveloping cloud of dust and smoke when a familiar voice said, "Sorry I couldn't get here sooner, Ryuko."

"Ichigo?" Ryuko didn't know what to think but knowing that he had most likely saved her life caused her shock to be replaced by relief, "Don't worry about it. You sure do know how to make an entrance."

"You should get out of here," Ichigo's voice echoed faintly from inside the dust, "This guy isn't going to stay down for long."

Ryuko was about to point out that Ichigo had decked Takaharu but stopped when she saw a figure rapidly running back towards them. It was Takaharu and she didn't need to be a genius to realize he was pissed. Giving Ichigo a quickly thanks, she made a break for the entrance of Honnouji Academy while knocking away several One-Star students stupid enough to get in her way. Grabbing a deliveryman's moped, while making sure to leave his deliveries in a neat pile on the ground, Ryuko took off into the distance accompanied by a trail of smoke.

" ***That Ryuko girl sure knows when to fold her cards,***" Mugetsu pointed out before adding, "***Three and a half minutes.***"

"Yeah..."

Satsuki stared into the clearing smoke with narrowed eyes as thoughts swirled in her mind. Judging from what she witnessed, if barely, it seemed her earlier assumption about Ichigo Kurosaki's unique uniform were indeed accurate, "So you had a Kamui all along, Ichigo Kurosaki. What else are you hiding from me?"

A white boot stepped out of the smoke before there was a release of energy, allowing all the gathered students to see Mugetsu in her true form.

Mugetsu had transformed from a simple school uniform into something resembling form-fitting armor that covered Ichigo from his neck down. He wore what looked to be a black bodysuit beneath interlocking white armor that protected everything apart from several parts of his upper legs and arms. His hands and feet were completely covered in the white armor, making it appear as if he wore greaves and gauntlets. In the middle of his back as well as behind both of his shoulders were three exhaust vents, a light blue glow seeming to emanate from within them.

" ***This is my true form,***" Mugetsu said with pride evident in her voice, her eyes turning to look at Ichigo. After transforming, via the infusion of Ichigo's blood, Mugetsu's eyes, which had previously been just beneath the collar of his school uniform, extended upwards and outwards until they resembled spaulders jutting several inches above his shoulders, ***"Can you feel the power coursing through your body, Ichigo? This is the power of a Kamui!"***

"Yeah," Ichigo muttered as he flexed a covered hand. He could feel Mugetsu's power coursing through his body and for just an instant thought he could do anything. Turning his attention to Satsuki, he scowled and asked, "Does it really matter if I have a Kamui or not?"

Satsuki didn't take her eyes off Ichigo as she slowly and deliberately reached for Bakuzan at her waist, "Do not speak so naively, Ichigo Kurosaki. You may possess a Kamui and all the power it entails but do you think you are a match for -"

The entire student population of Honnouji Academy took a collective nervous breath as Ichigo appeared to vanish from right in front of their eyes. As he moved across the courtyard faster than their eyes could keep up, Ichigo reappeared directly in front of Satsuki Kiryuin with his hand firmly placed on Bakuzan's pommel, preventing her from removing it from its scabbard.

"I don't think you need to do that," Ichigo warned softly as Satsuki glared at him with an annoyed look in her eyes. Ignoring the indignant shouts coming from Gamagori and Sanageyama, Ichigo

added, "From where I'm standing, fighting you would be beneath me."

Satsuki's eyes widened as Ichigo threw her words from their first encounter back in her face, but she was saved from having to answer as an enraged voice shouted, "How dare you speak like that to Lady Satsuki!"

Ichigo jumped backwards as Takaharu's fist punched through the air his head had just occupied. Easily landing on the ground several meters away, Ichigo stared at the miniature club captain. Takaharu's right eye was bruised and a heavy trail of blood was dribbling from his nose. While the captain didn't move, he turned his eyes towards Satsuki, "Are you alright, Ma'am?"

"I am fine," Satsuki answered calmly.

"That's good," Takaharu grinned, rage visible in his eyes, "That means I can go all out on this street punk! Now die, you bastard!"

Ichigo watched Takaharu race towards him with a faint scowl on his face and a disinterested look in his eyes. Waiting until the Boxing club captain had almost closed the distance between them and brought up his enormous right boxing glove to deliver a critical hit, Ichigo calmly raised his left hand and caught the attack in the palm of his hand with ease. While the force behind the attack was enough to cause the ground to shatter and crack behind Ichigo, the Kamui-wearing youth had shown no sign of trouble in stopping the attack.

"I-Impossible!" Takaharu stammered as he watched an attack from his Athleticism-Augmented Two-Star Goku Uniform get blocked with seemingly no effort on Ichigo's part. Gritting his teeth and pushing more and more power into his attack, Takaharu began to sweat nervously as Ichigo continued to stand in front of him with a bored look on his face.

"It's not impossible," Ichigo calmly corrected as he began applying pressure to the Life Fiber boxing glove held firmly in his hand. As

Takaharu's weapon of choice began developing hairline fractures along the surface, exposing the bright red light of the Life Fibers held within, Ichigo explained, "It's merely improbable."

**" *Two minutes left Ichigo,*" Mugetsu warned, *"Finish up and get out of here."***

Completely oblivious to what Mugetsu was telling Ichigo, Takaharu took the opportunity to leap back and out of Ichigo's grasp. Glancing at the cracks on his boxing glove, he grit his teeth as the veins in his forehead became more and more prominent. How dare Ichigo humiliate him in front of not only the entirety of Honnouji Academy, but Lady Satsuki as well! This was a slight against his honor as both a boxer and an athlete. Releasing the full power of his Goku Uniform, Takaharu fired a corkscrew punch that looked as if a stream of boxing gloves were emerging from his hands, "Don't think that's all I got, tough guy! Feel the power of my Athleticism-Augmented Two-Star Goku Uniform!"

"Man," Ichigo muttered as he leaned to the side to avoid the first punch, "Isn't that a mouthful or something?"

Despite the speed and power of his corkscrew punch, Takaharu found to his growing frustration that he had yet to land a hit on Ichigo Kurosaki. His punches were supposed to be too fast for anyone not wearing a Two-Star Goku Uniform or greater to see, let alone dodge, and yet Ichigo Kurosaki was ducking and waving around every single one of his punches without even a hint of trouble.

"Stop toying with me, you bastard!" he shouted. Realizing he needed to release his full power, he reached for the cord wrapping around his wrist only to find a shadow surrounding him. Looking up, he saw Ichigo descending towards him, a fist cocked back.

"That's enough!"

Before Ichigo could hit Takaharu, Satsuki appeared in his path with Bakuzan drawn. Using the flat side of the midnight black blade as a

makeshift shield, Satsuki managed to block his Kamui-enhanced punch only with a large amount of effort. With one hand tightly gripping the hilt of her blade while the other was propped up against Bakuzan's edge, Satsuki not only managed to stop Ichigo's punch but also push him away. As Ichigo was forced back from Satsuki's unexpected counterattack, he quickly twisted out of the way as Satsuki pressed her momentary advantage and tried to sever the Life Fibers composing Mugetsu.

"You have failed, Takaharu Fukuroda," Satsuki said sternly as she stepped away from Ichigo while sheathing Bakuzan, "Not only have you proven unable to fulfill your orders, you have also failed to take down someone who poses a great threat to the security and stability of Honnouji Academy. Leave my sight. I shall decide your punishment for such an abysmal failure soon enough."

Takaharu began sweating nervously and knelt on one knee, "Please forgive my failure, Ma'am!"

Satsuki ignored the prostrating Boxing Club captain in order to focus on the more immediate and pressing matter. Her opponent had a fully synchronized Kamui and seemed to have complete control over it despite it covering most of his body. Snapping her fingers as she came to a decision, Satsuki stood passively as Gamagori and Sanageyama appeared in front of her, preventing Ichigo from attacking her.

"Shall we deal with this delinquent, Lady Satsuki?" Gamagori growled authoritatively.

"That will not be necessary, Gamagori," Satsuki gently informed them. Staring past the collective surprised expressions on her Elite Four, Satsuki stepped forth and said, "Ichigo Kurosaki's purpose in coming here has already been fulfilled. He has no intention of challenging me. Isn't that correct, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

Ichigo clenched a fist as he scowled at Satsuki, "I only came to make sure that insane Boxing Club captain didn't kill Ryuko."

"Tch," Sanageyama drew the shinai from his back and waved it at Ichigo, "You think we're just going to let you walk away after insulting Lady Satsuki like that? I don't care if Lady Ragyo is allowing you to attend Honnouji Academy, you aren't going to get away with this, Ichigo Kurosaki."

There was something about the bravado Sanageyama and Gamagori were emitting that gave Ichigo pause for concern. While the power afforded to him by Mugetsu was great, there was no telling what kind of abilities a Three-Star Goku Uniform afforded the Elite Four. The only way they would dare to face a Kamui was if their own uniforms granted them a special kind of power that would give them an edge in combat.

***" One minute. It's almost time Ichigo..."***

Ichigo nodded but didn't say anything to his Kamui. Spreading his legs and raising a clenched fist into the air, he looked at his gathering opponents and said, "Sorry but I don't have time to stick around."

Sanageyama's eyes widened in realization as he rushed forward with his hand reached towards his lapel, "Damn it! You're not going to get away from us, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

Ichigo ignored Sanageyama's warning and, with a shout, the exhaust vent on his back began blasting out energy and heat as he slammed his fist into the ground, kicking up a cloud of smoke that put the one that formed when he intercepted Takaharu's attack earlier to shame.

"Damn it!" Sanageyama cursed and kicked the ground in frustration when he saw that Ichigo had disappeared. Looking around, he managed to spot Ichigo fleeing into the distance before leaping into the air and disappearing behind a building. Pointing to several One-Star students, he shouted, "Spread out and find Ichigo Kurosaki! I want his dorm room under guard and every room searched! He has to be around here somewhere!"

"Calm down, Sanageyama," Satsuki breathed out and relaxed her mind. Ichigo Kurosaki had a Kamui, which validated her theory, but the question remained of what his purpose was, "Chasing after Ichigo Kurosaki would no doubt be a fruitless effort. Let him be for the moment. I shall have him dealt with when the time is right."

"That was a Kamui, huh? My, Strawberry looked quite good in it," Nonon Jakuzure muttered in awe. She had felt the power emanating from Ichigo Kurosaki and Mugetsu and knew that he hadn't truly shown them his true power. What caused a hint of nervousness to creep into her mind was how Ichigo stared down Lady Satsuki without so much as a flinch.

Satsuki turned to leave, her fists tightening in anger. Blocking Ichigo Kurosaki's punch had been more difficult than she expected. If Bakuzan was anything weaker, it would have been shattered from the force behind the blow. She couldn't understand how Ichigo seemed to be in full control of his Kamui. There was no struggle for dominance between his will and the Kamui's will nor was there any sign of exhaustion due to excessive blood loss, "Inumuta."

The blue-haired Elite Four turned towards the student council president, "Yes, Lady Satsuki?"

"Were you able to gather any useful information on Ichigo Kurosaki's Kamui?"

"I'm afraid not," Inumuta adjusted his glasses as he continued speaking, "His appearance along with the apparent ease in which he dealt with the Boxing Club captain briefly threw off my sensors and detectors. I shall immediately get started on upgrading their sensitivity and durability. There is one thing I was able to find that you might find useful. Right before escaping, Ichigo Kurosaki referred to his Kamui as Mugetsu, or Moonless Sky if you're being poetic."

"I see," Satsuki stared towards where Ichigo had vanished before closing her eyes. Mugetsu was quite the poetic name for a Kamui

although it would never ring as purely and truly as Junketsu. Turning around while giving Inumuta a final glance, she added, "Takaharu's failure to capture the transfer student and acquire the Scissor Blade cannot be forgotten. Since the Boxing Club is part of the Athletic Clubs, I shall allow Sanageyama to devise the method and severity of punishment."

"As you wish, Lady Satsuki," Inumuta typed something on his PDA before asking, "Is there anything else you require? I would really like to examine the data I've acquired about Ichigo Kurosaki."

"Yes," Satsuki paused and stared up into the sky, "Aside from Ichigo Kurosaki, find out everything you can about the transfer student. Someone like her should not possess a weapon like the Scissor Blade. There is something missing and I don't want to be surprised a second time."

Satsuki ignored the slight bow of respect from Inumuta as she walked back into Honnouji Academy with Gamagori and Jakuzure flanking her on either side, *"That was not the true strength of a Kamui. While Ichigo Kurosaki's display undoubtedly impressed the masses and the Elite Four, I could easily tell he was holding back. The question is whether that was out of fear or necessity."*

Ichigo Kurosaki's possession of a Kamui threw off Satsuki's plans. She had only just began adapting her plans and strategies on the off chance that Ichigo was a spy, willing or not, for her mother. Ichigo's wearing of a Kamui, let alone possessing full control over its immense power, was something she had not expected. If he were to rise up against her, she would need something of equal or greater power to counteract. She would wait a few more days in order to determine what Ichigo's motivations and drives were. Only then, after figuring out the inner workings of his mind would she choose her course of action.

If Ichigo truly was conspiring against her, Satsuki knew she would need to unseal Junketsu sooner than she would have liked. The power of Junketsu, the first Kamui she'd ever lain her eyes upon,



was said to be truly exceptional but required the wear to possess a will of steel. Even so, Satsuki could not help but allow a small smirk to adorn her face. She could not wait to see how Ichigo's Mugetsu would compare to the might of Junketsu when the time came.

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*So Mugetsu's released form is basically Ichigo's Fullbring Armor. I'll admit that Ichigo looked pretty badass in that armor in both the anime and manga and I couldn't help but think that nothing else would work for him. Like I said in the author's note for Chapter 5, it will be a cold day in hell before I allowed Ichigo's Kamui to be as revealing as Senketsu or Junketsu.*

# Just My Imagination

*Here is the new and revised Chapter 7. I uploaded the revised Chapter 6 a few days ago and the PM's I got back were all positive about the changes. One of the key issues I had with my earlier chapters is that they were all made before Episodes 21-24 were released, which is where a lot of the plot/story/etc was finally explained. If you read through the chapter once more, you will find that the overall cohesion and grammar is much better. Enjoy!*

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## Chapter 7 - Just My Imagination

"God damn it, this place is screwed up."

Ichigo peered out from the alley he was hiding in and let out a relieved sigh when he didn't see anyone following him. After he so easily managed to get away from Satsuki Kiryuin and her cronies Ichigo decided to flee as far away from Honnouji Academy as possible. He didn't know what Satsuki would do but he had the strangest feeling Sanageyama wouldn't just take his insults lying down. Letting his eyes scan the area one final time just to make sure no one was trying to sneak up on him, Ichigo ducked back into the alley and leaned his head against the cracked brick wall.

"What the hell is wrong with this school?" Ichigo mumbled as he ran a hand down his face. Satsuki Kiryuin was nothing like he expected her to be. Of course that brief conversation with her in his home at the start of this mess indicated more than anything that she was not someone to mess with, but from her seat of power Ichigo was beginning to realize that Honnouji Academy was more of a fortress or castle than a school.

" ***That is a good question, Ichigo***" Mugetsu said, once again in the form of a normal school uniform. Her eyes blinked once before looking up at him, "***But what are you going to do about it?***"

"Do about it?" Ichigo repeated. That thought had crossed his mind more than once, but every time he tried to come up with how he would go about it or even if it could work, he drew a blank. Pursing his lips and looking to the side, he sighed and said, "I don't think there is anything I can do about it."

Mugetsu looked surprised at Ichigo's answer, but was cut off from saying anything as he continued, "Things like this are always more complicated than they first appear. You may be right about my power being greater than Satsuki's, for the moment at least, but let's assume I do manage to take her down. She has this entire city in the palm of her hand. If I remove her from power, I will have everyone who follows her gunning for me."

Mugetsu mulled that explanation over for a moment, "***As long as you are safe, I don't care what happens to anyone else.***"

Ichigo listened to his Kamui before something important crossed his mind, "Hey Mugetsu."

" ***What is it?***"

"You said I only had four minutes to save Ryuko. Why was that?"

" ***I confess that the four minute time limit was something I came up with,***" Mugetsu confessed sadly, "***I was afraid that if you and I remained merged for any longer, I would lose any self-control I had and devour you.***"

"Wait," Ichigo's mind tried to process what he just heard, "Devour me?"

" ***Kamui such as myself rely on the blood of our wielder to function,***" Mugetsu reminded him, "***While I normally receive a***

***small amount of blood from you throughout the day, when I transformed into my true form, the amount of blood I received from you was so great that I was tempted to suck you dry. Ichigo, your blood is exquisitely delicious. It is the best thing I have ever tasted."***

"That's great to know," Ichigo growled, not bothering to point out that his blood is the only thing Mugetsu has every tasted. Leaning his head back against the wall of the building behind him, he thought for a moment before asking, "Does this mean you have a four minute limit on your transformation?"

***" For the moment I do, but I am certain given enough time I will be able to control my urges."***

Ichigo scowled as he considered how much could go wrong until Mugetsu could control herself, "How much time are you talking about?"

Mugetsu's multihued eyes closed as she thought about the answer, ***"It shouldn't take any longer than two days for the little blood I can draw from your body to no longer tempt me."***

"Let me know as soon as possible. Someone like Gamagori is probably just itching for a chance to get back at me," Ichigo commented with annoyance in his voice. He wasn't annoyed at Mugetsu or anything that she did. Rather, he was annoyed because he just knew something was going to happen in the next two days that would undoubtedly require him to activate Mugetsu.

As Ichigo walked out of the alley his thoughts drifted to Ryuko and the state she was in when he saved her. While he had saved her from whatever Satsuki was planning to do to her, he didn't know how she was doing. The wounds he'd seen on her body were quite severe so she would probably need to go to a doctor to make sure she didn't have any internal bleeding or broken bones. The only problem was he had no clue where she was staying or even if she had a place to live. Mako did say Ryuko had only transferred in

today. If things at Honnouji Academy were as screwed up as he thought, Ryuko probably didn't even have a home.

*" I wonder if Mako knows where she's staying."*

So enraptured was Ichigo in his thoughts that as he turned a corner he walked straight into another student sprinting through the streets in the opposite direction. While months of shinigami experience allowed Ichigo to barely keep himself from falling down, the same could not be said for the other unfortunate student. The force of the impact against Ichigo caused the student to bounce back with enough force that he was laying on the ground with a dazed and confused look on his face.

"Hey," Ichigo leaned over the dazed student with a concerned look on his face, "Are you alright?"

"Did someone get the name of that truck?" The student mumbled incoherently before noticing who was standing over him. Leaping to his feet with a level of dexterity and speed that Ichigo hadn't thought him capable of, the student tapped his hand against his chest and looked up at Ichigo, "I recognize that brightly colored natural hair! You're the new transfer student from Karakura Town - Ichigo Kurosaki!"

The fact that the teen knew who he was by the color of his hair didn't startle Ichigo. In his brief time at Honnouji Academy Ichigo hadn't found anyone else with the same orange hair as him. What bothered him was the level of happiness in the teen's voice upon seeing him. It was almost enough to cause Ichigo to shudder in revulsion, "Who are you and what do you want?"

"Please forgive me, Ichigo Kurosaki! Due to the circumstances of our meeting I have forgotten to introduce myself!" The teen stepped back and began bowing dramatically to Ichigo before striking a pose, "I am the number one student reporter of the Newspaper Club - Shinjiro Nagita!"

At the mentioning of a school club Ichigo backed a few steps away and asked, "You're not going to attack me for what I did to Satsuki are you?"

Shinjiro looked offended at Ichigo's question. Adjusting the rim of his glasses dramatically, he exclaimed, "Of course not! While the Student Council and Lady Satsuki may have sanctioned the Newspaper Club's actions I have my own will and drive! Most of my fellow reporters and editors might be willing to commit acts of slander to protect and cover for the Student Council but I hold myself to a higher standard! As a journalist, it is my sacred duty to spread freedom of speech however I can."

**"Something doesn't sit well me with, Ichigo. It was too much of a coincidence that he ran into you here,"** Mugetsu didn't point out in her suspicions that something about Shinjiro just felt wrong with her. The Kamui wracked her mind trying to understand what she was feeling but no matter how hard she looked at Shinjiro there just wasn't anything obviously suspicious about him. His uniform didn't even have any Life Fibers in it, **"Find out what he was looking for you."**

"That's all well and good," Ichigo said before scowling, "But what does all that have to do with me? I'm already in enough trouble with Satsuki. I don't need to get involved in whatever mess you're trying to create."

"You're the only person in Honnouji Academy's history that not only stood up to Lady Satsuki's regime but actually overpowered her!" Shinjiro explained passionately with a wave of his arm. Clenching his fist tightly in front of his face, he sternly continued, "For three years Lady Satsuki and her close associates of the Elite Four have not only destroyed the freedoms of No-Star students such as myself but also prevented any of us from leaving! Anyone that tries to complain or protest are beaten into submission and quietly silenced by the weight of the system she's created. I may have only caught a glimpse of your battle earlier but it was enough for me to see that

you are the destined hope that Honnouji Academy's been waiting for!"

**"What are you going to do?"** Mugetsu felt Ichigo's pulse elevating and knew her wearer was worried about what he should do,  
***"Shinjiro brings up a valid point. If Satsuki Kiryuin is doing everything he claims than many people are suffering because of it."***

Ichigo mulled over Shinjiro's words. If Shinjiro was telling the truth and wasn't simply a spy for Satsuki designed to play on his sympathies Ichigo couldn't just sit back and do nothing. While attacking and humiliating Satsuki earlier was probably a really bad choice on his part, it was the best thing Ichigo could think of doing at the time. Still, he couldn't get rid of the notion that Satsuki wasn't about to let a slight against her honor simply vanish. If his actions earlier caused innocent people to get hurt he would have no one to blame but himself.

"Give me some time to think about this," Ichigo said as he began to walk past Shinjiro, "It's been a really busy day and I need to figure out a way to get back to my dorm without getting caught."

"No!" Shinjiro dove at Ichigo and wrapped his arms around his leg, "Don't go!"

"Hey! What the hell are you doing? Get the hell off!" Ichigo tried to shake Shinjiro off his leg but found the teen's grip to be supernaturally strong.

With his arms still tightly gripping Ichigo's leg Shinjiro looked out and shouted, "I need your protection! I already tried to expose Lady Satsuki using the school newspaper so many times that I'm on her 'list of dissenters!' If I try to say anything bad about her one more time she'll either permanently suspend me from school grounds or send the Disciplinary Committee after me! I can't stop writing the truth Ichigo! Lying just isn't in me! If the Disciplinary Committee finds me, they'll beat the stuffing out of me!"

"There he is, boys!"

Ichigo turned around and saw three massive One-Star students rushing towards them. One of them pointed at Shinjiro and shouted, "Shinjiro Nagita! Your slander and libel against Lady Satsuki ends today. Prepare to be disciplined!"

"Ah! Don't let them get me Ichigo!"

Ichigo stepped in front of the cowering Shinjiro and stared at the Disciplinary Committee members, "If you want to get Shinjiro, you're going to have to go through me first."

One of the students took a step forward to do just that but was stopped when another held his arm out, "Don't be a fool. That's Ichigo Kurosaki, the new transfer student with the Kamui. As long as he's with Shinjiro Nagita, we'll be unable to discipline him. We need to go report back to Gamagori about this turn of events."

As the three students reluctantly turned to leave, the one that just spoke turned around and pointed at Shinjiro, "Consider yourself lucky you are in presence of someone many times your superior! But know that eventually your luck will run out. Ichigo Kurosaki's protection cannot last forever and eventually you will pay for your crimes against Lady Satsuki!"

Ichigo waited until the Disciplinary Committee was out of sight before turning to Shinjiro, "I have a feeling those guys aren't going to give up so easily but it looks like as long as I'm around they'll leave you alone."

"You need not worry about constantly protecting me, Ichigo!" Shinjiro stood up and clenched his fist, "As long as you lead the way I will follow you to hell and back. The power you possess mixed with ability to disseminate information amongst the No-Star students shall start a revolution. Together we can finally remove Lady Satsuki's tyranny from Honnouji Academy!"



"Are you planning to just waltz right into Honnouji Academy and take down someone like Satsuki Kiryuin with a few words?" Ichigo asked sarcastically, "She's not someone that will care what you write."

"What?" Shinjiro seemed surprised by Ichigo's lack of commitment, "I thought you were going to help me?"

Ichigo shook his head and glanced in the direction the One-Star students had left, "No, I said I would protect you from those assholes. If you want to keep putting your life in danger, than be my guest. Just don't drag me into it."

"Oh..." Shinjiro was crestfallen at Ichigo's refusal to help him, but his normal exuberant attitude quickly reasserted itself, "That's alright by me! As long as I am able to use the powers of the press to spread the word of Lady Satsuki's evil deeds I do not care what happens to me!"

Ichigo was about to retort, but was stopped when the sounds of static and wires crackling filled the air.

"What's going on?"

"It's the Honnou City P.A. system," Shinjiro explained, "It is only used by Lady Satsuki and the Student Council when they are announcing something of grave importance."

**" Transfer students, can you hear me?"** A familiar voice spoke through the speakers, **"In one hour, your best friend, Mako Mankanshoku, will be executed due to her shared responsibility for committing treason against Honnouji Academy and Lady Satsuki! If either of you want to stop it, quit hiding like cowards and show yourselves!"**

"That guy just doesn't know when to quit," Ichigo growled angrily. Every single one of his senses was shouting at him that going back to Honnouji Academy was a trap but he couldn't let Mako get executed. Ichigo may not have known why the Boxing Club captain

wanted to kill Mako but it would be a cold day in hell if he just sat back and let that happen.

"I know I'm going to regret this," Ichigo muttered before looking at Shinjiro, "I need to go save Mako, Shinjiro, so you should find someplace to hide until it's all over."

"You can't be thinking of simply walking in Honnouji Academy's front door!" Shinjiro exclaimed in shock. Making several intricate motions in the air with his hands, he exclaimed, "While your uniform may allow you to easily overpower a Two-Star Goku Uniform and take Lady Satsuki by surprise, such trickery won't work more than once! If you step into Honnouji Academy, there is no doubt that you'll have to take on the Elite Four if you wish to rescue Mako Mankanshoku."

"I'm not going to let Mako die for something I did," Ichigo answered, moving around Shinjiro and towards Honnouji Academy, "Of course I know going back is probably a trap and if it is, I plan on beating the crap out of as many people as it takes to save Mako. As much as I know the odds are against me, I can't fail. I was almost too late to save Ryuko earlier and if I can save Mako then that's what I'm going to do."

Mugetsu listened to Ichigo's speech before she added in her own thoughts, ***"Ichigo, while your passion and desire to do the right thing is inspiring, you won't be able to fight back against the Goku Uniforms. If you try to release my true form once more, you will die."***

Ichigo thought about what his Kamui said and realized, when it came down to it, that if he had to risk his life for someone like Mako, who wasn't even involved in what happened, then he would gladly do so without a moment's hesitation, "That's a risk I'm going to have to take, Mugetsu."

Mugetsu, shocked at Ichigo's dedication and willingness to throw his life away to save someone else, could only mutter, ***"Ichigo..."***

"That's enough standing around doing nothing," Ichigo stated and began running up the road to Honnouji Academy. It would take longer to get back without taking the trolleys but Ichigo didn't trust the operators to not fight him. Turning around back to Shinjiro, Ichigo asked, "You should come as well. Those guys are probably waiting around the corner for me to leave or something."

"O-Of course!" Shinjiro stammered and quickly followed after Ichigo.

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The rain, which had drawn ever closer to Honnou City as the day wore on, finally arrived in a cataclysmic burst of thunder just as Ryuko arrived at her destination. Leaning over the handles of the stolen moped, her breath ragged from exhaustion and pain, she took a single step onto the muddy ground and quickly fell down to her hands and knees.

"Damn it," she coughed weakly as she used whatever strength she had remaining to push her body off the ground. Gritting her teeth angrily as she was forced to use her Scissor Blade as a makeshift crutch, Ryuko managed to force herself to stand back on her feet only after more than a minute of trying.

Leaning heavily on her weapon for support, Ryuko cursed her situation, "I was so close to finding out."

Taking a step forward and swaggering on her feet for just a moment, Ryuko managed to keep her balance as she stumbled her way into the ruined remains of her childhood home. It had been six months since she had last been here, and that was the last time there had been any sense of normality in her life. As she made her way through the fire-swept hallways, she eventually came across the same room that she had discovered her father's dying body. Planting her Scissor Blade into the floor, Ryuko stared at the ground in front of her in sadness.

"I couldn't do it dad," she muttered as tears threatened to well up from her eyes, "Just when I thought I knew who killed you, I failed. If only I had more power! I could have used it to save you from that woman!"

Ryuko collapsed onto her knees and knelt there in the rain for what seemed like hours. Coming back to this place was hard enough, but realizing that everything she accomplished had been for nothing had taken a toll on her mind. After going over what happened in her mind, she staggered back to her feet and wiped a tear from her eye.

"I'm sorry my power wasn't great enough to avenge you," she confessed sadly before the barest traces of a smile appeared on her face, "But there is someone who might be able to help. Mako says he's alright and he did save me. His name is -"

Before she could finish whatever it was she was about to say, a trapdoor opened up beneath Ryuko's feet, causing her to drop screaming into the dark abyss below.

"WHAT THE HELL!"

Several meters away, hidden behind a partially destroyed wall, Aikuro Mikisugi stared at where Ryuko had just been with concealed amusement. Sweeping his hand across his face, removing his glasses in the process, he said, "I leave the rest up to you, Ryuko Matoi."

As Ryuko's screams slowly died away, Aikuro turned around to head back to Honnouji Academy, but not before looking at the remote in his hand with disdain, "Four year battery life, huh?"

While Aikuro was contemplating getting a refund on his trapdoor remote control, Ryuko found herself bouncing erratically between the walls of the tunnel she was falling through. Nothing she did to slow her descent seemed to work. She tried bracing her feet and back only to find the walls too slick for friction to slow her down. When that

failed, she attempted to use her Scissor Blade only to crash through the roof of a large room and land in a pile of clothing.

"Damn that hurt," she grumbled as she pulled herself free from the pile of old and discarded clothing. As she looked around and realized where she was, she whistled and said, "How the hell did dad manage to build something like this under the house?"

Moving to get to her feet, Ryuko winced as a lance of pain shot down her left arm. Pulling up the sleeve of her blazer, she noticed that one of the many cuts she had obtained during her short fight against Takaharu had reopened upon landing and was now dripping blood down her arm and into the pile of clothing beneath her.

"I guess I reopened the wound from earlier," she muttered, clenching her fist to block out the pain. Something like this wasn't as painful as it would have been to someone else. Ryuko couldn't explain it, but she had always had an extremely high tolerance for pain, "I better look for a way out of here before I bleed to death."

Picking up her Scissor Blade, Ryuko slid down the pile of clothing until she managed to reach the floor. Stumbling for a moment, she looked around for any sort of exit. Whatever this place had been, something had happened to destroy most of it. It was strange that the explosion that destroyed the house didn't reach all the way down here. Pushing that thought out of her mind for the time being, Ryuko picked a random direction and began walking, "There has to be a way out of here."

As she looked around for a way to climb upwards towards one of the holes in the ceiling high above her head, something caught Ryuko's eye. Laying on its side, half crushed and half destroyed by the forces of nature, was an old wooden desk. From the various instruments and tools lying strewn around, it must have belonged to her dad.

"Dad..."

Ryuko walked to the desk and knelt down before sifting through the shattered remains. There wasn't much that hadn't been destroyed or damaged, but one thing remained that caused her to take a closer look. Carefully cleaning off pieces of shattered glass and dirt, Ryuko picked up an old picture. Pulling it out of its damaged frame, careful to not rip or damage it further, Ryuko's eyes widened in surprise when she saw who was in it. In the picture, her dad appeared to be standing on what looked like a pier or bridge and in his arms, with an innocent smile on her face, was a younger version of Ryuko. As she stared at the picture, Ryuko couldn't remember when this picture was taken or even where they were. Her eyes drifted away from her dad and towards the other occupants of the picture, causing her to frown.

"Who are they?"

Standing to the right of her father were two people, and by the looks on their faces they must have either been engaged or married. The man had a goofy smile on his face and was giving the camera the sign for 'victory' with one hand while the other was wrapped around the woman's shoulders. He wore a gaudy Hawaiian shirt with a red flower pattern over a blue background and had the beginning of stubble on his face. The woman had curly brown hair and seemed to be trying to play with the younger version of Ryuko.

Ryuko stared at the picture before tossing it in her pocket, "If they knew my dad, then they might know why that woman with the Scissor Blade killed him. Now I just need to find a way out of this place."

" **Wait...** " a muffled voice called out, stopping Ryuko in her tracks, "**More. Give me more.**"

"Who the hell's there? Show yourself!" Ryuko shouted through the abandoned chamber, her hands tightly gripping her Scissor Blade as she listened to her voice echo back and forth into obscurity. Muscles tensing up in preparation for an attack from the unknown intruder, Ryuko stood still for more than a minute as she waited for something

to happen. When she heard nothing but silence despite her best efforts to locate the source of the voice Ryuko began to relax. Perhaps the voice had come from her head and in her current state she believed it came from somewhere in the room.

"I'm losing it," Ryuko rubbed her eyes and yawned. She must have lost more blood from her battle against Takaharu than she originally thought.

" **More...**" the voice repeated, echoing through the large chamber and making it impossible for Ryuko to pinpoint where it was coming from, "**... I need more...**"

Ryuko turned around as her eyes focused on the pile of discarded fabrics she had fallen down on. Squinting as she caught the barest traces of movement from within the pile, Ryuko quickly swung her Scissor Blade through the air as something shot out of the pile. After noticing that her blade easily and cleanly slicing through the old shirt, Ryuko noticed a change in the lighting and looked upwards just as something descended through the air towards her.

"What's that light?" Ryuko squinted in confusion as she raised her hand in front of her face, "What the hell... is that a sailor uniform?"

" **Give me more!**"

Ryuko attempted to move out of the way of the falling uniform but winced as her wounds from her fight against Takaharu caught up with her and her left leg gave out. Before she had a chance to push past the pain and move out of the way, Ryuko found her body launching forward and tumbling along the ground before slamming into the wall as the uniform wrapped itself around her body.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ryuko shouted half-hysterically and half-deliriously as she felt the uniform beginning to grope her. With a luminescent blush adorning her face as the uniform pushed past all normal boundaries, Ryuko tried to break free of the living uniform's perverted touch but found to her shock that it was supernaturally

strong. Breaking out in a cold sweat as the uniform's eye seemed to dilute maniacally, Ryuko yelled, "Get the hell off me!"

" ***Don't leave me!***" the uniform shouted as it wrapped its sleeves around her arms and pressed itself against her chest, "***What are you waiting for? Take off your clothes already so you can put me on!***"

Ryuko gasped in embarrassment at the closeness of the living uniform and doubled her efforts to free herself from the nightmarish thing attacking her. She had no idea what it was but there was no way in hell that she was going to let it continue to grope her body. As she struggled against the flexible bonds holding her, the Kamui saw that she was being uncooperative and decided to take matters into its own nonexistent hands. Using its sleeves as makeshift hands it systematically began tearing her clothes off without care, leaving Ryuko clad in nothing but her bra and panties, "What the hell are you doing you fucking pervert?"

The Kamui purposely ignored Ryuko's protests of indignation as it finished stripping her. Staring at her body with a crazed look in its one eye, it shouted, "***Wear me and give me lots of your blood! I don't want to go back to sleep!***"

Let it be known that Ryuko had seen many crazy things as she transferred from academy to academy across Japan. After witnessing the beef tank at Kami-Kobe High School, which was right before she was chased off by someone called Kyuji Obayashi with a beef cannon, Ryuko thought nothing could faze her. But now, after having her body assaulted by a living sailor uniform with an unhealthy desire to be worn, Ryuko found her mind unable to wrap itself around what was happening, "The sailor uniform is talking?"

For a just brief moment the Kamui seemed to take notice of something other than Ryuko's body. Swiveling its eye upwards until it was staring at her nervous face, the opening that Ryuko assumed was its mouth smiled, "***Why are you scared? You should wear me***



***instead of being frightened. I will make all your worries go away!"***

"Like hell I will!" Ryuko shouted back in fear as she began trying to bite the Kamui's sleeves, "There's no way I'm going to wear a talking uniform!"

***" Hmm... time for a more hands-on approach!"*** The Kamui's form twisted and distorted before it threw itself on top of Ryuko, its fabric instantly molding to the shape and contours of her body.

"What did I just say?" Ryuko growled as she struggled to pull the Kamui off her body but found that she was quickly losing the battle. Whatever it was made of was making it impossible for her to resist and Ryuko could not help but feel a stab of fear course through her body at what will happen when she finally loses, "Uniforms aren't supposed to talk. Not get the hell off me you stupid piece of clothing before I find a pair of scissors!"

***" Enough of your whining,"*** The Kamui shouted as it began shining with a faint red light, ***"That's it! I'm going to make you wear me whether you like it or not!"***

"No means no!"

***" Too late!"*** The Kamui shouted in triumph, ***"Look! I'm a perfect fit!"***

As the Kamui finally forced itself completely on Ryuko's body and began the process of acclimating to her blood, pulse, shape and thoughts, Ryuko stumbled to her feet as red energy crackled around her form. She felt a strange feeling coursing through her body and it was making her sweat nervously. As the feeling inside her body built to a crescendo, Ryuko let out a loud shout as a large column of red energy shot up into the sky.

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"So you came back after all," Sanageyama grinned with his hands in the pockets of his coat as he watched Ichigo walk through the entrance of Honnouji Academy. Raising a hand and silently ordering the members of the Boxing Club to stand down, Sanageyama stepped forward and said, "I have to admit that after your little performance earlier I thought you would be smart enough to not fall for such an obvious trap."

"Why wouldn't I come back if someone's life was on the line?" Ichigo countered as he noticed students were beginning to surround him. Glancing past Sanageyama, Ichigo scowled when he saw Mako being held upside-down over a vat of boiling oil, "Let her go. She had nothing to do with what happened."

"I don't like doing things like this but the rules have to be followed," Sanageyama gave a sigh as he jumped out of the boxing ring. He would never admit it but Lady Satsuki's plans did not involve Mako Mankanshoku dying. She was merely bait to draw in the more important prey, namely Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi. As much as Takaharu wished to regain his honor, Sanageyama would never let him torture an innocent person to death, "It doesn't have to go down like this. Everything you see is simply a means to enact the proper punishment."

Ichigo didn't say anything as he looked up and saw Satsuki Kiryuin staring down at him. From the deepening frown on her face, he could tell she wasn't too happy about their earlier encounter, "If this is the punishment for someone who did nothing wrong, I'd hate to see how you treat those that are actually guilty."

Sanageyama's expression fell as Ichigo refused to follow the plan. Tapping his shinai against his shoulder to calm down before he said anything rash, Sanageyama held his hand out to Ichigo and said, "Ichigo, there is a way out of this that will allow Mankanshoku to walk away scot free. If you simply surrender yourself to the mercy of Lady Satsuki, the execution order against Mako Mankanshoku will be rescinded and she can go home to her family."

"What!" Takaharu angrily gripped the ropes surrounding the boxing ring as a vein bulged on his temple.

"Shut up," Sanageyama ordered without bothering to turn to face the Boxing Club captain. When Takaharu gnashed his teeth together but refrained from saying anything, Sanageyama turned his attention back to Ichigo, "You have two choices, Ichigo. You can take Lady Satsuki's mercy and Mankanshoku will be sent home completely unharmed or you can try to fight us, which will not be easy. You may have gotten the jump on her last time but don't think you will be able to do it again so easily."

As much as he wanted to wipe the smug look off Sanageyama's face and show Satsuki just how much respect he had for her, Ichigo knew he didn't have a choice in the matter. Sanageyama wasn't the type of person to lie to his face and if giving up would spare Mako from being boiled alive, then his path forward was rather clear. Taking a step forward and raising his hands into the air, Ichigo quickly found his way blocked by Shinjiro.

"You can't give up, Ichigo!" Shinjiro had a pleading look in his eye as he stood in Ichigo's way, "Sanageyama is one of Lady Satsuki's Elite Four. He'll say anything to make sure no one defies her authority. He probably plans to kill Mankanshoku as soon as you're in custody."

Sanageyama's face distorted into a scowl as his ears picked up Shinjiro's scathing and insulting comment. Pointing his shinai at the smaller student, Sanageyama growled and said, "I don't know who you think you are to say something like that but I'm a man of my word. If I say something, you can damn well be sure that I would never go back on it."

Shinjiro shrunk back from Sanageyama's intense glare, "But -"

"Don't worry about it, Shinjiro. I'll be fine," Ichigo cut off his new friend and started walking towards Sanageyama. Rubbing his wrists as a slight smile spread across his face, Ichigo added, "I don't think Satsuki will be able to capture me even if she wanted to."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Sanageyama demanded as he noticed Ichigo's distinct lack of fear, "Tell me right -"

Sanageyama was cut off as what sounded like an explosion went off near the boxing ring, causing a cloud of smoke and dust to erupt into the air. Covering his eyes to protect them from the dust, Sanageyama tried to see what was going on, "What the hell was that?"

There was a thick silence as the gathered students and civilians tried to see what was happening. As their eyes tried to pierce the thick smoke, a figure darted out of it and flew towards the captured Mako. The members of the Boxing Club tried to stop them, but were easily and brutally forced out of the way as the figure kicked and punched them all in the face and neck. When the figure stood on top of the scaffolding holding Mako, a familiar red blade in their hand, the suspended girl shouted.

"You've come back to save me Ryuko!"

Ryuko pulled the Scissor Blade from beneath the tattered brown cloak covering her body and looked around. Confident that no one had yet managed to see her newest uniform, she spun the blade around her wrist before stabbing it into the scaffolding, "Hold on tight, Mako. I'm going to get you out of there."

As she tore apart the ropes holding Mako above the vat of boiling oil, Ryuko noticed several of the less injured members of the Boxing Club rushing up the scaffolding in an attempt to stop her. Scoffing at their futile attempt, Ryuko spun her body around and let loose a flurry of kicks and punches that forces the club members back and into the boiling oil. Tearing off the last of the bindings holding up her friend, Ryuko grabbed Mako before she could fall and leapt into the air. Landing in the middle of the boxing ring, Takaharu glaring at her with a mixture of interest and anger, Ryuko put Mako down, her body as stiff as a piece of wood, and returned the diminutive captain's glare.

"So you've come at last, transfer student," Takaharu gloated into the microphone while raising his right fist, "Truth be told, I'm glad you interrupted Ichigo Kurosaki's surrender. It would be boring for this to go down without a real fight."

"Using a hostage is just dirty," Ryuko countered. Giving Mako a small push to the side so she would leave the ring before things started to get ugly, Ryuko held the cloak covering her body with one hand as she said, "I thought you boxers were all about honor and rules. If you are really a boxer, let's settle this one on one!"

Takaharu grinned as the rematch he was looking for, and his only chance to regain his honor as a member of the Student Council, began, "You were never recruited into my club, but if you are looking for a one on one fight, who am I to argue. It'll just make my victory all the sweeter when I pound your body into dust."

Throwing away the microphone without care, hitting the head of a student in the crowd in the process, Takaharu rushed at Ryuko with his left arm pulled back for a powerful jab, "I'm going to haze you like a punk!"

Letting loose a shout as he punched forward, Takaharu smiled as his boxing glove seemed to multiply over and over again until there were hundreds of blurry boxing gloves circling throughout the boxing ring. Adjusting their direction with but a simple thought, Takaharu began hitting Ryuko's covered body with everything he had.

"Is this too much for you?" Takaharu shouted victoriously as he watched every one of his blows hit Ryuko head on, "This sacred ring is overflowing with the myriad of left jabs that my toned body has produced!"

Outside the ring, Shinjiro watched Takaharu hit Ryuko again and again without her doing anything, "What is she doing? She's going to die if she doesn't fight back!"

Ichigo wasn't so sure that was the case. As he carefully watched the multitude of blows land on Ryuko's body, bursts of concussive force blasting past her into the crowd of gathered students, Ichigo saw that Ryuko had yet to take a step back or even flinch away in pain. Despite the number of punches, jabs and crosses raining down on her body courtesy of her opponent, Ryuko appeared to be completely unaffected by the attacks.

Takaharu's heart raced in excitement as he delivered blow after blow upon Ryuko. He was so enthralled in the fight that Takaharu failed to notice Ryuko standing still without even a grunt of pain. Sliding back across the ring, Takaharu grinned maliciously as he rotated his shoulder and shouted, "And the champion switches his footwork before moving into a right straight! But what's this? It's really a corkscrew punch! Ten! Ken! Fun! Sai!"

As the Two-Star's boxing glove began spinning like a drill as it inched ever closer to her body, Ryuko continued to simply stand still with her eyes firmly locked on the incoming attack. While Takaharu's technique certainly looked impressive enough to have potentially killed her if he had bothered to bring it out in their first fight, Ryuko knew that no matter how strong he was, it was not even close to the power she currently possessed. As the attack finally connected and shredded the cloak she had wrapped around her body, Ryuko didn't bother to move as Takaharu's glove stopped cold against her Kamui.

"W-What?" Takaharu stammered, "What sort of outfit could you possibly be wearing?"

A blush broke out along Ryuko's face as she covered her chest with one arm, "Quit your staring!"

"Well now..." Sanageyama scratched his nose and stared at Ryuko with a satisfied grin on his face, "That's something you don't see everyday."

While Sanageyama was staring at Ryuko with a grin and Shinjiro had pulled out a notepad and began hastily scribbling something

down, Ichigo's reaction was much more drastic.

" *What the hell is that?*" he thought in both shock and embarrassment. He was shocked that someone besides him had a Kamui. Aikuro had mentioned that he could count the number of Kamui in the world on his hands. The fact that another Kamui had appeared in Honnouji Academy, on the same day that he exposed his own Mugetsu to the school, meant that the teacher had something to do with it. His embarrassment, on the other hand, came from the rather revealing form that Ryuko's Kamui had decided to take.

Instead of being practical armor like his Mugetsu, that covered everything below his neck in rigid and dense armor that felt nearly impervious to attacks, Ryuko's looked... different to say the least. It took the form of thigh-high black boots and leggings, with red heels and lines going up to the very top, where they extended into straps that connected to the short black skirt that barely covered anything. The skirt was connected to the top of the outfit by a pair of suspenders that barely managed to cover her breasts. The suspenders then connected into the only thing that could be considered armor on the Kamui. Her arms and everything above her breasts up to the top of her chin was covered in black armor. At the front of her Kamui, much like Mugetsu, were two familiar looking eyes, one of which was permanently closed by a prominent scar across it.

"That can't be a Kamui..." he muttered. It looked nothing like his Mugetsu.

" *It is,*" Mugetsu answered Ichigo's rhetorical question, "***But what you fail to understand, Ichigo, is that a Kamui does not need to cover up every part of the body to function as armor. As long as it is worn and sufficient blood is given, every part of the wearer's body, even exposed skin, will be as hard as steel.***"

"I get that," he said slowly, "Just don't ever transform into something even close to that."

While Ichigo was arguing with Mugetsu over the proper definition of armor, back in the boxing ring Takaharu was trying, and failing, to deliver a blow that could hurt Ryuko. How the hell could she have gotten so strong in only a few hours? The last time they fought he had wiped the floor with her but now she was shrugging off his attacks like he was a fly. Letting loose a punch to Ryuko's face, Takaharu grimaced when he saw she hadn't so much as turned her head away, "You're cheating! You're trying to distract me from the match with your overwhelming sexiness!"

"Get real! I'm not wearing this thing because I want to!" Ryuko argued, the blush on her face increasing in intensity along with her embarrassment. She didn't understand why Senketsu had to take the form of something so revealing. It made her practically naked!

"No excuses!" Takaharu yelled, his voice breaking slightly, "You're mocking boxing with that scandalous outfit. No, all sports have been degraded by that thing!"

"I am not!"

Seeming to realize something of great importance, Takaharu grinned and stepped back, "All right, then. If you are going to fight completely undressed, I guess I'll take the liberty of undressing as well to make it even."

"Hey!" Ryuko, along with Ichigo and about half the audience, covered their eyes as Takaharu's hands reached for his belt, "You're the one mocking me, you damn pervert!"

"What are you talking about?" Takaharu looked perplexed at Ryuko before a glowing red chain on his belt snapped. As his right boxing glove transformed, to Ryuko's gaping shock, he explained, "Keep your mind out of the gutter. I'm just taking off the soft gloves I've been wearing for the away bouts. Behold! These are the true and genuine Honnouji Academy Athleticism-Augmenting Two-Star Boxing Gloves!"



"Oh boy," Sanageyama whistled, "This is going to be interesting to watch. I haven't seen Takaharu this focused on a fight since that bout against the American high school champion."

"Boxing Club captain Takaharu removed the safety limiters on his gloves in order to counter the increasing threat of the new transfer student Ryuko Matoi..." Shinjiro mumbled as he hastily wrote in his notepad. This was a golden story! He had thought Ichigo Kurosaki was the only one with the power to go up against the Student Council and Lady Satsuki, but to find another student willing to actually do so, it was a godsend. He just needed to talk to her in person, "Hey Ichigo, you called that outfit she was wearing a Kamui. What does that term mean?"

Ichigo hand waved his question away, "I'll tell you another time."

Ryuko stared at the giant spiked glove held in the air with a look of bewilderment on her face, "What the hell is up with your glove?"

"Are you talking about this old thing?" Takaharu looked at his boxing glove with pride and affection, "If I didn't wrap my gloves during my away bouts, other schools would be too afraid to face me in the ring. Wrapping my gloves is the only way I can get a decent fight anymore! Being able to release them after such a long time fills my heart with strength and conviction! This is the true power of a Goku Uniform!"

"I don't know that much about boxing," Ryuko said with a confused look on her face that quickly became a smug grin, "But even I know that what you're doing is illegal. But if you're really that eager to fight me, then bring it on!"

"I'm going to wipe that grin off your face, transfer student!" Takaharu shouted. Leaping into the air, his spiked glove drawn back for a jab, he rushed towards Ryuko, "Now that you're half-naked, I'm going to tear apart what little shreds of clothing and dignity you have left and send you flying to the moon!"

As Takaharu sprinted towards her, Ryuko continued to stand still while glaring at the diminutive Two-Star, "Good luck with that."

Ryuko's gloating was not unfounded. As Takaharu's glove easily connected with Ryuko's bare and exposed stomach, causing a pressure wave to explode out behind her and knock several students into the air, the Boxing Club captain noticed something odd with the whole situation. He had put all his power into that one attack, enough power to cause even the Elite Four to flinch back at least a little, and yet Ryuko was looked at him with that blasted smirk on her face.

"What are you smiling about?"

Takaharu's eyes widened as Ryuko answered, "Take a look at your glove."

Turning his shaking eyes to his fully unleashed boxing glove, Takaharu's mouth opened in shock and awe as the hairline fractures that it sustained from Ichigo Kurosaki's interference earlier grew before the glove shattered completely.

"W-What?" Takaharu gasped at seeing his precious boxing glove destroyed, "My precious glove!"

"Your glove isn't the only thing that can transform," Ryuko informed him, "So does my outfit!"

As Takaharu's mind filled with rage at the loss of his precious glove he let go of any restraints he had left and began hitting Ryuko with a multitude of punches and kicks. Even if Ryuko appeared to be unfazed by his attack combo, Takaharu was intent on making her pay no matter the cost.

"Amazing," Shinjiro muttered, momentarily forgetting to write down notes, "She's not even flinching from Takaharu's attacks. Is it because she is wearing what you call a Kamui, Ichigo?"

**"Ichigo, what are you going to do about her?"** Mugetsu questioned. He couldn't blame her interest in Ryuko. Neither of them could have guessed that they would run into someone with another Kamui.

That was a question that Ichigo didn't have an answer to. While talking to Ryuko about where she got her Kamui would answer a lot of questions, it might also bring up several questions. After thinking about it for a moment, Ichigo decided that the benefits outweighed the costs, "Shinjiro, stay here."

Near the ring and completely safe from harm, Mako Mankanshoku began playfully boxing as she watched Ryuko take Takaharu's punches without flinching, "Wow, Ryuko, I didn't know you knew how to box!"

"I don't think she does," her younger brother, Mataro, deadpanned from right next to her. Rolling his eyes at his sister's lack of intelligence, he turned his attention back to the sexy sight of Ryuko only to find someone standing in front of him, "Hey jackass, you're blocking the angelic view!"

"Shut it," Ichigo ordered Mataro, who folded his arms and grumbled back at him. Recognizing his voice, Mako turned to Ichigo, sparkles emanating from her eyes.

"Ichigo!" Mako exclaimed before latching onto his waist, causing the teen to pry her off his body, "I knew you'd be ok!"

"Yeah, well, my rescue plan didn't turn out the way I hoped," Ichigo admitted.

Back in the ring, Ryuko was starting to get sick and tired of Takaharu's futile attacks, Gritting her teeth while her anger built up, she shouted, "So now it's my turn, right?"

As steam began blasting out from the various folds of her Kamui, Ryuko sprinted towards Takaharu, avoiding the many attacks he was

throwing at her. Grabbing her Scissor Blade and spinning it around in her hand, she slammed the hilt into the captain's face before slashing him across his back, "Left jab and then a right hook!"

When her Scissor Blade propelled Takaharu into the air, nearly unconscious from the intense force behind the blows, Ryuko began spinning her weapon around her wrist, "And to finish it, a right straight! Seni-Soshitsu!"

Her Scissor Blade easily carved through Takaharu's Goku Uniform before it was suddenly and violently ripped to shreds, leaving the captain naked as the day he was born.

"That's impossible!" Sanageyama shouted in disbelief. How could the transfer student not only defeat a Two-Star Goku Uniform, but also destroy it? It made no sense.

Up near Satsuki Kiryuin, Inumuta adjusted his glasses, "So that's the power of the Scissor Blade. It is a truly remarkable weapon."

"Wait a second," Ichigo's eyes narrowed as he tried to get a closer look at something floating towards Ryuko. It was hard to spot it, due to the setting sun being directly behind it, but there was a glowing thread forming out of the shredded remains of Takaharu's Goku Uniform. The thread floated through the air towards Ryuko, where it was absorbed into her Kamui, causing it to emit a faint pink light.

"Now to finish you off!" Ryuko shouted, ignorant of what just happened, as Takaharu's body began falling towards her. Holding her Scissor Blade in a reverse grip, she swung it like a bat, causing the captain's body to propel through the air towards Satsuki.

As Takaharu's body flew towards her, Satsuki calmly and lazily leaned to the side, allowing the club captain to fly past her and into the tall spire of Honnouji Academy behind her.

"How dare you!" Sanageyama shouted at Ryuko as he began climbing into the ring to fight her, but was stopped when Satsuki's

voice rung out.

"That's enough, Sanageyama," Satsuki calmly told him. Stepping forward and past the remaining three members of the Elite Four, she stopped on the edge of the roof, her heel clicking as she did, "That was very impressive. Who are you and where did you get your hands on that outfit?"

Without looking up at Satsuki, her face covered in shadows, Ryuko answered, "It is a gift from my dad. And the one that killed him left behind this Scissor Blade! Now, you're going to tell me who owns the other half of this Scissor Blade, Satsuki Kiryuin!"

Satsuki stared at Ryuko, uncaring to the fact that the Scissor Blade had been the work of her father and not the other way around. With her face an expressionless mask, she asked, "You're Isshin Matoi's daughter?"

Ryuko was about to answer when she felt a strange feeling of weakness course through her body. As she broke out in a cold sweat and her arms shook from the effort of holding her Scissor Blade, Ryuko collapsed onto her knees as her strength left her.

" ***Ryuko, you've lost too much blood,***" Senketsu told her.

"I thought you needed blood," she answered.

" ***That is true,***" Senketsu responded, "***But at the current rate, you will lose consciousness in less than a minute.***"

"Don't sound so calm about it!" Ryuko growled.

"How interesting," Satsuki's voice cut through Ryuko's argument, "I did not expect for you to remain here, Ichigo Kurosaki."

Ryuko turned and saw Ichigo climbing into the boxing ring besides her. She was about to ask what he was doing when her eyes happened to glance at the familiar eyes on the collar of his uniform.

As she realized what exactly Ichigo's uniform was, all Ryuko could do was utter his name in disbelief, "I-Ichigo?"

"I'll talk to you later," he said without taking his gaze off Satsuki.

Satsuki, to her credit, smirked at Ichigo's appearance, "So I see you are not a coward after all. You must know that you are outnumbered and overpowered, with or without the Kamui you are wearing. You are either fearless or stupid, Ichigo Kurosaki."

Ichigo opened his mouth to answer but found Ryuko's hand gripping his arm. She was visibly sweating and her breath was coming out in labored gasps, "Move Ichigo... I... just... need to..."

Before Ryuko could finish saying her desire she felt the world darkening around her and collapsed as the black embrace of unconsciousness claimed her. As Senketsu transformed back to his normal state of a sailor uniform accompanied by a brief explosion of stars and light, Ichigo quickly reached out and managed to grab Ryuko before she hit the ground.

"So what are you going to do, Ichigo Kurosaki?" Satsuki asked as members of the Boxing Club as well as Sanageyama closed in around him, "There is nowhere to run or hide without leaving Ryuko Matoi behind. So your choices are as follows - be brave and surrender with honor or flee like a coward but live to fight another day. I leave the choice of your future to you."

Ichigo's eyes narrowed before an idea hit him, "Hey Mugetsu. How long do you think it will take for me to escape Honnouji Academy while transformed?"

" **About thirty seconds,**" Mugetsu answered, unaware of Senketsu's single eye widening upon hearing her voice, "**But surely you don't - "**

Ichigo adjusted Ryuko over his shoulder, allowing him to free his other arm up, "Think you can hold off for thirty seconds or so?"

Mugetsu could see what he was planning to do and gave the Kamui equivalent of a nod, ***"Yes, but it will be extremely difficult. I would try to get out as quickly as possible."***

"Got it," Ichigo slammed his hand down on his spaulder and felt the twin needles hidden within bury themselves in his shoulder, "Life Fiber Initial Release!"

Sanageyama was not standing around doing nothing while Ichigo was conversing with Mugetsu. As soon as he saw Ichigo shift Ryuko's body and reach over to his spaulder, Sanageyama was already rushing into the boxing ring with his shinai held aloft in the air. He could not let Ichigo get away no matter the cost but before he could tackle Ichigo Sanageyama was blinded by a bright light as his opponent emerged in Mugetsu's white and black armor.

"Sorry about this," Ichigo apologized as he easily dodged around Sanageyama's shinai before disappearing past him, "But I don't have time to talk."

As easily as it would have been to simply jump over the entire crowd of gathered students, even while holding Ryuko's unconscious body, there was something else Ichigo needed to do first. Landing just outside the ring where Mako was staring at him with stars in her eyes, Ichigo quickly grabbed her before pushing back into the air with enough force that the pressure wave knocked back those standing next to Mako.

"This is amazing!" Mako shouted happily from under Ichigo's right arm, "I'm queen of the world! Super speed a go go!"

"Mako, is there anywhere we can go that Satsuki couldn't find us?"

"Hmm..." Mako pondered the question, her face the epitome of concentration, before exclaiming happily, "Let's go to my place! My dad runs a back alley clinic. We have lots of stolen blood and medicine he can use to help Ryuko!"

"Just tell me where I need to go," Ichigo answered, ignoring the illegal acts Mako had just confessed to. Jumping over the edge of an artificial cliff, Ichigo began skidding down the concrete wall separating the condos and apartments owned by the One-Star students and the shacks and shanties occupied by the families of No-Star students. As his boots created sparks behind him, Ichigo heard a deep male voice speak.

**" *Why did you overdo it, Ryuko?* "**

"It's not a big deal," Ichigo comforted Senketsu, who seemed to be in a depressed slump after Ryuko fainted from overusing his power for the first time. As the Kamui turned his one good eye up at him, Ichigo added. "Mugetsu is the same way."

**" *Hey!* "**

Senketsu's single eye widened in surprise as he realized Ichigo could understand him. Before he could so much as ask Ichigo how he could hear his voice, Senketsu found the metaphorical air knocked out of his lungs as Ichigo pushed off a wall and began hopping across the rooftops towards Mako's house.



# Tired of Being Alone

*Well, here is Chapter 8 of **To My Death I Fight** . This chapter covers the first part of Episode 2, but do not assume I am just following the story (the last chapter should have cemented that already). Several events happen in this chapter that never occurred in the anime. I must admit that the enduring popularity of this story has amazed me. This story not only has the most words of any Kill la Kill crossover, but also the most reviews with 186 at the time of this posting! Thanks all of you for your continued support!*

*As a side note, I **highly** recommend checking out **The Moiderah of Writing** 's story **Transfer Student: Satsuki Matoi** . It is an AU in which Ryuko and Satsuki switch places and it is both hilariously funny and awesome to read. Check it out here on FFN or on spacebattles whenever you get a chance.*

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## Chapter 8 - Tired of Being Alone

As Ryuko Matoi slowly regained consciousness, the colors of the world around her coming together into a blurry focus, the first thing she heard was Ichigo Kurosaki talking to Senketsu as well as someone else.

***" I don't know how to thank you enough for what you did, Ichigo... and Mugetsu,"*** Senketsu, in his normal form as a navy colored sailor uniform, said. Raising a sleeve in embarrassment as faint blush appeared on the cloth beneath his eyes, he continued, ***"I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been their when Ryuko fainted..."***

"Like I said the first six times, it's not a big deal," Ichigo replied, "Besides, I couldn't have saved Ryuko or Mako without Mugetsu's power."

" ***You flatter me,***" Mugetsu said, before she sarcastically added, ***"But don't ever do something this stupid again. You were a few seconds away from being drained dry by me when you reached Mako's house."***

"I know, damn it, but I had no choice."

"I-Ichigo?" Ryuko groaned as she pushed herself off the cot she was laying on. Wincing slightly as she accidentally aggravated her wounds, she looked down and noticed that half of her body was covered in layers of bandages, "Did you fix me up?"

"Actually, it was Mako's dad," Ichigo turned his head to reply. He was surprised that Ryuko was up so soon. With her wounds, she should have been out for at least a few more hours. She must be made of tougher stuff than he thought, "The guy's a competent doctor, but once he finished treating your wounds he tried to stare at your half naked body while I was still in the room. I kicked his ass and threw him out of the room and warned him not to come back until you woke up."

"Lucky bastard," Ryuko grunted as she sat on the edge of the cot, "He got off easy. If I had woken up, I would have punched his ass into the ceiling for staring at my body like a damn pervert."

Rubbing her face and yawning, Ryuko remembered what she had seen just before passing out, "So you have one of these things as well?"

" ***I am not a thing,***" Mugetsu said passionately, one of her sleeves swinging out and hitting Senketsu in the process, ***"I am a Kamui. Don't forget that."***

Grumbling at the look she was getting from Mugetsu, Ryuko gave in, "Fine. So you have a Kamui too, Ichigo?"

Ichigo frowned at Mugetsu's behavior but nodded, "Yeah."

That made sense to Ryuko, "And can it transform into a more powerful form by drinking your blood?"

"Yes."

"And it's not embarrassing or half-naked?"

Ichigo stared at Ryuko with an annoyed expression on his face, "What do you think?"

"Damn it!" she cursed and glared at Senketsu's one eye, "Why the hell are you the only Kamui that transforms into something nearly naked? Why can't you be more practical like Ichigo's Kamui?"

" ***Like I told you earlier,***" Senketsu chided, his single eye rolling in irritation, ***"Your father created me just for you. Perhaps he thought this was an appropriate look for me."***

"Like hell. My dad was no pervert," Ryuko muttered under her breath, "So Ichigo, does your Kamui have a name?"

"Her name is Mugetsu," Ichigo answered, pointing a thumb at Mugetsu. Said Kamui was sitting on the ground nearby in a pose reminiscent of Ichigo. Much like Senketsu, she had partially transformed in order to become mobile. Mugetsu locked gazes with Ryuko for barely a second before she huffed and turned away, her sleeves folded in an apparent pout.

"What's the deal with your Kamui?"

"I don't know," Ichigo answered. Ever since dropping Ryuko off and speaking with Senketsu, Mugetsu had become moody, "I think she's upset that I'm talking to another Kamui."

Mugetsu's eyes swung around, ***"I am not upset. I am worried that Senketsu might not be who he says he is. That's all."***

Ryuko stared at Ichigo before glancing to Mugetsu. All was silent before she broke out into laughter, "Ha! Your clothes are jealous!"

"Oh sure, laugh it up," Ichigo muttered, "At least Mugetsu doesn't transform into something that should get me arrested for public indecency."

"Shut up!" Ryuko tried kicking Ichigo only for him to move out of the way, causing her to fall undignified on the ground, "It's not like I was given a choice in the matter! I want to switch Kamui, you bastard!"

"No way!" Ichigo crossed his forearms in front of his chest and stepped away from Ryuko, "There's no way in hell I would be caught alive, or even dead, in Senketsu!"

"Damn you," Ryuko grumbled and sat down on the edge of the cot, "So how did I get here anyway?"

"After you fainted, I used Mugetsu to escape from Honnouji Academy, but not before grabbing you and Mako. Mako mentioned that her dad is a doctor and would be able to treat your wounds and blood loss."

"Ryuko!"

The door to the bedroom slid open and Mako Mankanshoku came flying in, her arms extended forward to hug her new best friend. Ryuko, a calm and bored expression on her face, simply leaned back, allowing Mako to go flying past her and out the nearby window.

A moment later Mako appeared at the window, her hair covered in pieces of garbage, "You're awake Ryuko!"

"Yeah," Ryuko clenched a fist and found that she could feel no pain, "Did you dad do this?"

"Yup!" Mako climbed back into the bedroom, "Dad's a Back Alley Doctor! He used all his stolen medicine and tools to heal you right up! Let's go out into the family room! Everyone's waiting to see you guys!"

Ryuko and Ichigo exchanged a look before deciding to follow Mako out of the bedroom. She was still trying to get her mind to wrap around the fact that her dad was able to create something as remarkable and powerful as Senketsu. Granted, its appearance could use some work. She didn't want to be seen as some kind of perverted stripper no matter how much power Senketsu granted her, but if he helped her track down the woman who killed her dad, she was willing to put up with the embarrassment and loss of blood for the time being.

"You must be the girl my Mako was so infatuated with," A large and heavyset man commented. His nose was plugged up with tissue paper to stop it from bleeding and his left eye was blackened, "Your friend Ichigo has a wicked right arm! The name's Barazo Mankanshoku!"

"You were such a badass to swing that Scissor Blade around while half-naked," The annoying voice of Mataro Mankanshoku piped up from the side, "Nobody sane would fight dressed like that!"

Growling, Ryuko reached out and grabbed Mataro by the scruff of his collar before comically punching him in the face, "Go to hell! It's complicated!"

"Damn it, that hurt!" Mataro pretended to cry as he held his wounded body, "I would have carried you here if Ichigo hadn't been so stubborn about it! I wanted to hold your sexy body, damn it!"

"Hey punk," Ichigo glared down at Mataro, "What did I tell you the first time you said that?"

"Oh my," A soft voice came from the kitchen. As the door opened, revealing a Sukuyo Mankanshoku wearing an apron and carrying a

tray, she said, "If hitting my husband or admonishing my son makes you feel better, go right ahead."

"So you're the one that healed me," Ryuko looked at her wounds in awe.

"Like I said, dad's a Back Alley Doctor. If you count the number of people he's killed versus the number he's save, he's killed way more!"

"That's not a good thing," Ichigo deadpanned.

"No need to worry," Barazo waved his hand dismissively, "The dead ones don't sue."

Popping out from underneath the table in between Ichigo and Ryuko, Shinjiro added, "Mr. Mankanshoku is correct. In all the years the Mankanshoku Family Clinic has been open, there hasn't been a single lawsuit from a dead patient."

Nearly falling over from the shock of Shinjiro's sudden appearance, Ryuko pointed a finger at him, "Who the hell are you?"

"Oh?" Shinjiro looked at Ryuko before bowing apologetically, "My apologies! It appears that in my haste I have forgotten to introduce myself. I am Shinjiro Nagita, member of the Newspaper Club, and I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Shinjiro?" Ichigo looked at the shorter student with suspicion and confusion, "Where the hell did you come from?"

Shinjiro chuckled embarrassingly, "Evading the Disciplinary Committee has enabled me to hide myself quite well. When I saw you escape from Honnouji Academy, I quickly made my own escape and followed your trail to here. As a reporter, I take pride in being able to follow a story wherever it may be!"

Ryuko glared at him, "Do you make it a habit to randomly break into people's homes?"

"It's not a problem, Ryuko!" Mako announced, wrapping one arm around Shinjiro's shoulders while clenching her other fist dramatically, "If Shinjiro is in trouble with the Disciplinary Committee and Gamagori, then it is my sacred duty as a member of the Mankanshoku family to keep him safe and sound. It would be a stain on my honor if he were to meet with a terrible fate!"

"Well now," a mature female voice said from the nearby open window, "That was some convoluted logic, but I think he gets the point."

Every turned and saw a dark-skinned woman with long purple hair tied up in a ponytail and amber eyes sitting lazily on the windowsill. Ichigo's eyes widened as he recognized who she was, "Yoruichi?"

"Yoruichi?" Yoruichi repeated playfully, "Is that all you can say after all we've been through Ichigo? I'm hurt."

Ryuko turned to Ichigo, "You know this woman?"

"Not really."

"That hurts Ichigo," Yoruichi mocked as she hopped into the Mankanshoku household, her figure gaining the immediate attention of both Barazo and Mataro. Making it a point to ignore the two drooling men, Yoruichi sat down across from Ichigo, "You could say that Ichigo wouldn't be half the man he is today without my training. I worked his lazy ass for days to get him into shape. The name's Yoruichi Shihoin."

"We don't need to hear your damn introduction," Ichigo grumbled and folded his arms while looking away from Yoruichi, "And that wasn't training. It was torture."

"Training and torture are just two sides of the same coin, Ichigo. You can't have one without the other," Yoruichi grinned like a cat before pulling out a tape, "But I'm afraid I'm not hear to mock you, at least this time. Where's the T.V.?"

Mataro stood up and ran to his room, "I think I stole one a few days ago!"

"That's my boy," Barazo laughed loudly, "Always thinking ahead, just like a true Mankanshoku."

Yoruichi looked at Ichigo, who simply shook his head, as if to warn her not to ask too many questions in fear of losing her sanity. After less than a minute had passed, Mataro came walking out of the hallway, a large television in his arms.

"I snagged this baby without any problems," Mataro placed the television on the table and plugged it into the wall, "The stupid clerk didn't even see me carrying it out of the store."

As Yoruichi placed the tape in the television, Ichigo asked, "What's on the tape?"

"It's a message from Kisuke."

There was a crackle of static before Kisuke Urahara's visage appeared on the television, a familiar goofy smile on his face, "*Hey Ichigo! If you're seeing this tape, that means Yoruichi managed to track your ass down no matter where you hid. Yoruichi, if you're still there, good job. I would give you a treat, but as this tape implies, I am either dead, missing, lost or too busy working on some unholy monstrosity to announce that I am still alive. If said monstrosity is the cause of my death, please be sure to use the flamethrowers conveniently provided at the far ends of my store to kill it.*"

Kisuke moved away from the camera and began carrying it through the air before stopping on a bundle of glowing red fibers, "*Back on topic. These, Ichigo, are what are known as Life Fibers. They are*



*remarkable things that have so many different applications, but I will not say anything since I hate basing ideas off of untested conjectures. All you, and everyone else sitting with you, need to know is that the Kamui I created for you is made purely of Life Fibers and let me tell you, it wasn't an easy thing to do. In fact, it may have been the single most difficult thing I created since... well... you know."*

As Kisuke panned the camera away, everyone could see something that looked like Mugetsu being woven together from a large spool of Life Fibers, "Anyway, I'm rambling. As I worked with the Life Fibers, I decided that it was in my best interest to create something capable of destroying them. After my first two attempts at creating a Kamui ended with them trying to eat me, I thought it was prudent to err on the side of caution and avoid any further bodily harm. Who knew something made of clothing could have such sharp teeth? Hence the weapon I have created for you. That's all and don't worry Ichigo, if things don't turn out the way I hope, I could always send Tessai or Ururu to check up on you. It's quite strange; ever since I started working with Life Fibers she has been feeling antsy. Perhaps she is finally growing up? Ta ta~!"

The video cut out, leaving the Mankanshoku household in complete silence until Mako blurted out, "Let's watch that again!"

Grabbing her friend by the back of her shirt before Mako could go through on her promise, Ryuko looked at Yoruichi and asked, "So what is this weapon that guy talked about?"

With a solid clunk, Yoruichi dropped a long thin package on the table, "Here you go, Ichigo. I don't think I need to tell you to be careful with it."

Carefully unwrapping one end of the package, Ichigo gracefully caught the scabbard of a long blade as it fell out of the box. Drawing the blade out of the scabbard, he was stunned when he pulled out a katana that shone with a deep blue color. Turning it over in hands a couple of times, marveling at the craftsmanship and integrity of the

blade, he looked at Yoruichi, "Why did Kisuke want me to have this katana?"

Yoruichi shrugged, "Beats me, but if Kisuke thought you needed it, then you probably do. Kisuke was never someone to exaggerate threats. If he thinks these Life Fibers are as dangerous as he says they are, then you should be careful."

As he looked over the blade, Ichigo noticed something inscribed on the hilt, "Tournesol? What the hell kind of name is that?"

"That makes two of us," Yoruichi dramatically sighed and sat down, "You know Kisuke, he always has to be one to give large and grandiose names to everything he creates. That blade you're holding is no different. Usually I just call his inventions whatever the hell I want, but Kisuke thought ahead and actually carved the name of the blade onto it. Clever bastard. When I find him..."

"Hey Yoruichi," Ichigo paused as he tried to think of the exact question he wanted to ask, "Have you heard anything from Kisuke? Is he alive or not?"

Much to everyone's shock, Yoruichi took a bite out of one of the disgusting croquettes Sukuyo had conjured up. Swallowing the lump of mysterious food before speaking, she replied to him, "Ever since Kisuke vanished, I've spent days looking around Karakura Town for signs of him. There were a few times that I thought I was close to discovering who killed him, but they were all just dead ends."

Propping her chin into the cup of her hand, Yoruichi grinned and looked around the room, "So I see you've made quite the circle of friends, Ichigo. You've not been here a week and you already made quite the commotion. I heard about what happened up at Honnouji Academy. If Isshin was here, he would kill you."

"I'd like to see the old goat try," Ichigo grumbled.

Yoruichi grinned, "Perhaps. So, who might you all be?"

"Ryuko Matoi," Ryuko answered calmly.

Shinjiro bowed respectfully, "Shinjiro Nagita, member of the Newspaper Club."

"Mako Mankanshoku," Mako answered as excited as ever. Pumping a fist into the air she added, "And this is my family! My dad Barazo, my mom Sukuyo, my brother Mataro and our dog Guts! It's a pleasure to meet you Lady Yoruichi!"

"Aren't you cute," Yoruichi chuckled at Mako's antics before her mood became serious, "Before I go, Ichigo, I have one last piece of news. It concerns the person that attacked Kisuke."

Yoruichi reached into her shirt and pulled out a photograph, "Kisuke had set up dozens of cameras throughout Karakura Town to warn him of any incoming danger. Before you think that is an invasion of privacy, they have been quite helpful in the past. Anyway, on the day he disappeared, one of Kisuke's cameras caught something. It was only on a single frame of the video, which is remarkable because Kisuke's cameras operate at over two hundred frames a second."

Yoruichi tossed the picture onto the table. As everyone crowded around the picture, Ichigo asked, "What am I looking at here?"

"A purple Scissor Blade," Yoruichi announced. While the room grew silent upon the announcement, with even the constantly joyful Mako Mankanshoku lost deep in thought, Ryuko stared at the picture with building anger.

"A Scissor Blade?" Ichigo took a closer look at the picture but still couldn't connect the dots, "Where did you come up with that? I don't see it."

"It was Isshin that told me what it was once I showed him the picture," Yoruichi took back the picture from Shinjiro, who had gripped it so tightly that it took Yoruichi a brief amount of effort to

reclaim it, "Aside from that, I know nothing more about Kisuke's assailant."

"I might know a little more about this person," Ichigo cast his gaze downwards as he recollected what Kisuke had told him over the phone, "On the day he disappeared, Kiuske called me. He said someone who had nearly killed him in his shop was chasing him across Karakura Town. The strangest thing he said was that the woman wasn't quite human. Damn, I still don't know what that means."

By this point Ryuko had reached her tipping point. Standing up and angrily slamming her hands on the table, she shouted, "Tell me everything you know about this woman! Is her name Satsuki Kiryuin?"

Yoruichi looked at Ryuko completely unperturbed by the teen's outburst, "I'm guessing that Kisuke isn't the first person this woman's attacked."

"Damn right!" Ryuko shouted and pointed her red Scissor Blade across the table at Yoruichi, "She killed my dad with the other half of this scissor blade!"

"I see..." Yoruichi took a deep breath before adding, "Let me just say this, Ryuko. If Kisuke, a man who could be considered one of the most clever men in the world, is afraid of what this woman could do to him if she finds him, what makes you think fighting her would end in your benefit? You could be strong or fast, but the fact of the matter remains the same. Kisuke could think twenty moves ahead in a battle. He could enact contingency after contingency in case he couldn't outright win a battle. If he couldn't win, you sure as hell can't."

While Ryuko remained stunned at Yoruichi's outright refusal to help her, a fist clenching in anger, the captain turned to Ichigo, "I'm going to head back to Karakura Town now. Isshin's doing some remodeling to your house, which means Karin and Yuzu are staying at the shop.

Last I heard Yuzu managed to convince Tessai to let her braid his beard."

With that said, Yoruichi stood up and left through the same window that she first appeared from.

"Wait a second!" Ryuko jumped up and ran at the window. Pressing her body against the frame of the window, she coughed as a motorcycle engine revved to life and Yoruichi disappeared into the distance atop a bright blue motorcycle.

"Damn, she's gone," Ryuko grumbled as she plopped back down on the floor, "So, who was this Kisuke guy Ichigo?"

Threatening to kill Yoruichi for dropping this on top of his lap, Ichigo explained, "He's an old family friend, or I think he is."

"I still find the concept of Kamui fascinating," Shinjiro stood up and took a dramatic pose, "With the power of your Kamui, you two can help me take down Lady Satsuki's tyrannical regime."

Ryuko looked at the grandstanding Shinjiro before she flatly said, "Wait. What?"

"Just ignore it, he's always like this," Ichigo muttered. Now that he thought about it, Shinjiro's behavior was eerily similar to Mako's, except that his was more along the lines of extreme enthusiasm and determination instead of insanity and craziness, "He's in the Newspaper Club. Apparently what he's written pissed off the Disciplinary Committee and I'm the only one standing in their way."

"I see," Ryuko muttered.

"Don't be upset, Ryuko!" Mako exclaimed, sliding into view right next to Shinjiro, "Shinjiro is just trying his very best to do what he was made to do. Who are we to judge what is right and wrong? On the honor of my family I, Mako Mankanshoku, will make sure that nothing happens to you!"

"I knew I could trust you Mako," Shinjiro's single eye shone with tears as he grabbed her hands, "Will you help me destroy the tyranny imposed by Lady Satsuki?"

"Oh dear god..." Ichigo stared in horror as Shinjiro and Mako began talking, "What have I done?"

"Mako," Ryuko tried to intercede before it was too late, "Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?"

Mako's eyes widened before she shouted in a panic, "You're right! I'm sorry Shinjiro, but I can't help you in your righteous quest to bring down the establishment. Perhaps in another time, another place we could have been partners in your crusade but alas, it was not to be!"

"I fully understand your conviction Mako!" Shinjiro's glasses shone with a holy light, "But even with this setback, I will not stop in my mission!"

" ***He is quite... vocal about his beliefs,***" Mugetsu muttered.

" ***I quite agree,***" Senketsu added, "***Although I do wonder why his hair is covering his left eye.***"

Deciding to leave before he was dragged further into the insanity, Ichigo stood up and headed to the door, "It's been fun, but I'm going to leave before I lose what remains of my sanity."

"You're going back to your fancy dorm room Ichigo?" Mako announced in a mix of shock and confusion, "But Lady Satsuki is surely looking for you! Stay here with my family. Ryuko is!"

"No thanks Mako," Ichigo put Tournesol back in its scabbard and headed for the door, "If I don't get back soon, that Gamagori bastard will find some reason to expel me."

"Then I should get going too," Shinjiro announced enthusiastically  
"Since Ichigo is my bodyguard against the Disciplinary Committee, it

makes sense that I stick close to him. It's been a pleasure meeting you Mako Mankanshoku and Ryuko Matoi. Pray we meet again!"

Out in the crisp night air of Honnou City, Ichigo took in the glow from the various homes and buildings around him and started walking in the direction of the dorms when he heard someone running towards him.

"Hey wait up Ichigo!" Shinjiro sprinted towards him before skidding to a stop, a note pad in his hand, "I have to ask you something. If this Kisuke person was attacked by the same person that murdered Ryuko Matoi's father, aren't you worried about Yoruichi Shihoin's safety?"

"Not really."

Shinjiro hadn't been expecting that answer, "Why?"

"She might not look like it, but Yoruichi is one of the fastest people in the world."

"That's good to know," Shinjiro replied and turned to walk away. Waving goodbye to Ichigo, he said, "Well, I should be heading home now. We all can't live in the Honnouji Academy dorms like you. If I move quickly, I should be able to get back home before the Disciplinary Committee manages to track me down. It's almost like they know where I am at all times. I'll see you tomorrow at school. Perhaps you will have changed your mind about helping me tear down this tyrannical establishment we call Honnouji Academy!"

As Shinjiro disappeared into the distance, Ichigo watched him go before asking Mugetsu, "Mugetsu, did you notice anything off about Shinjiro?"

Mugetsu's eyes swiveled up to look at him, "***What do you mean, Ichigo?***"

"I've known fast people before," Ichigo began as he turned to walk towards the academy, "But one thing that bugs me about Shinjiro is how he was able to track me down. Even with his sources, he shouldn't have been able to find where I was for at least a day. And I can't forget about how he just appeared out of nowhere in the middle of Mako's home."

***" That is concerning. What do you plan on doing about him?"***

"For now, I'll just watch him. For all I know, he could actually be that good of a reporter. In any case, I have bigger issues to worry about. Satsuki and her goons aren't going to just let me go to school in peace anymore. I have to watch my back and with you out of the picture for a few days, I need to be even more careful. Hopefully this sword will help keep away some of the more troublesome idiots."

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"The masses are fools... every single one of them are nothing but swine dressed in human clothing, completely domesticated by the established order."

Satsuki Kiryuin's heel clicked on the ground as she continued, "They have lost the right and will to govern themselves, that is why they must be governed by Honnouji Academy. We shall create humanity's future through the use of the Goku Uniforms. Iori, I have chosen your Sewing Club as the chosen elite of our Human Conquest and Liberation Project."

"Thank you Lady Satsuki," Iori bowed respectfully.

Satsuki looked over the lines of One-Star Goku Uniforms passing by her with smug satisfaction. The latest iteration of the Goku Uniforms was almost eight percent more powerful than the previous design. She had to give credit to Iori for both his dedication and ability to work under strict conditions. While Satsuki could have easily hired



someone from Revocs to design and produce the Goku Uniforms, with increased power and resilience no less, she didn't trust anyone but Iori for the task at hand.

"Iori, have you had a chance to look over the data Inumuta sent you on Ichigo Kurosaki's Kamui?"

"Yes I have," Iori handed Satsuki a clipboard, "I must thank you for allowing me access to the information and data concerning the Kamui, Junketsu. Without it, attempting to determine the power and capabilities of Ichigo Kurosaki's Mugetsu would have ended in failure."

"What have you found?"

Iori adjusted his glasses before beginning, "After comparing your Life Fiber Resistance with Ichigo Kurosaki's, as well as what abilities his Mugetsu has revealed, I have determined that your Junketsu should be theoretically stronger."

"Theoretically?" Satsuki arched an eyebrow in mild annoyance, "I do not deal in theories or assumptions. I need cold, hard facts."

Iori swallowed nervously, "Please forgive me, but unless we can somehow force Ichigo Kurosaki into using Mugetsu's full power, everything will be based only on conjecture. From the limited data Inumuta was able to collect, it is obvious that Mugetsu's speed and power exceeds that of a standard Two-Star uniform."

"What about a Three-Star Goku Uniform?" Satsuki questioned, "Will Ichigo Kurosaki's Kamui be able to stand up to their power?"

"I am not sure. I would need more data to make an accurate guess."

"... Very well, Iori. Keep me informed of any further developments."

Iori bowed once again, "As you wish."

The level at which Ichigo Kurosaki bothered Satsuki was increasing rapidly. It wasn't the fact that he was attending Honnouji Academy at the behest of her mother, Satsuki could easily deal with that, nor was it that he possessed a Kamui. Power was one thing that she was easily able to counter. Her natural skill and talent made her leagues above that of a Two-Star club captain. What irritated her was the ease in which he used Mugetsu's power. From the tests she had secretly run on Junketsu, away from the eyes of her mother and Revocs, the Kamui was incredibly vicious and insatiable. It would take someone with an iron will to tame Junketsu's urges and great power.

*"How did you tame Mugetsu, Ichigo Kurosaki?" Satsuki thought in frustration, "Is your will really that great that you can temper a being of such power as a Kamui?"*

Satsuki was still staring ahead when a female voice respectfully spoke up from behind, "Tennis Club Captain Omiko Hakodate reporting as ordered, Lady Satsuki."

"Hakodate," Satsuki didn't take her gaze off the monitors in front of her, but she could tell the Tennis Club Captain was kneeling behind her, "How are the preparations for the Hokkaido interleague match coming along? I'm assuming there have been no problems."

"Of course not, Milady," Hakodate answered neutrally, "Every single club member has been devoting every waking moment of their time to training. Our opponents will soon learn to fear the might of Honnouji Academy and Lady Satsuki."

There was a loud hissing of escaping air as a container descended from above, opening as it went. Walking towards the still kneeling Hakodate, Iori said, "This is a Tennis-Spec, Athleticism-Augmenting Two-Star Goku Uniform. Consider it a gift from Lady Satsuki for your complete devotion and loyalty."

Hakodate's one visible eye widened in greed as she stared at the Goku Uniform, "At long last I have a Two-Star Goku Uniform of my

own! Thank you, Milady!"

"Carry out your mission without fail," Satsuki ordered, silently disturbed by the look on Hakodate's face, as she headed to a nearby elevator, "Sanageyama, come with me. I have further need of your services."

"Of course," Sanageyama nodded his head while surprised by what Satsuki could want with him. The elevator she had entered led directly her own personal room overlooking the rest of Honnouji Academy as well as most of Honnou City. In all three years he had been at Honnouji Academy, Sanageyama could count the number of times he had been there on both hands.

As soon as he stepped into the elevator and the doors closed, Satsuki asked, "You were standing next to Ichigo Kurosaki earlier this evening when Ryuko Matoi defeated Takaharu, correct?"

Sanageyama could not see where Satsuki was going with this. She knew all this already. Nevertheless he answered the question, "Yeah. I was right next to him up until Ryuko Matoi unveiled her Kamui to Honnouji Academy."

"I see..." Satsuki's eyes stared out over the darkened courtyard of her academy, only broken by the lights of the elevator. Reaching into the pocket of her uniform, she extended two fingers and handed Sanageyama a small picture, "The Photography Club managed to procure this photograph of Ichigo Kurosaki's acquaintance. I asked Jakuzure and Gamagori about his identity, but they said that this student had never been in trouble with the Disciplinary Committee or a member of the Non-Athletic Clubs. Inumuta was unable to find anything in the database about this student apart from his name, student number, and age. Have you seen him before?"

Sanageyama stared at the picture of the No-Star student that had been next to Ichigo Kurosaki during the match between Ryuko and Takaharu earlier. He looked carefully at the picture for several long

moments before shaking his head, "I'm sorry, but this student isn't a part of any of the Athletic Clubs."

Satsuki seemed to find that news disturbing, if the slight narrowing of her eyes meant anything to Sanageyama, "Did you notice anything off about him?"

"Off?" Sanageyama scratched his chin, "Now that you mention it, there was something strange about him."

"How so?"

"Well, he seemed to have a strange fascination with Ryuko Matoi. As soon as Ichigo Kurosaki left to go help her, I glanced over and noticed the kid's eye focused almost entirely on her. The way he was looking at her really freaked me out. Do you want me to bring him in for questioning? He might be a spy from one of the other schools."

"No," Satsuki barely managed to hide the nervousness in her voice, "You are to inform Gamagori as well as the rest of the Student Council to leave this particular student alone. You are not to speak to him, confront him, or meet with him alone. Am I understood?"

"Y-Yes," Sanageyama was taken aback by the order. He didn't know what had gotten Satsuki so worked up, "But why is it important that we leave him alone? He's only a lowly No-Star student."

"Because," Satsuki crumpled the picture in her hands and bit her lip, " *He* is not a student at all. If you, or any of the Elite Four, were to try and fight him, he would destroy you in less than a second. Ichigo Kurosaki is in great danger."

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Ichigo suppressed a yawn as he finally walked back through the weird entrance to Honnouji Academy. Walking uphill was a lot more

difficult that simply jumping down while wearing a Kamui. With the trolleys and lifts out of the service due to the time, he had to walk the entire way back uphill without rest. He was really looking forward to his bed. That was if Gamagori wasn't staking out his room for what he did earlier today. That man was probably watching him right now.

"Oh man," he grumbled as he rubbed his eyes and sighed, "I really want to get some sleep."

"~Hello Ichigo~!"

Ichigo turned around in surprise at the completely unexpected voice. Standing behind him in the dead of night with a fancy umbrella leaning against her shoulder was a girl with long blonde hair and wearing a pink dress. A purple eye patch covered the girl's left eye and she had a large and seemingly friendly smile plastered on her face. When Ichigo remained silent after her apparent introduction, Nui Harime sighed wistfully and leaned her head onto her hand, her elbow propped up in midair.

"It's rude to not introduce yourself, you know? Aren't you going to say anything Ichigo?"

" ***Ichigo...***" Mugetsu was nervous about the girl in front of them. She couldn't quite place it, but there was something wrong with her, "***Be careful. There is something not right about her.***"

"I know," he muttered to Mugetsu. Call it intuition or instinct, but there was something extremely disturbing about the girl standing not ten feet away from him. What bothered Ichigo the most was how she appeared behind him without alerting him to her presence. Until she spoke to him he had felt or sensed nothing. For all he knew, she could have been following him the entire time and he wouldn't have known about it, "Who are you and how do you know me?"

"Oh my..." Nui playfully pouted as she leaned on her umbrella and was impossibly floating in the air, "... That's such a silly question coming from someone like you."

"Someone like me?" Ichigo tensed his muscles. The girl might have been playing around with him, but he could tell she was dangerous. There was something in her eyes that he had only seen during the war against Aizen and it wasn't good, "I don't even know you."

"Really?" Faster than Ichigo could blink, Nui was gone from her perch several feet in the air and was now standing at his side, her finger poking Mugetsu curiously, "Is this a Kamui? It's quite fashionable. It suits you Ichigo!"

Ichigo stood there, mouth agape, as his mind tried to process how Nui appeared there, but in less than a second reflexes honed by months of fighting and combat kicked in. Jumping away from Nui, Ichigo pressed a hand to his side and noticed that Mugetsu was shivering, "Mugetsu?"

***" Her hand was as cold as ice," Mugetsu's voice was shivering, "She was reaching for something with her finger Ichigo. Don't let her touch me again!"***

"Isn't that sweet, you talk to your Kamui!" Nui clapped her hands together and tilted her head to the side, her pigtails bouncing all the way, "But I'm insulted that you don't know who I am Ichigo. After all, you and I are a lot closer than you think."

"Is that so?" Ichigo could tell he was in immense danger just by being in proximity to this girl. There was no way in hell any human was this peppy and cheerful normally, but the fact that it was two in the morning drove the point home. She was not here to chat. Deciding to play along for the moment, he asked, "You haven't even told me your name yet."

"You want to know my name?" Nui pursed her lips cutely before sticking her tongue out at Ichigo, "Nope! Not going to tell you! You're going to have to figure that out all on your own Ichigo."

Feeling more uncomfortable by the second being in the presence of this girl, Ichigo turned around only to find her standing inches from

him, her face leaning in until she was inches from his own face, "I must say, Ichigo, it is quite the pleasure finally meeting you after all these years. You don't look anything like I expected."

Staring at Nui, Ichigo hid his trepidation and asked, "What do you want with me?"

"What do I want with you?" Nui looked into the distance, her face seeming to ponder the question intensely, before she turned back to Ichigo, "I just wanted to see how my cousin was doing, that's all there is to it."

"Cousin?" Ichigo was confused by what Nui was suggesting. He had no family outside of his sisters and dad. He knew his dad was a shinigami, which explained why he had never seen his side of the family, but it was strange that no one from his mother's side of the family ever visited. The girl could be telling the truth about it, but the odds that she was lying to force him off balance were great, "You're lying. I don't have any cousins."

"Oh..." Nui seemed dismayed by Ichigo's dismissal of her claims, "I goofed up! You thought I was talking about something as silly as blood. Nope! What I was referring to is much closer...."

Ichigo blinked and suddenly found Nui pressing the palm of her hand against his chest, "Right about here is where we're related, Ichigo! Can you figure out what I mean or do you need a better hint?"

Reaching his limit, Ichigo grabbed Tournesol and swung the blue blade through the air towards Nui. Some might consider his response toward what at first glance appeared to be a simple invasion of personal space an overreaction, but Ichigo knew better. Nui, smile still on her face, effortlessly dodged his first attack as well as the next dozen with visible ease.

"Wow! You're really good!" Nui complimented Ichigo as she dodged around his strikes, her arms folded behind her back, "You almost hit

me this time! You must really have been practicing with a sword to get this good!"

Ducking under Tournesol, Nui leaned up until her face was right against Ichigo's before flicking him in the chest with her index finger. As soon as her finger made contact with his chest, Ichigo felt as if a truck had hit him.

"Guh!"

His body flew backwards through the air, bouncing twice against the ground before he managed to regain his balance. Skidding to a stop, his breath ragged from the ease in which he was being toyed with, he reached towards the spaulder before remembering that he still couldn't release Mugetsu for at least another day or two.

"Impressive!" Nui's voice drifted from behind Ichigo. Clapping her hands together happily, she smiled and continued, "You're actually able to remain conscious after all that? You really are as good as you look! As much fun as this has been, I didn't come here to play with you, Ichigo."

"Why should I believe a word you say?" he argued, taking a step back. While the action was redundant due to Nui's ability to seemingly teleport, it helped to make him feel just a little better.

"But it's the truth," Nui pouted and folded her arms. Suddenly perking back up again, she seemed to realize something and said, "Well, I've had a lot of fun tonight, Ichigo! Let's play again some time."

Nui took a few steps away from Ichigo before she turned around, a smile still on her face, and said, "Oh! I almost forgot. If you tell anyone about our little play date, I'll kill everyone you know and love! See ya~!"

With that, Nui Harime simply vanished into the darkness of the night, leaving a shocked Ichigo behind in the courtyard of Honnouji



Academy. After several minutes had passed, and Nui hadn't made reappeared, he let out a nervous breath.

"Damn it," Ichigo ran a hand through his hair, "Who the hell was she? What was she?"

***"Ichigo, I don't think she was human. Her hand was as cold as ice and her movements were too stiff to be natural."***

"I noticed," Ichigo glanced once more in the direction Nui had disappeared before walking towards the student dorms, "Mugetsu, do you think she was the one that attacked Kisuke?"

Mugetsu's eyes closed for a moment before she answered, ***"Her abilities and description match with what you know. Surely you aren't thinking of going after her?"***

"No. If I were to fight her, even with your aid, I would lose. I need some time to think about who she was and what she wanted with me."

***"Whatever your decision is, I will be with you the entire way Ichigo,"*** Mugetsu stated as her eyes closed and she fell asleep. Nearly at the dorms, his eyes already threatening to close on him, Ichigo frowned. Why was everything and everyone at Honnouji Academy so damn insane?

# Bohemian Rhapsody

*\*So I present to you Chapter 9 of **To My Death I Fight** . Before I say anything, I would like to announce that this story has several entries now up on Tvtropes! I discovered the links by complete accident, but when I read them, I couldn't help but realize that my story is awesome!*

*\*I've been asked a few times what Tournesol means. Yes, it means Sunflower in French, but that is not why I chose it. It is a reference to the most powerful Greatsword in Final Fantasy XII. Of course, that is in name only. Ichigo's Tournesol is merely a blue-colored katana similar in nature to the Scissor Blades. You can chalk the choice of the name to Kisuke, who might just be a big fan of RPGs.*

*\* If anyone wants to draw a picture of Ichigo wearing Mugetsu, that would be fantastic.*

*\*I have some ideas for character themes. These are just out of the blue. Think of them as Omake if you want to.*

*1) Ragyo + Junketsu Combined Battle Theme: Lightning Returns: **SUPREME GOD BHUNIVELZE** (The first 2 minutes or so at least)*

*2) Nui Harime Explanation / Flashback Theme: Team Fortress 2: **Right Behind You***

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## Chapter 9 - Bohemian Rhapsody

It was his lunch break and Aikuro Mikisugi was busy reading one of his favorite novels. He really had nothing better to do at the moment. Ryuko Matoi was still getting acquainted with her Kamui, Senketsu was its name if he recalled corrected. He wouldn't be able to speak

with her face to face until she realized Senketsu couldn't be activated with a small blood donation. Ichigo Kurosaki, on the other hand, Aikuro didn't know what to make of him. The boy had a Kamui, which was interesting to say the least since he hadn't expected it, but his utter lack of knowledge regarding anything going on at Honnouji Academy intrigued him.

"Perhaps I'll talk to Ichigo again soon," Aikuro muttered as he turned the page in his book, "But then again, I'm worried about my personal health if I do end up talking to him. This is a worrying conundrum..."

Several minutes passed in peaceful silence before his cell phone began ringing.

Normally that wouldn't be a problem. Every teacher at Honnouji Academy had a cell phone, courtesy of Satsuki Kiryuin, so that they could be contacted on short notice. What bothered him was that it was his personal Nudist Beach cell phone that was ringing. There were only a few people in Japan that knew his number and all of them knew not to bother him while he was undercover at Honnouji Academy. The chance of being discovered as a spy was too great of a risk. Deciding that whoever was calling him had a good reason, Aikuro flipped it open and yawned, "You've reached the wonderful man known as Aikuro Mikisugi. How may I be of service?"

"Hello to you as well, you naked bastard."

Aikuro nearly fell out of his chair upon hearing the familiar voice.

"Hold on just one second!" He stammered into the phone before quickly walking around his office and making sure he was completely alone. After locking his door, drawing his shades and making sure the bugs planted by Inumuta were recording junk and irrelevant data, he let out a chuckling sigh, "Isshin Shiba, or is it still Kurosaki? My, it's been quite a long time since you decided not to speak to me."

At the other end of the line, Isshin Kurosaki was busy looking over several new and, at first glance, superfluous additions to his home,

"Yeah, it's great to speak to you as well, you naked bastard, but something's come up that I think you should know about."

Sitting back down, Aikuro leaned backwards and propped his feet up on his desk, "Important enough to speak to me after over a decade of silence?"

"You know why I didn't call or speak to you," Isshin responded.

"Yeah," Aikuro's eyes fell, "After I heard what happened, I couldn't help but realize I would have done the same thing if I were to be in your situation."

Isshin sighed and closed his eyes, "What's done is done. Besides, we have a much bigger problem on our hands than some small personal vendetta."

Aikuro's eyes widened in realization, "You don't mean - "

Isshin grit his teeth as he answered, "Ragyo's started making her move."

That was the worst thing that Aikuro wanted to hear. After taking a moment to catch his breath, he asked, "Are you certain?"

"I'm keeping things close to the chest on this one, Aikuro," Isshin admitted, "But I advise you to be extremely careful in the near future. I don't know if Ragyo will start making her move in a few weeks, a few months or even next year, but the fact remains that it will be soon. If what I saw at Revocs was any indication of her mindset, she is extremely confident about something. A confident Ragyo is something that scares me. She all but admitted that there was nothing I could do to stop her, and that's not to mention that Nui Harime was hiding nearby the entire time I was there. As much as she likes to imagine herself as being superior to everyone she meets, Nui cannot fool me."

Aikuro knew very little about Isshin's relation to Ragyo, but what he did know implied that the two of them had once been very close friends, "If you know so much about Ragyo Kiryuin, why do you refuse to help us? You must know that your knowledge and experience would be invaluable in taking her down before things can get out of hand."

"If only it were that simple," Isshin bolted a panel into place and took a step back, "Ragyo is too smart of a woman to not realize something like that. She's most likely already aware of my relation with your group and what I might have told you. I wouldn't put it past her to have spies watching my every move. So even if I were to come to Osaka, the odds that Ragyo's already planned for that is quite high. She may be a crazy and sociopathic bitch with no regard for anyone but herself, but she's anything but stupid."

"If what you say is true," Aikuro's voice was full of concern, "Then what was the purpose of calling me?"

"It's about Ichigo," Isshin stated immediately, "By now, he's probably discovered that his uniform is actually a Kamui. You've probably already spoken to him as well. I don't know what Kisuke was thinking when he decided to make a Kamui, but I need you to, as a favor to me, watch over him. Ichigo may be smart and strong, but he's always been stubborn as a mule. He won't back down from a fight if it comes to that. Make sure he survives his time at Honnouji Academy, especially since several people are going to start taking an interest in him."

"Hmm... you're worried about Satsuki Kiryuin's plans for him?"

"It's not Ragyo's daughter I'm concerned about," Isshin ran a hand down his face, "If you knew half the things I do... you just need to trust me on this."

Isshin heard Aikuro sigh across the line, "Fine. I guess I owe you one. I'll make sure Ichigo doesn't do anything stupid. I'll contact you if anything new comes up, Isshin. Be careful."

With that final warning, Aikuro hung up, leaving Isshin Kurosaki alone with his thoughts. After nearly a minute had passed, he lowered his cell phone away from his ear and decided to go back to work.

"You aren't the only one with a trick or two of their sleeve, Ragyo," Isshin muttered to himself as he continued working on making his house completely safe.

It was something that he started years ago with Masaki. Sort of a pet project, if one could call it that. After rescuing Ichigo from Ragyo's clutches, they both realized what her plans were but could do nothing to stop it. To the rest of the world Ragyo was known as the strict CEO of Revocs who helped make her company one of the most powerful on the planet. If either Isshin or Masaki had accused Ragyo of the heinous acts she was truly guilty of, not only would they be laughed at, but Ragyo would come after them with the full force of Revocs and COVERS behind her, the consequences for both sides be damned.

So instead of actively working against Ragyo, and incurring her undivided attention, Isshin decided to go on the defensive. The first thing Isshin did was make Kisuke place memory modifiers throughout Karakura Town that would work to prevent Revocs from gaining a foothold in the town. It wouldn't stop someone like Ragyo from knowing the town existed, but it would stop her from setting up a subsidiary within the town. The second thing he did was something he hid from everyone, and Isshin meant everyone. No one knew what he had done, and Isshin hoped no one would ever find out. Even Masaki, bless her heart, didn't know about what he had absconded from Revocs with after rescuing Ichigo. It had been nothing but a spur of the moment decision, but in the end it might be one of the key events to stop Ragyo's plans.

"*If only I could believe that,*" Isshin thought gloomily as he finished installing a panel of his Anti-Life Fiber security system. It had taken a pretty penny, courtesy of an oblivious Nudist Beach, but when he was done, the Kurosaki household would be impervious to anything

containing active Life Fibers, apart from those he expressively allows within its boundaries of course. Letting out a breath of exhaustion from nearly three hours of working outdoors, Isshin was about to go back to work when a soft-spoken voice suddenly appeared right next to him.

"You look a little tired, Mr. Kurosaki. Would you like some lemonade?"

Isshin put on a goofy smile, "Why yes I would! Thanks a bunch for helping me out with this little renovation project of mine, Ururu. I know it must be a bother to help out and all, but I really appreciate it."

Ururu Tsumugiya's blush momentarily intensified before she tapped her arm proudly, "I-It's not a problem, Mr. Kurosaki. I'm stronger than I look, you know."

"That you are!" Isshin guffawed as he ruffled her hair, "But please call me Isshin! Mr. Kurosaki makes me sound like an old man!"

"O-Okay," Ururu turned around and, without so much as a grunt, lifted lumber and metal weighing nearly half a ton over her head, "Where do you want me to put these?"

Taking a sip from his lemonade, Isshin said, "Just put them in the back. Since Karin and Yuzu are staying with Yoruichi and Tessai, they won't be bothered by the noise."

He wanted to see Nui Harime just try and get inside his house again. If she so much as stepped one foot inside the barrier, she'll be burned alive. Isshin sighed in depression as he realized that would never happen. As psychotic as she may be, Nui wasn't an idiot, no matter how she acted.

"Damn, a man can dream..."

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"The gap between the rich and poor is pretty large."

Ryuko's observation broke Mako out of her sleep, causing her to jolt back to consciousness with nearly perfect fluidity, "It makes perfect sense, since Honnou City is ruled by Lady Satsuki. The top-tier students are given homes in the really expensive residential areas while No-Star students like us have to live in the slums."

"Your position at school determines where you live?" Ryuko grumbled into the palm of her hand as she gazed out of the trolley. They had just entered the living quarters for the One-Star students and already she could see quite the difference. Instead of homes constructed out of anything available and multiple families living in the same building, there were rows upon rows of middle-class housing and apartments that were leagues above the Mankanshoku's home.

"Yep! Pretty straightforward, huh?"

"I guess," Ryuko blinked before she remembered something, "Hey, didn't you say that Ichigo lives in the student dorms?"

"I did?" Mako brought a finger up to her chin, "Oh, I did! Yep! Honnouji Academy has student dorms. They are where exchange students with lots of money stay. Usually the dorms are empty, since most of the exchange students prefer the One and Two-Star housing, but the dorms are really nice, even if they are super expensive to stay in."

"They're that expensive?" Ryuko asked amazed, "Then how does Ichigo afford it? He didn't seem like the kind of person to have a lot of money."

"I don't know!" Mako replied with the exuberance of someone talking about winning the lottery, "But Ichigo's super smart! He's, like, a



genius or something."

"Ichigo's that smart?" The trolley jolted to a stop as it finally arrived in front of Honnouji Academy. As Ryuko stepped off, while Mako did a front flip out of the window, she saw a familiar figure shambling towards them.

"Good morning, Ichigo!" Mako waved towards the tired Ichigo.

"Hey Mako," Ichigo waved back with a tired yawn. He was still trying to come to grips with what happened last night. When he returned to his dorm, he had spent a few hours going over what happened instead of going to bed. He just couldn't get what the girl had said to him out of his mind. Ichigo knew without a doubt that she could have wiped the floor with him within the first few seconds if she really wanted to. The fact that she instead talked to him, albeit in a very creepy and disturbing way, implied that she had an ulterior motive. If push came to shove and he was forced to fight her, Ichigo wasn't certain that even with Mugetsu's full power he could fight her to a standstill, let alone actually win.

"You look like something Mako's dog dragged in," Ryuko pointed out with concern upon seeing his exhausted state, "Didn't get much sleep last night, huh?"

"You could say that," Ichigo answered while rubbing his eyes in an attempt to remove some of the tiredness plaguing him, "After everything that happened yesterday, I needed time to come to terms with what's going on at this school. I've been here for less than a week and yet some of the things I've seen just doesn't make much sense to me."

Ryuko propped the silver case containing her Scissor Blade onto the ground and sat on it like a makeshift chair, "I know what you mean. Before I came here, I was known as the Kanto Vagabond or, as those idiots in Kobe called me, the Guitar Case Drifter. I've seen a lot of weird things, but Honnouji Academy takes the cake. Two words, Ichigo - Beef Tank."

Ichigo quirked an eyebrow, "Beef Tank?"

"Don't ask," Ryuko said with annoyance, "So Ichigo, you never told me where you came from."

"I'm from Karakura Town," Ichigo thought about how different Karakura Town was from Honnou City. The sheer number of differences between the two towns was something that his mind couldn't completely grasp. It was almost as if they existed in different worlds, "Sure there are some strange things in Karakura, but nothing quite like this. We didn't have clothes that could transform into suits of armor, turn your skin as hard as steel or give normal people superpowers. Hell, the most exciting thing that happened was a ghost sighting or two."

"Sounds like a boring place," Ryuko smirked. Noticing that Mako had wandered off to watch a flock of birds fly by, she added, "I don't think Mako's quite all there."

"I know someone like her," Ichigo remembered Orihime's daydreams and imagination. While her experiences in Hueco Mundo tempered her once legendary imagination and exuberance, she sometimes fell back into her old routines, much to all of Ichigo's friends collective annoyance, "The best thing to do is to just let her do her thing. Eventually she'll come back to reality."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then we call a doctor," Ichigo deadpanned. Noticing what time it was, he began heading into Honnouji Academy, "We should head to class before Gamagori shows up."

"That's right!" Mako's shocked voice rang out from where she had stopped following the birds, "Only ten minutes until school starts! If I'm late just one more time, I'll be expelled!"

Quickly catching up to Ryuko and Ichigo, she turned to her best friend and said, "Oh! That reminds me! Ryuko, my mom said that if

you need someplace to - "

While Mako was talking, Ichigo had been walking in front of her. So it was quite odd when he felt something fly by over his right shoulder and hit Mako in the face.

"Mom said that!" Another volley, this time over his left shoulder, smashed into Mako's face, "If you don't have a place to stay!" A third volley hit Mako's face, causing Ichigo duck out of the way as a fourth volley screamed through the spot where his head had just been, "You can stay! With us! She's already filed the paperwork!"

Ryuko stared in shock and awe at the bruised and smoking face of Mako, "Are you ok, Mako? Ichigo?"

"I'm fine," Ichigo pulled himself off the ground and dusted Mugetsu off, "But the person who just tried to hit me isn't going to be."

"You must be the transfer students that were rude to Lady Satsuki," a haughty voice announced, drawing ever closer as she spoke, "For the moment, I have no interest in anything concerning you. I'm the Girls Tennis Club captain, Omiko Hakodate, and I'm here on official club business."

"How is trying to kill us club business?" Ichigo stared at Omiko Hakodate as if she had grown another head, which, by the attire she was wearing, she might as well have. The club captain wore an exaggerated version of the standard female tennis uniform with two glowing red stars stitched across the front as well as on her visor. The underside of her dress was filled to the brim with tennis balls, giving it a strange appearance. Held in one hand across her shoulders was a black and red tennis racket that glowed with the number of Life Fibers stitched within it.

Hakodate smirked at Ichigo, exposing her razor sharp teeth, "You must be Ichigo Kurosaki. Your attitude and lack of survival skills are everything Lady Satsuki warned us about, but you need to shut up and stay out of this. Club member Mako Mankanshoku failed to fulfill

her daily club obligations. She is to be purged as a result, which is all standard procedure as stated in the Honnouji Academy Athletic Club Guidelines. Now let the punishment commence."

With a snap of her fingers, all of the One-Star students lined up behind Hakodate tossed a tennis ball into the air and aimed not at Mako, but at Ichigo and Ryuko. While Ryuko used her silver case as a makeshift shield, blocking the tennis balls from hitting her body, Ichigo was more proactive and used his sheathed Tournesol, which he had decided to carry at all times after what happened yesterday, to block and deflect those aimed at him.

"What's wrong with you, you crazy bitch?" Ryuko shouted from behind her shield, "What did Mako do wrong in the first place?"

Hakodate slammed the end of her racket into the ground, "You're knowledge of Honnouji is severely lacking, transfer student. Mako Mankanshoku skipped yesterday's club practice. Anyone who fails to come to practice without a legitimate excuse is required to suffer the 110 Million Cannonball Serves. Unless you wish to partake in Mankanshoku's punishment, you will stay out of the way. An outside like you or Ichigo Kurosaki has no right to complain about club policies!"

"Yesterday?" Ichigo stepped in front of Mako. With Tournesol still sheathed but held in front of his body, he said, "Mako was held hostage yesterday and nearly killed for doing nothing and you're trying to punish her for that?"

"Tch," Hakodate spit at Ichigo before grinning. Raising her tennis racket into the air with one hand, she pointed it at Ryuko and said, "I don't care if she was almost killed or not! The issue I have is that she was taken hostage without permission. If she had simply had Sanageyama sign the standard Kidnapping Exemption Form then there wouldn't be a problem."

Ryuko angrily slammed her silver case on the ground, "That makes no sense at all!"

Hakodate ignored her and shouted, "Begin!"

On queue, the line of One-Star tennis players lobbed another volley of tennis balls into the air, but this time aimed at Mako. As Mako gasped and comically covered her eyes, Ichigo and Ryuko stepped in front of her and used their respective weapons to block or deflect all the incoming projectiles.

"Cut that out, damn it!" Ryuko grunted from behind her case, feeling the impact of each and every tennis ball making contact. She could see a few dents already forming in her case. Just how hard were these tennis balls being hit anyway?

"These people just don't quit," Ichigo responded. His ability to deflect the tennis balls with Tournesol wasn't as high as he would have liked it to be. For every five tennis balls he stopped, another two managed to get through his guard and hit him. It was lucky that he was made of tough stuff or it would hurt, "We need to do something, Ryuko."

"I know," Ryuko replied while readjusting her hold on the silver case. Turning towards Mako, she said, "Get out of here, Mako! You'll be expelled if you're late one more time, right?"

"I almost forgot!" Mako shouted and darted around the line of tennis players; "I'll see you guys later!"

"Clever little girl," Hakodate admitted angrily before turning her attention back to Ichigo and Ryuko, "So by that little comment, I'm guessing you two are going to take us all on? Well now, this has gotten rather interesting. And here I thought today wasn't going to be any fun at all."

"I do owe her for a meal and a place to stay," Ryuko answered with a smirk.

"I don't need a reason to help people," Ichigo answered, as Hakodate's attention shifted to him, "Just wiping that smirk off your face is all the motivation and reason I need to stop you."

"How very funny of you two," Hakodate grinned, "But don't get too full of yourself. Just because you defeated Fukuroda, transfer student, that doesn't mean you can stand up against me. Boxing is nothing like tennis!"

Confident in her abilities, Ryuko pointed at Hakodate and shouted, "I'm going to make quick work of you! You ready Ichigo?"

"If you're asking if I can transform, the answer is no," Ichigo whispered to Ryuko, "Mugetsu still needs another day or so to adjust herself to my blood. If I tried to activate her now, I'll be risking my life."

Ryuko's eyes drifted to Ichigo, "What are you talking about? Your Kamui is powerful enough to take them all out in less than a minute!"

"I'm not going to risk it," Ichigo repeated, "Besides, we don't have the time to fight her. There's only a few minutes until the first bell and I don't want to have to deal with Gamagori again."

"Tch," Ryuko grit her teeth as she realized Ichigo was right. Still, she couldn't just back down from a fight. In all the fights she had been in, not once had she run away or backed out when challenged. It was who she was and nothing was going to change that, "You're right, Ichigo, but I can't stop now. If Satsuki Kiryuin is the one who killed my dad, I need to find out why she did it! If you don't want to fight, can you at least make sure Mako remains safe? I have a feeling these guys aren't going to let her go so easily. Now, let's do this, Senketsu!"

There was complete and utter silence as Ryuko attempted to transform only for nothing to happen. Beating her hand against Senketsu's single eye, she growled, "Hey! What's the matter with you, Senketsu? I said let's get to it!"

"She's talking to her clothes... is she freaking insane? How disappointing," Hakodate looked crestfallen at Ryuko's apparent insanity. Turning to Ichigo, who was staring at Ryuko with what could

only be described as a mixture of embarrassment and disappointment, she grinned, "Well now, isn't this a turnabout. Since your friend seems to have lost her mind, you must take her place, Ichigo Kurosaki! Now die!"

Hakodate's Goku Uniform glowed briefly before hundreds of tennis balls shot out from under her dress and began hovering in the air. With a fluidity afforded to her from years of practice, Hakodate grabbed her tennis racket with both hands before slamming the mass of tennis balls forward towards Ichigo and Ryuko.

Ichigo managed to see the volley coming and leapt back and out of the way, the tennis balls missing him by only a couple of inches. Ryuko, on the other hand, had turned away from Hakodate to admonish Senketsu for sleeping on the job. It was only when she realizing something was coming towards her and turned around that the tennis balls slammed into her body and knocked her over the edge and into the water below.

"A love game?" Hakodate cursed, "That was no fun at all. And here I thought she would be some sort of a challenge. So, Ichigo Kurosaki, it's just you and me now. Let's see how you stand up to my Goku Uniform!"

"NOT SO FAST!"

Hakodate and Ichigo looked upwards as a large shadow grew ever larger. Before either of them could react, Ira Gamagori crashed to the ground accompanied by a sonic boom.

"Omiko Hakodate!" Gamagori bellowed, "Punishment upon students does not fall onto your shoulders! I shall overlook your punishing of Ryuko Matoi due to her challenging you to a fight, but if you attempt to attack Ichigo Kurosaki, there shall be hell to pay! Am I understood?"

"Yes, Gamagori!" Hakodate and her fellow tennis club students bowed respectfully, "I shall follow your orders. And what of

Mankanshoku?"

Gamagori folded his arms across his massive chest, "Since Mankanshoku is part of the Girls Tennis Club, deciding her punishment for failing in her duties falls to you. Now where do you think you're going, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

Throughout Gamagori's exchange with Hakodate, Ichigo had wisely decided to try and get out of there. He had barely made it halfway before Gamagori's full attention was focused on him, "I don't want to be late to class. Since you're the head of the Disciplinary Committee, I'm sure you understand and all."

"Trying to use the same rules I enforce against me, how clever of you Ichigo Kurosaki!" Gamagori acknowledged as he stepped towards Ichigo, "But it is a useless gesture. I know the Honnouji Academy Rulebook inside and out. There is nothing you can say or do to stop what is coming!"

Ichigo took a step back, "Are you here to fight me?"

"Fight you?" Gamagori looked insulted at the sheer notion, "Of course not! It is against Honnouji Academy regulations to fight without the express permission of Lady Satsuki or a member of the Elite Four except when dealing with internal club affairs."

"Then why are you here?" Ichigo tensed up, "I still have several minutes before the bell rings."

"That is true," Gamagori acknowledged with a nod of his head, "I am here to personally escort you to Lady Satsuki. She feels it is time to have a serious conversation concerning your placement in Honnouji Academy."

"Oh great," Ichigo kicked the ground in front of him. He knew this would happen eventually. Even Satsuki, with her remarkable patience, would get tired of him snubbing her every attempt to talk with him, "Can't you just torture me or break my arm instead?"



"You dare speak about Lady Satsuki in such a manner?" Gamagori seemed to triple in size as he towered over Ichigo, his body enveloped in shadows and his eyes glowing points of yellow lights, "Take back what you said right now!"

For several seconds Ichigo stared up at Gamagori. As the tension between the two teens increased to the point where Hakodate was even beginning to back off out of fear, Ichigo intensified his glare and, in one swift motion, spun around and began running away as fast as he could.

"H-Hey!" Gamagori was shocked by Ichigo's abrupt cowardice, "Get back here, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

"Hell no!" Ichigo shouted back as he sprinted across the Honnouji Academy courtyard as fast he could, "There's no way in hell I'm going to speak to Satsuki again. You can just tell her you killed me for all I care!"

"No excuses will be accepted!" Gamagori shouted in return as he chased after Ichigo, nearly barreling over Hakodate in the process. Summoning a whip using his Goku Uniform, he tried to capture Ichigo only for him to jump over the whip before it could wrap around his ankle, "Lady Satsuki has demanded your presence. You will comply with her request, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

"What the hell's your problem anyway?" Ichigo shouted as he continued to dodge and jump over Gamagori's attempts to restrain him, "Don't you have anything better to do than chase me down? I'm sure there's someone vandalizing school property somewhere!"

"I was given an order by Lady Satsuki to bring you to her," Gamagori jumped into the air and began falling towards Ichigo, "And nothing will stop me, for I am the Disciplinary Committee Chair! The rules of Honnouji Academy flow through my blood and give me purpose!"

Ichigo stared at Gamagori's falling body with abject terror as he tried to push his body to go faster, "Can't you do anything, Mugetsu, like

turn my feet into jet boots or something?"

**"I'm afraid not,"** Mugetsu admitted in a resigned tone, ***"It looks like this is the end for us. For what it's worth, it was fun fighting alongside you, Ichigo."***

"AHAHAHA!" Gamagori laughed in triumph as he finally caught Ichigo, albeit not the method he would have preferred. Pinning the orange-haired teen's body beneath his own massive one, Gamagori announced, "Now, if you are done running, I am to escort you to see Lady Satsuki. So I hope there will be no more funny business, Ichigo Kurosaki, or I might have to get serious. Do you understand?"

"Damn..." Ichigo muttered from his pinned position, "You can... go to... hell... you bastard..."

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"I see that you received my summons, Ichigo Kurosaki."

There was a rumble as Gamagori turned around and walked back into the elevator leading down from the roof of Honnouji Academy, his head hitting the ceiling and denting it along the way. Now completely alone with Satsuki Kiryuin, Ichigo said, "It's not like I had a choice in the matter."

Satsuki's gaze was locked firmly on the horizon in front of her. As a stiff wind blew through the area, causing her air to sway in the breeze, she said, "I do believe the first order of business is an apology."

"An apology?" Ichigo didn't know why he was dragged up here, and frankly he didn't care, but if Satsuki Kiryuin was apologizing to him, everything he knew about the world was wrong.

"Yes," Satsuki took a deep breath but still did not turn to face him, "My previous conversations with you may have been a bit heavy handed. For that I apologize."

"You're kidding me," Ichigo didn't know whether Satsuki was mocking him or sincerely believed that was all she had to be sorry for. While every attempt at talking to him since his arrival at Honnouji Academy ended in the form of an impromptu interrogation, he could deal with that, "Do you really think that's what I care about?"

Satsuki turned her head slightly around and, by the look in her eye, Ichigo realized that she had no idea what he found wrong with that, "What are you inferring, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

Ichigo folded his hands in Mugetsu's pockets and slouched his shoulders slightly, "You really don't get it. Nothing you say will make me forgive you for allowing Mako to nearly die yesterday for something she had no part in."

Satsuki turned to fully face Ichigo, her icy blue eyes staring daggers at him, "You are naïve about how the world works, Ichigo Kurosaki. Honnouji Academy is a place of law and order, a place where those with the power or the will to achieve their desires thrive while those weak and lazy fall. If I had allowed Mako Mankanshoku to walk free after assisting Ryuko Matoi in her foolish attempt to attack me, the system would have fallen apart. That, Ichigo Kurosaki, is how this world works."

"How the world works?" Ichigo repeated in disgust. He had heard those words once before, from Kisuke as he sealed Aizen away, but the context between the two instances were entirely different. Kisuke had muttered them in an attempt to show Aizen that what he was doing would have destroyed everything, but Satsuki was using them as an excuse to enforce her own brand of Social Darwinism on those around her, "Just what is going on in that head of yours that you think killing people is the right thing to do?"

"I did not invite you here to speak with me only to hear your criticism, Ichigo Kurosaki," Satsuki unsheathed Bakuzan and pointed it at Ichigo. With her face a mask of indifference, she calmly continued, "I have several question for you, and this time you will not be able to avoid them."

"Tch," Ichigo knew this would eventually happen. Ever since his first arrival at Honnouji and after that stupid test, Satsuki had been trying to speak with him about one thing or another. It was almost impressive that she could find him with ease. Reaching over his shoulder and grasping Tournesol's hilt, he said, "That's funny. The way I see it, you're threatening to kill me if I don't answer your questions."

"You need not worry, Ichigo Kurosaki. I do not attack without provocation or reason," Satsuki admonished and, just to prove her point, swiped Bakuzan once through the air before sheathing it in its scabbard once again, "Now, if you are no longer feeling threatened, perhaps we can converse like civilized people."

"It's not like I have a choice in the matter," he mumbled as he removed his hand from Tournesol.

"Very well," Satsuki took a step forward, her heel clicking on the ground, "Let us begin. Have you ever met my mother, Ragyo Kiryuin, or spoken with her?"

"Your mother?" Ichigo thought long and hard about that question. It wasn't what he had been expecting, "I can't say that I have, although my dad seems to know quite a lot about her."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed at the implication but her tone remained steady, "How well does he know her?"

"I don't really know," Ichigo looked away and scratched the back of his neck, "I don't try to pry into my old man's business. If he wants to tell me something about his past, I'm not going to force him to say anything until he's ready."

If Satsuki had been expecting another answer, she was sorely disappointed. Isshin Kurosaki was a walking enigma. From what little Inumuta had been able to dig up on the man, he had been in contact with her mother as long as twenty years ago. She wasn't naïve enough to believe that Isshin Kurosaki saved her mother's life like the newspapers stated. Her mother was not that weak or grateful enough to give someone a reward for helping her. If anything, she would have killed Isshin Kurosaki just to keep up her appearance as the indomitable CEO of Revocs. It was only when she had Inumuta dig a little further that the puzzle revolving around Ichigo's father deepened.

There was almost nothing about Isshin Kurosaki in the Revocs servers. From the few bugs that Inumuta had been able to plant within Revocs that survived her mother's thorough surveillance sweeping, Isshin Kurosaki showed up some time during Student Evaluation Day and proceeded to head directly to her mother's office, but no matter how much she dug, further information on the man was scarce. There was absolutely nothing on the man's relationship with her mother or even what they talked about. It was almost as if someone had purposely deleted everything about him. That led Satsuki to her original assumption that Isshin Kurosaki was a lot like her mother. It wasn't until she spoke to the man on the phone that she realized she was mistaken. What was the connection between her mother and Isshin? How could someone with a disposition like Ichigo Kurosaki's father be acquainted with a woman like Ragyo Kiryuin?

"Your blade," Satsuki stated while switching topics. The likelihood that Ichigo Kurosaki knew anything about her mother, or was even aware of what she was capable of, was exceedingly small, "I can recall but one weapon with the same composition as your blade, and that weapon is currently in the possession of Ryuko Matoi. I also know for a fact that only one Scissor Blade exists in the world so tell me, Ichigo Kurosaki, how is it you came into possessing a similar weapon?"

Ichigo could sense a strange feeling emanating from Satsuki, "Why should I tell you anything?"

The constant wind blowing through the area suddenly picked up and, without warning, Satsuki raced towards Ichigo with Bakuzan drawn once more. Leaping back and drawing Tournesol in retaliation, Ichigo quickly blocked Satsuki's overhead strike while sparks shot out from between the clashing weapons.

"Damn it, what's your problem?" he asked from behind grit teeth. Satsuki was strong, but she was nothing compared to that girl from last night. With his feet firmly in place on the ground, Ichigo gave a shout and pushed Satsuki back with all the strength he could muster.

"It is indeed as strong a blade as I expected," Satsuki calmly stated as she landed back on the ground, Bakuzan held firmly within her right hand, "To be able to stand up to the strength of my Bakuzan, which can damage a Kamui, is no easy feat, but that is not taking into account your own skill, Ichigo Kurosaki. Ryuko Matoi might possess the Scissor Blade, but she wields it much like a child does a toy sword or stick. She does not use techniques or styles. She simply attempts to overpower her opponents through brute force. I find the prospect of such an exquisite weapon remaining in her possession inexcusable!"

"You sure like to hear yourself talk... you know that, right?" Ichigo muttered with Tournesol held diagonally in front of his body, "Did you force me to come up here just so you can see if I'm planning something against you? Because if you did, I can tell you right now that I have no interest in getting caught up in anything you or your underlings are planning."

"I find your lack of respect both highly insulting and strangely relieving," Satsuki stated with a huff as she sheathed Bakuzan for the second time in less than five minutes, "But you shall address me properly from now on, lest you face the consequences for such impudence."

"I'll respect you when I find you worthy of it," Ichigo replied with equal coldness, "But quite frankly, I don't think you'll ever earn it. From what I've seen and heard during my short time here, it's clear to me that Ryuko has more honor than you'll ever possess."

"More honor you say?" Satsuki tensed up at the mention of the word. Stepping towards the edge of the roof, but never getting close enough to slip off, she asked, "You say I don't have honor, but can the same not be said about you, Ichigo Kurosaki? I wield Bakuzan for the purpose of seeing my dreams come to fruition! What reason do you have to wield your blade?"

"Reason?" Ichigo had been asked that very question many times during his first few weeks as a shinigami when Uryu started that stupid Hollow contest. At the time he thought his answer was correct, since it managed to make Uryu shut up, but as time passed and things changed, he realized what he told Uryu was no longer good enough, "I'm not looking for power or glory. I won't say that I can stop anyone who gets in my way, nor will I be satisfied with just protecting those close to me. I want to protect as many people as I can from those that would step over them in some misguided attempt to increase their own power."

Satsuki went to reply but was cut off as Ichigo continued. His brown eyes seemed to pierce into her blue ones with a familiar intensity as he held up Tournesol, "This blade was created by Kisuke Urahara, a man who was targeted for something he didn't know anything about. I will use the gifts he gave me to find out more about the woman with the purple Scissor Blade that attacked him and as well as why she attacked him."

"*Nui Harime?*" Satsuki thought with shock, although her facial expression remained schooled and stoic, "*How is she involved with Ichigo Kurosaki? For what reason would she go out of her way to attack someone not even associated with or against Revocs and my mother? That's random, even for someone like her. There has to be something I'm missing.*"

"So your goal is vengeance then," Satsuki stated with dissatisfaction, "It is a pointless goal. The man you called Kisuke Urahara is already dead. Nothing you can do can change that. It is better to move on with your life and forget about reaping your vengeance against someone that you cannot defeat. Even with your Kamui, Mugetsu, you would not stand a chance against that woman."

Ichigo Kurosaki caught the familiar way in which Satsuki spoke of this woman. She knew her, but he still could not figure out just how Satsuki knew her. Turning around to leave, he decided to go with one final comment, "Perhaps you are right about that. Perhaps I cannot beat her. She might even kill me, but until I try how can I actually say I lost?"

The determination behind Ichigo's words momentarily stunned Satsuki. After she watched him take several steps, she decided to impart one final piece of advice, "If I were you, Ichigo Kurosaki, I would be cautious about trusting your Kamui."

Ichigo stopped walking, "What are you talking about?"

Satsuki stared at the courtyard below. Hakodate had caught Mako Mankanshoku and would start punishing her soon enough, which meant Ryuko Matoi would be returning soon as well. Ryuko Matoi might be a variable, but she was predictable. She would never let a friend be put in danger. Perhaps fighting Hakodate would be all the motivation needed to display all of her Kamui's power, "Kamui are made to look the way they are for a reason. Take away from that what you will."

"I suppose I will," There was a pregnant silence after Ichigo spoke that lasted for several seconds, but eventually he asked, "Let me ask you something, Satsuki, why are you so concerned about my personal life? There are hundreds of students here at Honnouji, but you've been focusing your attention on me."

"Because my mother has taken an interest in you," Satsuki answered bluntly before adding, "I do believe that is all I require from



you, Ichigo Kurosaki. You know the way down."

Turning his back on Satsuki, Ichigo calmly and collectively walked to the elevator and found to his surprise that it was already waiting for him. Stepping inside, he waited for the doors to close before dragging a hand down his face.

"God, that sucked."

" ***I know,***" Mugetsu added. During his time talking to Satsuki, she had wisely decided to not say anything and see how things played out, ***"What do you plan on doing now, Ichigo?"***

"Huh?" Ichigo leaned against the wall of the elevator and frowned, "I don't really know to be honest. At first I came here solely because my dad registered me without asking me first. But now... now I think he had a reason all along. The man may act like a child, but everything he does seems to have a reason behind it. After what happened last winter I can't take anything he does at face value anymore. I just need to figure out what he's planned."

" ***Last winter?***" Mugetsu's eyes blinked and gazed up at Ichigo.

Ichigo shook his head, "Don't worry about. It was just something personal that forced me to see my dad in an entire new light."

" ***If you don't want to tell me about it, I understand,***" despite what she said, Ichigo could tell that Mugetsu was hurt that he didn't trust her enough to tell her about the Winter War, ***"But what are you going to do about Satsuki? You and I both know she will not let this go so easily. Her interest in you is not just a passing fancy."***

"What the hell do you mean passing fancy?"

" ***I do not remember how, but Kisuke Urahara imprinted onto me several pieces of information, one of which was how the female***

***mind works. He must have assumed you would be oblivious. It seems that he was correct."***

Ichigo glared as an imaginary Kisuke Urahara appeared in his mind while laughing behind that stupid paper fan of his, "If that woman with the Scissor Blade didn't finish him off, I'm going to kill him myself. That bastard can go to hell for all I care. As for Satsuki... I have a feeling that she will make her next move quite soon. Knowing my luck, she has a Kamui of her own just waiting to be brought out for a special occasion."

# Living for the City

*\*So here is Chapter 10 of **To My Death I Fight** . You might notice that this chapter is a bit longer than usual. I wanted to write it as best as possible and cutting it down would have been a bad thing to do. Anyway, I hope you enjoy this next installment of the story. It has a lot of action, drama, comedy and whatever else makes up Kill la Kill and Bleach.*

*\*Did anyone else enjoy Episode 22? I know I did.*

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## Chapter 10 - Living for the City

Ryuko Matoi was annoyed.

After she made relatively short work of the Tennis Club Captain, Omiko Hakodate, after using her Scissor Blade as a makeshift tennis racket, she had been forced to flee from Honnouji Academy for the second time in two days. While she wanted to stay and get answers from Satsuki Kiryuin, since Senketsu informed her that she had several minutes of consciousness remaining, Ryuko had quickly changed her mind when Satsuki attacked her with Bakuzan and easily cut through Senketsu's armor without much effort.

Ryuko was so upset and angry that no amount of Sukuyo Mankanshoku's mystery croquettes or Mako's pick-me-up speeches could make her feel better. There had to be a secret to using Senketsu that she just wasn't able to see. Turning towards Ichigo, who was laying on the roof next to her, she asked, "How do you do it, Ichigo?"

"Do what?" Ichigo turned his head as he thought about the question. He had run into Ryuko some time after leaving Honnouji Academy. As much as he would have liked to stick around and watch Ryuko's fight against Hakodate, he knew that she wasn't someone that appreciated anyone, even a friend, coming to her rescue in the middle of a battle. He was the same way after all.

As he had taken the trolley down from the academy to the slums in order to tell Mako's family that their daughter was kidnapped yet again but that she'll most likely be fine, there was a loud crash on the roof. Sticking his head out the side of the trolley, Ichigo saw a still transformed Ryuko kneeling the roof with her back to him. Covering his eyes in embarrassment at what he saw, he told Ryuko to get inside the trolley before anyone else saw her.

Upon seeing Ichigo, Ryuko had promptly pulled herself inside the trolley and transformed back to normal. While she was still greatly exhausted from Senketsu drinking a lot of her blood, she still had enough energy to grab Ichigo and demand to know why he didn't help save Mako. After he explained to Ryuko what Satsuki had told him, she had calmed down, but not before declaring that she still didn't like it.

"What are you talking about?"

"About how to use Senketsu!" Ryuko growled and, to emphasize her point, pulled at Senketsu's lapel, eliciting a small growl of annoyance from the Kamui due to the harsh treatment, "How is it that you managed to get Mugetsu to transform into something that's not half-naked and completely embarrassing?"

"What makes you think I know anything about how Mugetsu transforms?" He answered equally as annoyed, "Mugetsu isn't exactly the most forthcoming with answers."

**" As if I would willingly change into something so scandalous,"** Mugetsu added in, her feminine voice adding to the conflict, **"You should be ashamed of yourself, Senketsu."**

" ***Give it a rest,***" Senketsu countered, his single eye rolling around in frustration, "***It shouldn't matter what I turn into as long as I work correctly.***"

Ryuko and Ichigo listened to their respective Kamui's argue before Ryuko groaned and slammed her fist against the roof, "This is crap! If what that Yoruichi woman said is true, then how the hell am I going to beat the woman with the Scissor Blade if I'm not as strong as you?"

There was silence as Ichigo thought about what Satsuki had told him earlier in the day, "Have you considered training?"

When Ryuko looked at him with a mixture of confusion and interest, he continued, "Well, I've noticed that you really don't have much training in using your Scissor Blade."

"Training?" Ryuko scoffed and turned her head away from him, "What's the point in training if I can beat these Two-Star club captains without much of a problem?"

"You might be able to beat the Two-Stars, but I don't think the Three-Stars will be as much as a pushover. If they help Satsuki run Honnouji Academy, then odds are they have some kind of trick up their sleeves. Training with your Scissor Blade would also help you fight Satsuki. When I talked with her earlier today, she tried to attack me. In our brief fight, I could tell she was very experienced in combat and tactics, which is something she will use against you when you eventually fight her."

Ryuko didn't say anything for a couple of minutes as she processed what Ichigo said. Eventually she sighed loudly and asked, "You really think I need to do some training with my Scissor Blade?"

Ichigo nodded, "Yeah."

"I guess you got a point," Ryuko huffed, "So that just leaves dealing with Satsuki Kiryuin. If what you said about her is true, do I have a

shot at beating her?"

"It depends on how you go about it," Ichigo thought back to his earlier conversation with the student council president. Satsuki was not someone to let anyone challenge her, even if they were doing so for a good reason. If he had a good grasp of Satsuki's mindset, she would soon focus on how to eliminate both him and Ryuko as potential threats to her power.

"How do you know all this, Ichigo?" Ryuko asked wistfully, "It's almost like you've done this before."

Ichigo panicked for a moment before calmly saying, "Let's just say you're not the only one with issues and leave it at that."

Ryuko was about to press the issue when she felt Senketsu shudder and let out a small growl at something.

"Huh? What's wrong Senketsu?"

"***It's nothing,***" her Kamui assured it, "***There's just something in the air that unnerves me.***"

"***You're not the only one,***" Mugetsu added, her eyes focused on the same place as Senketsu's, "***There is an ill omen in the air. I can feel it. Something is going to happen soon.***"

"What do you mean, Senketsu?" Ryuko asked worriedly, but when she got no response from Senketsu she sighed and turned to Ichigo, "Any ideas on how to make Senketsu as strong and powerful as Mugetsu?"

"What are you asking me for?" Ichigo grumbled, "Why don't you just ask him if you're so interested?"

"I did!" Ryuko growled back to him, "But all he's said is that I need to accept being naked! Like I'm going to fight half naked and not be the

least bit embarrassed. Senketsu doesn't know what he's talking about."

**" I heard that Ryuko,"** Senketsu's voice piped in, **"And I'll have you know that I was serious about what I said earlier. I only drink so much blood because you're embarrassed to wear me."**

**" Ichigo and I don't have that problem,"** Mugetsu added, clearly enjoying being superior to Senketsu.

Ryuko and Ichigo let out a collective groan of annoyance as their Kamui began arguing once again. It was going to be a long night.

"Hey Ichigo, I almost forgot something," Ryuko covered her mouth as she yawned, "I didn't see Shinjiro today."

"That's right..." Ichigo frowned and sat up on the roof. It was rather strange that he didn't see Shinjiro all day. The kid was practically on him like a leech the day he ran into Ichigo. To suddenly disappear like this was concerning, "I don't know where he is, but I hope he hasn't gotten into any trouble."

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### *The Previous Night*

*Yoruichi smirked as she twisted down the throttle on the motorcycle she had borrowed from Kisuke's shop. The man might be a former shinigami captain, but no one could say that he didn't have good taste. As she revved the engine, forcing the motorcycle to go even faster, Yoruichi wondered just how much Kisuke paid for it. Perhaps, like most things in his shop, he borrowed it without permission and just forgot to give it back.*

*As she reached the halfway point between Honnou City and Karakura Town, Yoruichi's ears picked up a sharp ringing sound right*

*before a rocket propelled grenade slammed into her motorcycle. The vehicle was catapulted into the air alongside a burst of flames before it came crashing back down to the ground and skid to a stop against the edge of the highway, the wreckage still emitting flames and smoke.*

*" Ha," Takiji Kuroido grinned in well-deserved satisfaction as he shouldered the rocket launcher. Holding onto the edge of the helicopter with his free hand, he gazed over the wreckage and smugly said, "I got her with my first shot."*

*" Don't get too cocky~!" Nui Harime joked, appearing out of nowhere at Kuroido's side. Forgoing her usual parasol for the purple Scissor Blade held aloft on her shoulder, she laughed girlishly and added, "When you underestimate your opponent you lose. Don't you know about that rule already? After you screwed up the first time, I would think you would have grown some brains or something."*

*" I assure you, Grand Couturier, that I hit her dead on," Kuroido argued but, knowing Nui Harime's disposition, ordered the pilot to circle around the wreckage a few times just to make sure Yoruichi was dead.*

*Gazing down at the flaming wreckage, the wind kicked up by the helicopter causing his suit to flap around, he asked, " I'm curious about something, Grand Couturier. How did you know she was going to be here?"*

*" That's silly," Nui beamed childishly, "I ran into her in Honnou City. She had some very bad information that I felt shouldn't be given out. Besides, I thought you love this part of your job?"*

*Kuroido scoffed but nodded. It was pointless to argue with the Grand Couturier whenever she had her mind set on something. His position might prevent her from killing him, but Nui could do other things to him that would make murdering him seem like a blessing.*



*" Oh~!" Nui held her hand over her eyes and stared down at the wreckage, "I spy with my one eye something that shouldn't belong!"*

*" What?" Kuroido barked and stuck his head out the helicopter to look at the wreckage. It took him a moment to spot her, but sure enough through an apparently enormous amount of luck, he had missed injuring Yoruichi at all . With her body illuminated by the rising flames behind her, Yoruichi stood on the divide separating the two sides of the highway and stared up at the helicopter hovering overhead. As Kuroido watched, Yoruichi twisted her upper body back before throwing a piece of debris from her destroyed motorcycle at the helicopter. Kuroido barely had time to duck before the piece of steel shot through the air and out the other side of the helicopter without slowing down.*

*" That's impossible!" Kuroido screeched in disbelief as he stared at the hole in the helicopter right behind his head . Turning towards the pilot, he ordered, " Bring us around again. I'll make sure to get her this time!"*

*" Nope! Not gonna happen!" Nui exclaimed happily as she grabbed the rocket launcher out of Kuroido's grasp and, in one fluid and quick motion, disassembled it before placing the pieces on the floor in a nice neat pile. Smacking her hands together to clear off the imaginary dust, she grabbed her purple Scissor Blade and grabbed the edge of the open helicopter, "Just leave this to me~!"*

*Kuroido grumbled but wisely decided to step back for his own safety , "As you wish, Grand Couturier."*

*Jumping out of the hovering helicopter, Nui Harime freefell towards the highway below, laughing the entire way. Spinning around several times before landing softly just a few meters away from Yoruichi, she looked at the former captain and pressed a finger to her lips, "Huh... you look familiar. Have we met before?"*

*Yoruichi stared at Nui Harime with a cold and calculating look in her eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that the girl in front of her was*

*the one that had attacked Kisuke in Karakura Town. The purple Scissor Blade held lazily in Nui's right hand was proof enough of that, "That's odd. I don't remember ever meeting you before."*

*" You haven't?" Nui cocked her head to the right, her smile falling off temporarily before reasserting itself, "Oh well! I guess I was wrong about that. Silly me!"*

*There was something incredibly unsettling about the way Nui was acting, and it caused all sorts of bells to go off in Yoruichi's head. Despite Nui's girlish and airy exterior, Yoruichi could sense that she was hiding much of her true strength just below the surface. If she needed to fight her, and Yoruichi knew that was very likely at this point, then it would be suicidal to go in without more information. Nui liked to talk? Then Yoruichi would let her talk.*

*" So by that blade in her hand you must be the one that attacked Kisuke?" Yoruichi hopped off the highway divide and landed on the asphalt with nary a sound, "To be honest I expected someone different."*

*" Different?" Nui paused and blinked owlshly. By her expression, it was clear she was actually interested in what Yoruichi had to say, "How so?"*

*" Well..." Yoruichi chuckled to herself, "I expected you to be older. Kisuke must be really embarrassed to have been defeated by someone your age, but then again, that's not as strange at it sounds. Kids these days seem to be getting stronger all the time."*

*" Shucks..." Nui turned away, seemingly embarrassed by Yoruichi's apparent compliment, "That's so nice of you, but it's not going to make a difference in the next few minutes. Back to business! Do you happen to know what Kisuke Urahara did with the Life Fibers he stole from Revocs? It would be ever so nice of you to tell me. It might even make your death in the next minute or two that much less painful and agonizing!"*

*That settled it. There was something inherently wrong with the girl in front of her. Deciding to play her trump card, for what it might be worth, Yoruichi hid her nervousness behind a Cheshire grin, "You're a really clever girl. You think I didn't recognize you from that little disguise back in Honnou City? I admit it was very good. In fact, it was perhaps the best disguise I have ever seen. If I hadn't sensed something off about you, I wouldn't have noticed at all. I think that when I'm done teaching you some manners I'm going to head back. Ichigo and Ryuko might just be interested in what I have to tell them."*

*It was very subtle, but Yoruichi hadn't gotten where she was in life by going into battles half-blind and full of pride. When she caught the slight shifting of Nui's left foot, which was barely half an inch, she instantly recognized it as the precursor to an attack. Sure enough, just a few seconds after noticing it, Nui came racing towards her, the purple Scissor Blade transforming into a deadly double-edged scythe along the way.*

*Yoruichi leapt back as Nui hit the ground, the Scissor Blade carving through the concrete and asphalt as if they were nothing but butter. She couldn't believe Nui's speed. She had to be nearly as fast as Sui-Feng. Jumping back several times, Yoruichi quickly twisted to the side as Nui exploded out from the ground, her blade just missing bisecting the former captain at her waist. Flipping back several times after being forced to deflect another strike with the sole of her boot, Yoruichi vanished in a burst of Shunpo and reappeared several dozen meters away on a streetlight.*

*"Huh?" Nui looked at her purple scythe, seemingly disappointed that there was no blood on it, "This just won't do. You're supposed to be dead by now. I do have things to do outside of work, you know."*

*"Work, huh?" Yoruichi crouched down on the light, her eyes focused on every single detail surrounding Nui, "You're not human, are you?"*

*"Human is such an arbitrary word," Nui playfully teased before she abruptly vanished. Yoruichi's eyes widened in shock as she looked*

*around for the Grand Couturier, only to be stunned when Nui's voice came from directly behind her, "You're not focused~!"*

*Ducking under the floating Nui's surprise attack, Yoruichi countered by grabbed her wrist. Pulling Nui forward with more strength than the Grand Couturier expected, Yoruichi slammed her knee into Nui's stomach before elbowing her in the face, propelling her back to the ground. Holding the Scissor Blade that she had taken from Nui's grasp during her attack, Yoruichi looked it over in the brief respite in the battle. Just by holding it and feeling the metal composing it, she could tell it was the same material that made up Ichigo's Tournesol. That meant this Scissor Blade had to have been designed to sever and kill Life Fibers but, if Yoruichi were thinking about this correctly, it wouldn't work fully unless it was used in conjunction with Ryuko's blade.*

*" That was quite rude of you," Nui's voice echoed from the dust surrounding where she landed. Trotting out with nary a wound on her body, she looked up at Yoruichi and pouted, "It's not nice to take what doesn't belong to you. I'm going to have to make your death extra painful now!"*

*" I'm pretty sure this didn't belong to you in the first place," Yoruichi countered.*

*" So say you!" Nui said and pulled her right pinkie finger back. Immediately Yoruichi noticed a thin red wire appear in the air, connecting the Scissor Blade in her hands with the tip of Nui's finger. With a seemingly minimal amount of effort, Nui ripped the Scissor Blade out of Yoruichi's hands.*

*" That's better!" Nui said proudly as she caught the spinning weapon with ease, "Everything is as it should be!"*

*Yoruichi decided she couldn't hold back anymore if she wanted to get out of this fight in one piece. She couldn't afford to go easy on Nui, despite her reservations about hitting a child, for Nui was clearly*

*anything but a normal person. Crouching back down on the streetlight, Yoruichi pushed off and rocketed towards Nui.*

*" Like that's going to work!" Nui beamed with a smile as she prepared for Yoruichi's attack, "Full frontal assaults are so cliché! It's almost - "*

*Nui's comment was cut off in midsentence as Yoruichi disappeared from in front of her using Shunpo before reappearing behind the Grand Couturier with her left leg arcing downwards towards the base of her neck. Leaning backwards and allowing Yoruichi's leg to sail harmlessly over her head, Nui countered the captain's attack by spinning the Scissor Blade around her wrist before forcing the tip towards Yoruichi's face.*

*" Not this time!"*

*Leaning her head to the side, Yoruichi waited for the Scissor Blade to stop moving forward before she twisted her shoulder and caught Nui's arm in-between her chest and arm. Jumping into the air, Yoruichi forced Nui's body to follow her trajectory before she spun around, grabbed Nui's head, and slammed the Grand Couturier face-first into the pavement hard enough to crack it. Grabbing the Scissor Blade once more, Yoruichi widened the gap between Nui and herself while making sure there weren't any more Life Fibers connected to the Scissor Blade.*

*Gazing at Nui's body comically sticking out of the ground, Yoruichi sensed the Grand Couturier was nowhere near defeated. True enough, just a couple of seconds later Nui's hands pressed their palms on the ground and pushed her smiling face out of the ground.*

*" That wasn't very nice!" Nui quipped, as she stiffly righted herself without a trace of dust on her pink dress, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice and you will suffer greatly before you die!"*

*Crossing her hands in front of her body, a sadistic smile on her face, Nui summoned dozens of Life Fibers that immediately began*

*whipping their way towards Yoruichi. The captain jumped backwards and into the air while using the stolen Scissor Blade to cut the threads down before they could reach her. Spinning around twice, while making sure she hadn't missed a single Life Fiber, Yoruichi touched down on the ground and instantly noticed Nui was nowhere to be seen.*

*" Where did she go?" Yoruichi asked herself, turning around when she didn't see the Grand Couturier in front of her only to find the highway completely deserted, "What's she up to?"*

*Yoruichi's well-honed senses picked up something in the air and she quickly leaned to the side. It wasn't fast enough to fully avoid the attack though. Wincing in pain as the razor sharp measuring tape cut into her side with uncanny ease, Yoruichi began using the Scissor Blade to deflect and stop Nui's impromptu spiked whip.*

*" Are you having fun yet?" Nui asked, a sadistic smile adorning her face, "Because I sure am! After all, a woman never leaves the house without a backup plan!"*

*Subtly changing the course of her measuring tape in midflight, Nui wrapped it around the purple Scissor Blade before, with a quick yank, pulled it out of Yoruichi's hands and back in her own where it belonged.*

*" There now... I just gotta do one thing before we continue," Nui spun the Scissor Blade around once before tucking it into her dress, the blade disappearing into the smaller dress mysteriously, "Now you can't take it anymore! Sorry to disappoint you."*

*Without a weapon, at least for the moment, Yoruichi was forced to actively dodge Nui's weapon. After suffering several more minor wounds on her arms, Yoruichi saw an opportunity to counterattack. Sticking her arm out and allowing the measuring tape to wrap around it, she attempted to pull Nui towards her only for the Grand Couturier to smile and grab it as well.*

*" Sorry! Not going to fall for that old trick a second time!"*

*" Who says I'm going to do what you think I am?" Yoruichi smiled as she readjusted her stance. As she grabbed the measuring tape with her other hand, Nui, seeing what the former captain was trying to do, quickly tried to stop her. Before the Grand Couturier could so much as sever one of Yoruichi's limbs, the dark skinned woman buckled the measuring tape with enough force that Nui's body was comically and dramatically thrown against the roadway before she bounced into the air, spinning the entire way. As Nui's body arced through the air, Yoruichi pushed off the ground and met her in midflight.*

*" Take this! Meteor Barrage!"*

*Yoruichi began by kneeing Nui in the stomach hard enough that balls of cotton seemed to escape the Grand Couturier's mouth. Not letting up on her assault even as the two of them began falling back to the ground, Yoruichi followed up her attack by slamming her elbow into the back of Nui's neck, dislocated the Grand Couturier's right shoulder and head butted her until blood was spurting out of Nui's nose almost like it was a faucet. Just before reaching the ground, Yoruichi spun around and slammed Nui's head back into the ground, causing the highway to splinter and crack before exploding as the captain continued to push Nui further downwards.*

*As an explosion of energy shot out from the point of impact, Yoruichi reappeared down the highway, using Shunpo to increase her speed. She needed to get back to Karakura Town and warn Isshin that she ran into the woman that attacked Kisuke and, what was worse, who was hanging around Ichigo under a disguise. Already more than a kilometer away from the site of the battle, Yoruichi could sense Nui was completely fine. She was glad she hadn't skimped out on her training after the Winter War. With what she had pushed herself through, she should be able to make it back to Karakura Town with endurance to spare.*

*Back at the crater that formed from Yoruichi's attack, a perfectly fine Nui Harime sat on her Scissor Blade as she looked around for*

*Yoruichi, "Oh... she ran away. No one's ever managed to escape me before. I must be losing my touch~!"*

*Noticing Kuroido bringing the helicopter around to pick her up, Nui smiled despite failing in her objective. It was always fun to fight an opponent that didn't die in the first few seconds. The next time she fought Yoruichi, she would make sure the woman didn't run away again. Cutting off her legs will make sure of that!*

*" It's too bad I need to report back to the Director. I sure do wonder how Ichigo's doing without me. I'm sure he's having lots of fun!"*

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Deep beneath Kiryuin Manor, in a complex hidden from all eyes apart from a chosen few, Satsuki Kiryuin finished descending down the only stairwell leading towards her goal only to find several men blocking her path forward.

"Please turn back, Milady!" One of the men said, a bead of sweat dripping down his nervous face. Swallowing the bile in his throat, he continued, "I'm not allowed to let anyone past this point, not even you! I'm sorry!"

Without even bothering to look the man in the eye, Satsuki responded with a flat, "Stand aside."

"You know we can't do that, Milady," The same man argued, "Our orders are - "

Before the man could finish speaking, Satsuki removed the sheathed Bakuzan from her hip and thrust it into both men's abdomens with enough force to make their bodies instantly crumple to the ground. Stepping over the fallen men, Satsuki continued walking towards her goal, only bothering to say to them, "I don't have any time to waste on speaking to fools like you. Stay out of my way."



Just beyond the area where her mother's men had tried to stop her was a pair of blast doors designed to prevent anything less than an atomic explosion from passing through. Pressing her thumb against a hidden panel at her side, Satsuki typed in a thirty five digit password on the keypad that appeared and stepped back as a loud hiss resounded through the area while the blast doors slowly opened.

Squinting her eyes as a bright white light shone out, Satsuki's vision quickly reasserted its dominance and she walked through the doorway into the secret chamber. The large chamber was lit by several dozen floodlights that extended up the walls and onto the ceiling, all of which focused on the single object standing in the middle of the chamber.

"Milady," Soroi's calm and elderly voice spoke up as Satsuki ascending the stairs leading towards her objective, "Perhaps this is an unwise move."

Satsuki's hand hovered over the hand scanner, "You think I am making the wrong choice, Soroi?"

Her faithful butler took a deep breath, "I did not say that, Milady. I am simply voicing my opinion that perhaps you are being a tad hasty in your determination. Ever since you discovered that Ryuko Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki both have Kamui, I have noticed a hint of envy in your voice when we speak."

"You say that I am jealous?" Satsuki's voice held a hint of malice, but it was not directed at Soroi, "It is inconceivable that Ryuko Matoi managed to wear a Kamui before me, but what bothers me the most is Ichigo Kurosaki's disposition in regards to his Kamui. His Mugetsu grants him enough power that he could have defeated me with ease if he chose to. He is able to fully wield his Kamui's power and yet he doesn't make a move. If I am to counter whatever it is he is planning, I need the power Junketsu offers. Soroi... if you do not think this is the correct decision, I will not stop you from leaving."

Soroi was silent for a moment before he said, "If you truly wish to go through with this, I will stand by your side the entire way."

"I am glad that you don't see a problem," Satsuki softly replied as she finally continued with what she was doing. Pressing her hand on the scanner and getting an affirmative beep from the computer, Satsuki stared in determination as the front of the pillar opened. Hanging inside the pillar, wrapping in plastic and with several biohazard warnings stapled to the front, was Junketsu.

"I've come for you at last, Junketsu," Satsuki spoke to the Kamui, even though she knew it could not talk back to her. As she reached towards the Kamui, already thinking of the power it could offer her, Satsuki's ears picked up the subtle sound of someone's feet pounding on the ground.

"Soroi!" Takiji Kuroido shouted at the butler, all while trying to capture his breath. When the steward of the Kiryuin family heard that Satsuki had returned to the manor and had immediately headed towards the basement, he knew right away what she was trying to do. Barreling his way out of his personal office, and over several maids and butlers in the process, he considered himself fortunate that he managed to make it to the basement in time to stop Satsuki from accomplishing what she was trying to do.

"Kuroido..." Satsuki stared at the steward with disinterest, "I did not expect you to find out so quickly."

Kuroido ignored Satsuki's subtle remark and focused his ire entirely on Soroi, "How could you let her do this? Why are you standing there allowing this to happen?"

Soroi calmly turned to the steward, "Good evening, Master Kuroido."

Infuriated at Soroi's witticism, Kuroido took a moment to reign in his anger before turning to Satsuki, "Lady Satsuki, your mother has forbidden the removal of that outfit from its seal. You know the

consequences of such disrespect! Return it at once and I will not report this to Lady Ragyo!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Satsuki answered calmly, completely ignoring the subtle threat from Kuroido. She knew, without a doubt, that he was going to inform her mother on her actions no matter the choice she made. It was better for her to have to speak to her mother with Junketsu's power at her side, "I have need of Junketsu's power. You will not stop me."

Kuroido took a threatening step forward, "This is unacceptable! As the steward of the Kiryuin family, it is my duty to care for this manor in your mother's absence! That means that you must listen to everything I say without comment, Lady Satsuki! I cannot allow such behavior!"

Satsuki paused in her movements for several seconds, and for a brief moment in time Kuroido thought he had managed to convince her to back away from Junketsu. That all changed when Satsuki spoke, "You say that you cannot allow it? If you really think that way, then what is preventing you from coming up here and making me back away by force? Who is it do you think you're talking to? I am not one of my mother's servants, who listen to your every word like it is the gospel!"

"Lady Satsuki! I - "

Shrugging off her uniform, exposing her body to everyone in sight without regret, she interrupted the steward, "It is time that I changed. Get out of my sight, you shameless fool."

Both Kuroido and Soroi averted their gazes from Satsuki's nude body, but while Soroi turned his head completely around Kuroido continued to face forward, albeit with his eyes closed, "Surely you don't intend to try and put on Junketsu? You know the risks of attempting such a feat! Why do you think it was sealed away by your mother?"

"Try you say?" Now completely nude, Satsuki stepped forward and away from the pile of her discard clothing, "I do not intend to, as you so eloquently put it, 'try.' Everything that I do, every step I make and every word I speak is just one more step closer to fulfilling my ambition!"

"But if you put on that Kamui, you'll most likely die!" Even with his eyes closed, Kuroido tried to move to stop Satsuki only to find Soroi's hand gripping his shoulder with strength the elderly butler should not have been able to possess.

"Do not speak out of fear, Kuroido!" Satsuki announced, one hand holding an unsheathed Bakuzan and the other Junketsu, "There is no danger. Clothing exists simply to be worn! It is scandalous to think that my life shall be threatened by a mere piece of clothing, even if it happens to be a Kamui! If someone of Ichigo Kurosaki's caliber and willpower can master Mugetsu, it is inconceivable that I shall not be able to do the same with Junketsu, for my willpower and determination far outclasses his!"

Satsuki dragged her finger gently along Bakuzan's edge, a thin trail of blood dripping down her finger as she raised her hand over Junketsu, "Junketsu, take this blood offering as the beginning of an eternal vow between you and I. This shall be the red thread of our combined fate!"

There was a pregnant silence as several large globs of blood dripped off her finger and onto Junketsu, the life-giving liquid absorbed into the white fabric almost as soon as it made contact. After several seconds, Junketsu's eyes shot open and the Kamui threw itself at Satsuki. Satsuki's body bent backwards as the Kamui attempted to consume her blood, her body contorting in pain as she fought off the berserk clothing.

"Lady Satsuki!" Soroi and Kuroido shouted in unison.

"Hold your tongues and watch!" Satsuki growled, her hair covering her face as she was forced to bend forward from Junketsu's attempt

to latch onto her body, "Ask not the sparrow how the eagle soars! No one on this planet can do something before Satsuki Kiryuin! Not Ryuko Matoi and especially not Ichigo Kurosaki! I will not let people without ambition of their own gain access to power such as this! If I have to dive into the pits of Hades to accomplish my ambitions than so be it! Even Junketsu is but a mere garment and I will make it acknowledge me as its master!"

Blue energy crackled around Satsuki's hunched over form as she continued to try and force Junketsu into submission through sheer force of will and determination. For several tense seconds both Soroi and Kuroido could do nothing except listen to Satsuki's screams as she stove off Junketsu's continued attempts to devour her body and mind. When the screaming stopped and nothing immediately happened, they thought the worst had happened, but were blown back when Satsuki, wearing a completely transformed Junketsu, staggered to her feet before screaming into the heavens above. A pillar of blue light signifying what she had accomplished accompanying her the entire time.

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Ichigo was enjoying one of his rare peaceful dreams when he was forcibly returned to consciousness by a sound very similar to someone knocking on his door. Opening one eye, and noticing that the clock on his nightstand said it was only four in the morning, he turned over and grumbled.

"It's four in the morning," he mumbled in annoyance, unconsciousness already overtaking him, "Whoever they are, I'm sure they can wait until the sun is up to talk to me."

When the knocking stopped and Ichigo began to think he would be able to go back to sleep in peace, he was quite violently thrown into the waking world on both feet as the door to his dorm was literally

blasted off its hinges and sailed through the air before hitting the far wall.

"Ichigo Kurosaki!" Ira Gamagori ducked down and squeezed his way through the smaller doorframe, "Why are you still asleep?"

Sitting up in his bed and still groggy, Ichigo yawned, "Why you ask? Because it's four in the fucking morning, that's why. Classes don't start for several more hours so why are you here bothering me at this ungodly hour?"

"You are correct that it is four in the morning!" Gamagori nodded in agreement, "I see your sense of time is still intact, but I am afraid that you have missed out on something that is vital to every student attending Honnouji Academy!"

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Ichigo yawned and asked, "And what may that be?"

Gamagori smirked and held up a packet of papers, "Your transcript finally came through, Ichigo Kurosaki, and it seems that you have missed a few of your vaccinations. Until you get your shots, you are forbidden from attending classes. Luckily Honnouji Academy is well prepared for such an issue. Get dressed and meet me out on the hallway in five minutes. I am to escort you to the Honnouji Academy Regional Nurses Office by six sharp for your vaccinations!"

Any traces of exhaustion and sleepiness that still clung to him vanished as soon as Gamagori mentioned that he needed to get shots. Ever since he was a kid, Ichigo had always hated shots. Whenever he had to get blood drawn, his dad would always complain about how Yuzu and Karin never whined or moaned like a little baby at the needle. Up until just a short while ago, Ichigo could stand needles so long as he didn't look directly at it, but that all changed due to that bastard of a scientist, Mayuri Kurotsuchi.

During the Muramasa fiasco in the Soul Society, Kurotsuchi had tried to inject him with several needles full of mysterious chemicals. The

captain had claimed them to be antidotes or medicines, but Ichigo wasn't stupid. As soon as he saw the liquid start burning through rocks on the ground, Ichigo knew the captain was lying right to his face.

Quickly getting out of bed, Ichigo hurried over to Mugetsu and pulled her off the hanger she was sleeping on.

" **Huh?**" Mugetsu's eyes blinked tiredly before she gave a big yawn, a surprising feat for something that didn't need to breathe, **"What's going on Ichigo?"**

"Trouble," He answered and quickly put on Mugetsu. Feeling the subtle sensation of his Kamui drawing a small amount of blood, he quietly made his way towards the sole window in his bedroom. It was nearly one hundred feet to the ground below, but Ichigo was sure he could survive it, "Mugetsu... will there be any issues with my blood?"

" **Hmm...**" Mugetsu closed her eyes and Ichigo could feel, despite that not making much sense, the Kamui tasting his blood. After several second she said, **"No. The taste of your blood will no longer drive me to devour you. May I ask why you wish to transform so early in the morning?"**

"Yeah," Ichigo quipped as Gamagori literally head butted the bedroom door, the large teen's head sticking through the small hole it had created, "That's why."

"You think you can escape the grasp of Ira Gamagori?" Gamagori asked rhetorically before busting through the remains of the door through sheer physical strength, "The doctor will see you now."

"Like hell," Ichigo answered and leapt out of the window and into the pre-dawn air. Shivering slightly from the cold, he glanced upwards and groaned in annoyance when he saw Gamagori following him, a look of sheer determination on the Elite Four's face.

"Can't you take a hint?" Ichigo shouted over the wind.

"No hint shall stop me!" Gamagori shouted back as he was miraculously closing the distance between the two of them, "I have a job to do and I shall do it to my fullest capacity!"

"To hell with this!" Ichigo reached for his spaulder and pressed down on the two buttons, "Let's go Mugetsu! Life Fiber Synchronization! Kamui Mugetsu!"

Gamagori was forced to cover his eyes as a blast of light shone out from Ichigo's body as he transformed into Mugetsu's true form. Reaching to activate his Three-Star Goku Uniform in response, he stopped when he realized he wouldn't be able to do anything. His uniform was built to take damage and then reflect it after all. Deciding to take care of Ichigo Kurosaki with his own hands, Gamagori shouted, "Activating your Kamui will not save you from - "

He was cut off as Ichigo landed on the ground, forming a small crater in the process, before he took off into the distance. With Mugetsu augmenting his speed, Gamagori had no chance of catching Ichigo before he escaped from Honnouji Academy. Grumbling at his failure, Gamagori pressed a finger against his ear and activated the headset hidden within.

"It's Gamagori. Ichigo Kurosaki has escaped from Honnouji Academy," For a few moments Gamagori listened to the other side of the line, a twitch of annoyance in his eyebrow, before he interrupted them, "It's not my fault he activated his Kamui in midair! Besides, I thought the purpose of Lady Satsuki's plan was to keep Ichigo Kurosaki away from Honnouji Academy for as long as possible? I will not stand for sass, Jakuzure!"

There was faint mumbling from the headset before Gamagori asked, "Is Sanageyama in place? Good. Tell him Ichigo Kurosaki should be within range in the next few minutes. He needs to keep Ichigo Kurosaki occupied until Lady Satsuki is finished dealing with Ryuko Matoi."

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Ryuko yawned loudly as she approached Honnouji Academy.

Usually she slept fairly well, but all last night she couldn't help but feel as if something serious was going to happen today. She would have attributed it to her nerves, taking down the establishment usually does that to someone, but seeing No-Star and One-Star students go out of their way to avoid her and Mako meant her intuition was right.

"You look tired, Ryuko?" Mako asked, pointing out the obvious, "Didn't you get enough sleep last night? Mom did have us go to bed early after all."

Groggily rubbing at her eye, Ryuko responded tiredly, "I couldn't sleep at all last night because I had the strangest feeling that something bad was going to happen at any moment."

"That's silly!" Mako waved off Ryuko's suspicions the only way she knew how, "Nothing bad happened at all last night, except for the normal random murders in the streets. If you get up really early, you can see the clean up crews from Honnouji Academy moving the dead bodies away!"

Ryuko looked at Mako in shock, "I don't think that - "

"Get him! Don't let him escape this time!"

Ryuko and Mako watched as a large explosion blasted out of the side of Honnouji Academy before a black and white figure came soaring out of the smoke. Landing nearby, still in Mugetsu's transformed state, Ichigo cursed when he sensed the One-Star students chasing him begin to find a way down, "Damn. These guys just don't when to quit."

A snap-like sound reverberated through the air but, with dexterous ease, Ichigo caught the rifle-shaped needle in his right hand. Spinning around and extending his arm, he threw it back towards where it came from, a satisfied smirk on his face when he heard the muffled sounds of someone yelping in pain.

"Ichigo? Is that you?" Ryuko blinked in astonishment at Ichigo. This was the first time she was seeing Mugetsu's activated state. After her battle against Takaharu she had been half-conscious from Senketsu drinking too much of her blood. She had only been able to glimpse a foggy mix of white and black in the brief instance of consciousness as Ichigo carried her and Mako to safety.

Ichigo half-turned at the familiar voice. Tilting his head over Mugetsu's left eye, he looked just as surprised to see them, "Ryuko? Mako? What are you two doing here?"

"What do you mean 'what are we doing here?' We're right outside the entrance to Honnouji Academy."

"What?" Ichigo looked around and noticed that Ryuko was right. During the multi-hour long chase, he had somehow stumbled back to Honnouji Academy. Groaning in frustration, he glared at Mugetsu's right eye, "Oi! I thought you knew where we were going?"

"*I did,*" his Kamui chastised, "***But all the running, jumping and spinning made me nauseous. By the time I could open my eyes again, you were lost.***"

"How do you even get nauseous anyway?" Ichigo seethed at his Kamui.

"I hate to break up your conversation," Ryuko looked up and noticed several people rappelling down a wall, "But what the hell is going on? I'm seriously confused."

Ichigo glanced at the approaching One-Star students before answering, "Apparently my old man was too stubborn to get me all

my shots, so now that bastard Gamagori is hounding me with guns that fire needles. I've been outrunning them since about four this morning and it's starting to really piss me off."

Ryuko was stunned at how long Ichigo had been wearing Mugetsu, "How have you been wearing Mugetsu for several hours? Shouldn't she have drained you of all your blood already?"

**" Unlike you and Senketsu, Ichigo and I are fully synchronized,"** Mugetsu explained to Ryuko, whose face fell upon remembering the gap of trust between her and Senketsu. Noticing that Ryuko was listening to her, Mugetsu continued, **"Ichigo accepts me for what I am and doesn't try to make me something I'm not. In fact, I... incoming at two o'clock Ichigo."**

Ichigo ducked under the barrage of needles and glared at the students who had fired them, "Don't you guys ever quit? I've already beaten the crap out of dozens of you this morning!"

"We will never quit, Ichigo Kurosaki, until you have taken your medicine!" Sanageyama walked forward from behind the line of One-Star students. He had his bamboo sword held lazily over his right shoulder while one of the needle-firing guns was held firmly in his left hand. Smirking cockily at Ichigo, he looked at him before turning to Ryuko and Mako, "Well, it's been a swell chase, but we've finally managed to corner you. To be honest, I thought you managed to outfox us at Park Place but thankfully Inumuta was able to relocate you with his satellites."

"You have satellites?" Ichigo asked, thoroughly confused about what was going on. Looking at Ryuko, who was just as confused as he was, he turned back to Sanageyama and said, "I'm not going to think too hard about that. I would just like to point out that we're literally next to the edge of the road. I'm pretty sure I could just jump off and escape."

"And risk getting yourself expelled for being late?" Sanageyama seemed to take pleasure in pointing out the apparent loophole in

Ichigo's plan.

"That Gamagori bastard said I cannot attend classes until I get my shots. I take that to also mean he can't expel me for being late to class."

Sanageyama opened his mouth to respond when he realized Ichigo was correct. As long as he hadn't gotten his shots, he technically couldn't be expelled for being late to school. Gritting his teeth in anger, he pointed his bamboo sword at Ichigo and shouted, "Do not think I will allow you to escape me a tenth time, Ichigo! You will be getting your shots today! I will not forgive you for the mockery you put me through at the Water Works!"

"Water Works?" Ryuko narrowed her eyes as she realized something odd about that, "Hey Ichigo, isn't that - "

"Just stop there. Let's just say this city is a lot weirder than we first thought," Ichigo answered, cutting Ryuko off in mid-question. He had to give Sanageyama. It takes someone with a lot of determination to track him throughout Honnou City while he was wearing Mugetsu without giving up. There was a point about an hour ago that Sanageyama had activated his Three-Star Goku Uniform in an almost successful attempt to capture him. If Ichigo hadn't assumed Sanageyama's Blade Regalia was more than it appeared, he would have been caught off guard by its immense speed.

"I'll meet up with you guys later," Ichigo subtly shifted his body closer towards the nearby ledge, "I just have to get rid of these idiots first."

Due to being a member of the Elite Four, Sanageyama easily noticed Ichigo's body beginning to shift and shouted, "Fire! Don't let him escape!"

Ichigo took off the same time the barrage of needles flew through the air towards him at nearly half the speed of sound. Ducking and weaving around any needles that managed to get too close to him, Ichigo leapt over the edge and began skidding down the nearly

horizontal wall leading to the One-Star Residential Area, but not before turning around and giving a thoroughly-embarrassed Sanageyama the finger.

Sanageyama's shoulders slumped as he stared at the retreating Ichigo, "He can't be real."

Rubbing his forehead to alleviate the headache he was feeling, Sanageyama ordered the One-Star's to continue following Ichigo. As the horde of students leapt off the edge and deployed parachutes, Sanageyama looked at the flabbergasted Ryuko and Mako and let out a flat, "What?"

"Long day?" Mako asked, completely unperturbed about what she had just witnessed.

"Ugh," Sanageyama groaned. Rubbing his eyes in an attempt to relieve the stress he was feeling, he kicked the ground and said, "Ichigo Kurosaki is harder to catch than the freaking roadrunner. There's no way his Kamui could augment his natural speed and reflexes this much. Now get to Honnouji before you're tardy."

"What?" Ryuko asked suspiciously, "Aren't you going to try and fight me?"

Sanageyama opened his mouth to answer but was cut off as an explosion sounded in the distance. Noticing a miniature mushroom cloud expanding over the One-Star Residential Area, courtesy of Ichigo avoiding another well-planned and expensive trap, he silently groaned, "I'm a little busy now trying to keep my pride and composure intact. Why don't you come back and ask me in a few days when I finally manage to corner the orange haired bastard."

Ryuko looked at Mako, who seemed to be thinking something entirely unrelated to the situation, before shrugging and walked passed the depressed Sanageyama, who was listening to his men fail to capture Ichigo.

"Poor Sanageyama," Mako said sadly, her hands clenched over her heart, "To fail so thoroughly at his job must really be a burden."

"Are you feeling ok?" Ryuko was shocked at what Mako just said. It actually made perfect and logical sense, "Did you eat breakfast this morning?"

"But of course!" Mako exclaimed, apparently back to her normal self, "I ate enough to bankrupt the family several times over!"

Shaking her head at Mako's illogical answer, Ryuko walked through the entrance of Honnouji Academy only to find herself surrounded by One-Star students on either side with giant white banners expressing the academy's symbol interspaced throughout.

"What's going on?" Ryuko asked before her focus was drawn to a shining light coming from the top of the academy, which meant Satsuki Kiryuin was either going to give a speech or confront her.

" ***It seems like Satsuki is making her move,***" Senketsu pointed out nonchalantly, "***Are you ready for this, Ryuko?***"

"Who do you think I am?" Ryuko smirked at her Kamui, "Of course I'm ready for this!"

Ryuko and Mako were forced to jump back as an enormous staircase smashed into the ground in front of them.

"I see you've made it, Ryuko Matoi," Satsuki announced from the top of the academy. With her sword planted firmly in front of her, she suppressed the wince of pain that came from Junketsu attempting to overcome her will and added, "Just on time."

Unable to see what Satsuki was wearing due to her backlight, Ryuko pompously asked, "So what's with this grand welcome? Here you are waiting for me. What's the special occasion?"

Satsuki clicked her heel as she began walking down the steps, "Wasn't it you who said that when we next met, the matter between us would be settled once and for all?"

"That's very noble of you," Ryuko responded before whispering to Mako, "Get back, Mako, I don't want you to get hurt."

Stopping mere feet from Ryuko, Satsuki planted Bakuzan on the ground and cockily smiled at her, "You should rejoice, Ryuko Matoi. You will be the first one that I shall offer to Junketsu."

"Junketsu?" Ryuko repeated with a smirk of her own adorning her face. She had noticed something odd about Satsuki Kiryuin's new uniform. If she hadn't seen the same pair of eyes on Ichigo's Mugetsu, she might have actually been stunned to see another Kamui, "So you have a Kamui as well, Satsuki Kiryuin? That's hilarious. Is there anything about you that's actually pure?"

Satsuki's eyes narrowed slightly, "You do not seem surprised to see Junketsu. Why is that?"

"Heh," Ryuko placed her hands on her hips and chuckled. First there was Senketsu, then Mugetsu and now Junketsu. Someone had a weird sense of humor in naming Kamui, "You may have a Kamui of your own, but there's no way you're stronger than me or Ichigo. In fact, I think you're scared of our power. That's why you're confronting me here and now when Ichigo's preoccupied, isn't it? You don't want to get your ass kicked by the two of us."

Satsuki looked at Ryuko with suppressed anger. Reaching for the three blue bands on her left arm she said, "Allow me to show you the true power of Junketsu, and perhaps teach you a lesson about speaking to your betters."

Flicking her finger across the three bands on her arm, Satsuki allowed Junketsu access to enough of her blood to initiate its transformation. As the blood was drawn out of her body, Junketsu

became dyed in a familiar red color before it virtually exploded off of her body accompanied by a sparkling blue light.

" *Where is all this power coming from?*" Ryuko had been forced to cover her eyes with her forearm as soon as Satsuki began transforming. The sheer amount of power being emanated by the student council president dwarfed Senketsu's power.

When Ryuko heard respectful clapping coming from the One-Star students surrounding her, she risked looking at Satsuki and couldn't help but widen her eyes in shock.

"Life Fiber Override, Kamui Junketsu!"

If Ryuko thought wearing Senketsu made her look like an exhibitionist, Junketsu made it seem like she was downright modest in comparison to Satsuki. Unlike Senketsu's black with red highlights color scheme, Junketsu was mostly white with blue highlights. Satsuki wore hip-high boots with vertical blue stripes that ended in frills just below the thong that was all the modesty she wore.

Satsuki's upper body was armored similar to how Ryuko's was when she activated Senketsu, apart from the fact that instead of coming down low enough to just cover her breasts, Junketsu came down and wrapped around them, leaving just the center of her bosom exposed. Junketsu's two eyes, instead of jutting out to the side like Senketsu, stuck straight up into the air like Ichigo's Mugetsu.

"So that's Junketsu?" Ryuko asked with false bravado to hide the nervousness she was feeling at Satsuki's power, "I'm not impressed."

"Then come, Ryuko Matoi!" Satsuki spread her arms wide as twin blasts of steam shot out from the grills just beneath Junketsu's eyes, "Throw all of Senketsu's power against me and I will demonstrate the difference between you and I!"



## Riders on the Storm

*I present to you, my faithful readers, Chapter 11 of **To My Death I Fight** . As some of you might have noticed, before I took it down, a few days ago I received two or three reviews that consisted basically of nothing besides vulgar remarks. Thankfully I was able to remove them, but unfortunately I have been forced to turn on Anonymous Review Moderation. While 99.9% of all anon reviews will be let through, even ones critical of my story, please don't blame me if your review does not show up for several hours. Thank you for your understanding.*

*So Chapter 11 and a big fight scene. I must admit that I have never written a mostly continuous fight that was more than 4000 words. This chapter is where the first big divergence from canon takes place. Sure, the major events remain the same, but there are enough subtle differences that the fight won't play out the same way it did in the anime.*

***Edit: 5/5/2015 - So I went back and rewrote... well... nearly all of this chapter. I've gotten better as a writer this past year in terms of writing dialogue, scripts and fights and I wished to bring this whole chapter, which is one of the most pivotal in all of Kill la Kill, up to my current standards. There is more than 1,000 new words in this chapter and I'd like to think that 80-85% of it was rewritten. Now I did not change anything - the fights proceed the same way as the original draft. I just tightened up the dialogue (listening to Dub Ryuko helped a lot) and got rid of extraneous words that people wouldn't actually say in the middle of a fight. Also some grammar... I fixed A LOT of grammar... Enjoy!***

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## Chapter 11 - Riders on the Storm

Surrounded by a crowd of students, blue eyes narrowing at the smug look on her opponent's face, Ryuko Matoi scowled as she removed her Seki Tekko's pin. A brief burst of red stars and light enveloped her body as Senketsu immediately shifted into his battle configuration, steam shooting out of his vents, before Ryuko reappeared with a luminescent blush adorning her cheeks. As she swallowed the nervousness welling up in her stomach and walked towards Satsuki Kiryuin she glanced into her Kamui's eye and asked "Hey, is that thing she's wearing the reason you and Mugetsu were so nervous last night?"

**" Ryuko,"** Senketsu's voice was full of concern as he spoke, ***"I feel I should warn you. Satsuki Kiryuin's current power far exceeds your own."***

"Thanks for the motivational speech," Ryuko deadpanned as she stomped to a halt several meters from Satsuki. As she locked eyes with her opponent, the clashing of their willpowers causing a large explosion to detonate outwards, she smirked and ignored the small cut on her cheek, "So I see your outfit's not all show, Satsuki Kiryuin, but if you can't keep up mentally you won't stand a chance against Senketsu!"

"Is that so?" Satsuki stoically replied, the barest of grins spreading across her face when Ryuko charged forward. Slowly raising her arm, Bakuzan's midnight black blade gleaming darkly in the early morning sunlight, her grin rapidly twisted into a frown as she added, "But the same could be said for you, Matoi."

With but a single swing of her arm, Junketsu's form glowing slightly, Satsuki fired off a crescent of energy at Ryuko. Her eyes widening at the surprise attack Ryuko braced her legs before holding the Scissor Blade directly in front of her body, causing the ranged attack to split in two and explode in the surrounding crowd. Panting heavily as sweat dripped down her body, cuts and scrapes now adorning her

face, Ryuko gritted her teeth and glowered, *"Damn it... how the hell is she this strong?"*

"Impressive... but that's just the beginning," Satsuki announced before proceeding to lazily slash Bakuzan several times through the air.

Ryuko desperately swung her Scissor Blade with superhuman speed and reflexes as she deflected and parried each crescent of pressurized air. But despite her best efforts, blasts of steam jettisoning out of Senketsu's vent with every swing, it wasn't enough. Although her power was enough to prevent Satsuki from getting in a clean hit the force behind each attack was enough to physically create small cuts all over her body.

***" Ryuko, you need to be more careful. All this blood loss is accelerating the rate at which you'll lose consciousness."***

"Why are you telling me something I already know?" Ryuko shouted angrily back at Senketsu. Blocking a strike from Satsuki, she ducked under the following attack and rolled to a stop behind the student council president. Swinging her Scissor Blade toward the apparently defenseless Satsuki's back, Ryuko wasn't surprised when Bakuzan appeared directly in the path of her blade, but instead of being stunned or irritated that her attack failed, Ryuko grinned.

"That's perfect."

After Ichigo told her last night that she needed to work on using her Scissor Blade more effectively, Ryuko spent a couple of hours practicing how to use it and found, to her surprise, that she could collapse it down to a more manageable form simply with a flick of her wrist. So as her Scissor Blade rushed towards clashing with Satsuki's Bakuzan, Ryuko shifted her wrist slightly and her red blade almost instantly shrunk down to the size of a normal pair of scissors.

Satsuki's eyes widened noticeably at the display, *"It can change sizes?"*

Spinning underneath Bakuzan, apprehensive blue eyes tracking the black blade passing over her face, Ryuko flicked her wrist as the Scissor Blade transformed back to its normal size. Her heels digging trenches in the dirt as she stepped inside Satsuki's guard, a look of mild surprise in the Student Council President's eyes, Ryuko swung the her blade upwards as a blast of steam shot out of Senketsu's armor, "This is the end, Satsuki Kiryuin!"

"I think not."

With an almost detached expression on her face, the previous worry in her eyes gone, Satsuki reached out and caught the sharpened edge of the Scissor Blade in the palm of her hand. As Ryuko froze in shock, the notion that her attack could have been stopped so completely causing her mind to temporarily freeze, Satsuki's lips curled into a satisfied grin as she looked at her Kamui with devote fascination, "This power is simply marvelous!"

Stomping her heel against the ground before Ryuko had the opportunity to regain her bearings, the girl gasping in surprise when she found herself tossed in the air, Satsuki quickly spin around and slammed Bakuzan's hilt against Senketsu's eye. Her long black hair shifting in the wind as Ryuko was sent crashing into Honnouji Academy by the pressure wave, her screams echoing throughout the courtyard, Satsuki took a moment to examine her hand, "The power of a Kamui is leagues above anything I could have dreamt!"

As she disappeared in a blur towards Ryuko, a cloud of smoke rising from the hole her body created in Honnouji Academy, Satsuki could not help but marvel at her newly acquired power. This was the same strength Ichigo Kurosaki had demonstrated when he easily stopped Takaharu's attack with nothing but the palm of his hand. It was ludicrous to think that he could wield this power and yet not act. She would show not only him, but Ryuko Matoi as well, just how a Kamui should be used, "You have all this power and yet you can do nothing but run away, Matoi? You are unworthy of wearing a Kamui!"

"The hell did you just say?" Ryuko shouted angrily, the pile of desks and chairs exploding into splinters of wood as she rushed toward Satsuki. A blast of steam bursting from Senketsu's vents as she countered the Student Council President's initial strike, the Scissor Blade barely managing to parry Bakuzan to the left, she was unprepared for the following horizontal slash that sent her crashing through the wall and into the adjoining corridor.

As she bounced down the hallway, her back colliding violently with the floor several times, Ryuko cursed profusely when she noticed Satsuki rapidly approaching. Dragging her hand against the nearby wall she managed to swing around and pull herself into a stairwell seconds before Bakuzan could pierce her body. A hiss of pain escaping her lips when the pressure wave from Satsuki's attack catapulted her into the far wall, the exhaustion plaguing her body only helping to aggravate her injuries, Ryuko panted heavily as she fell to the ground. Beads of sweat dripping down her face as trembling fingers gripped the Scissor Blade's hilt she barely managed to jump out of the way when the Student Council President leapt downwards through the air.

"You're nothing but a human who managed to squeeze herself into a Kamui!" Satsuki exclaimed passionately as she rained blow after blow against the Scissor Blade. Vanishing in a blur when Ryuko attempted to counterattack, the crimson blade passing harmlessly through the air, the Student Council President reappeared seconds later with her right hand already clasped around her opponent's neck in a vice grip. As the sound of Senketsu's fabric audibly crackling filled the stairwell Satsuki scowled before spinning around and driving her heel deep into Ryuko's stomach, "But I've already mastered wearing my Kamui! Senketsu's power is fully my own!"

Thrown clear across Honnouji Academy by Satsuki's attack, her body landing in what used to be a biology classroom, Ryuko gasped for breath as she leaned against a piece of rebar. Brushing her fingers against her face when she felt something wet ooze down her cheek, blood coating Senketsu's armor before the Kamui readily

absorbed it, her blue eyes narrowed as she tried to think of a plan. Satsuki's power was too great for her to fight and running away was out of the question since there was no way in hell she could get away from Satsuki as long as the bitch was wearing Junketsu.

**" *This isn't good,*" Senketsu cautiously warned, *"At this rate you only have ten minutes before passing out from blood loss."***

"Is that all you can think about? Stop drinking my damn blood then!" Ryuko seethed before perking up when the soft sound of heels clicking against concrete reached her ears.

Sweating when she noticed out of the corner of her eyes Satsuki slowly stalking towards her, the Student Council President's gaze focused directly on her hiding spot, Ryuko swallowed the nervous lump in her throat and whispered, "Why can't you be like Ichigo's Mugetsu? He can wear her for hours without any damn problem!"

**" *I cannot be worn without drinking your blood. That is when my power manifests itself. The problem is that I have yet to be put on by you.*"**

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm wearing you right now or are you blind too?" she argued and emphasized it by pulling on one of her suspenders and releasing it with a loud snap, "While you're enjoying my blood, I'm fighting for my life while dying of embarrassment. How is that fair?"

**" *You shouldn't get so worked up, Ryuko,*" A blast of steam shot out of Senketsu as she spoke, *"Every time you get like this, your blood pressure rises and the amount of time you can remain in this form drops. That small outburst cost you ten seconds."***

As Ryuko opened her mouth to argue with her Kamui she caught of glimpse of Satsuki raising Bakuzan in one of the many pieces of jagged glass surrounding them. Cursing as she rolled forward, the black blade cutting through the rebar with nightmarish ease, Ryuko screamed as the pressure wave from the attack slammed her

against a wall. Her chest rising and falling with every panting breath as she shakily gripped the Scissor Blade and turned around, her legs feeling like jelly, she could only watch as Satsuki took a moment to examine Bakuzan's edge.

"Your reflexes are as sharp as ever, Matoi," Satsuki backhandedly complimented as she beheld her thoroughly exhausted opponent. It pleased the Student Council President that despite the vast gap between their powers Ryuko hadn't given up or ran away. Both choices would have been valid solutions if the roles were reversed but knowing that her fellow Kamui wearer remained to fight until the bitter end was heartening to say the least, "However to strike you down when you're defenseless would be cowardly. Take a moment to catch your breath so that I can defeat you when you're at your very best."

"Now you're being noble?" Ryuko sneered from between clenched teeth as she struggled to raise the Scissor Blade, "Where the hell was this nobility when you killed my father, you smug bitch?"

"Such impudence..."

Satsuki's grip upon Bakuzan tightened at the blatantly disrespectful tone before her body blurred as she charged forward. Deftly evading her opponent's pitifully slow counterattack with laughable ease she responded to the grievous insult by slamming her knee into Ryuko's stomach. As the teenager gasped in pain with spittle flying freely from her mouth Satsuki ended her assault by jabbing Bakuzan harshly against Senketsu's armor, causing her to fly screaming out of the building.

By the time Satsuki gracefully landed in a crouch on the ground she noticed that Ryuko Matoi's Kamui had already transformed back to the form of a normal school uniform. Strutting forward and grabbing Ryuko by her hair, a painful wince escaping the nearly unconscious girl's lips, she huffed dissatisfiedly and asked, "Was this the full extent of your powers, Ryuko Matoi? How pathetic... to think your Kamui willingly transformed to save you from passing out. You might

as well be naked for all the good a dormant Kamui can do for you now."

Despite everything, including nearly passing out from exhaustion and blood dripping off her body, Ryuko still had the courage to spit at Satsuki, "Don't make me fucking laugh. I don't need your damn pity, especially when you're wearing that ridiculous stripper outfit. What the hell are you even -"

Throwing Ryuko callously to the ground before she could finish her insult, the teenager's body rolling several feet before skidding to a stop, Satsuki's presence seemed to double as she held her arms outwards and shouted, "Do not dare to insult me with such vulgarities! It is only in this form that a Kamui's true power can be unleashed and tempered! The fact that you base your self-esteem on the opinion of others only proves how unworthy you are of wearing a Kamui! If adorning this garment allows me to fulfill all my ambitions than I, Satsuki Kiryuin, shall not show any shame or hesitation in doing so! My actions are completely pure in nature!"

"Pure?" Ryuko coughed as she spit out a wad of blood, "Then how the hell do you explain Mugetsu? Ichigo's Kamui doesn't like anything like yours."

"I don't know why Ichigo Kurosaki's Kamui covers his body as fully as it does," Satsuki admitted with a slight shake of her head, unable to expression the disappointment she felt for Ryuko Matoi. Despite forcing herself into a Kamui her strength couldn't even begin to compare to the overwhelming might of Junketsu. Pressing her heel against the small of Ryuko's back as she raised Bakuzan into the air, sunlight glittering off the dark blade, Satsuki's face twisted into a scowl as she exclaimed, "But in the end he was your superior in every way, shape and form! This is where your worthless ambitions end, Matoi!"

The defiant glare in her eyes vanishing as Satsuki swung Bakuzan towards her neck Ryuko couldn't help but notice Mako desperately running towards her, a look of utmost determination on her best



friend's face. Closing her eyes upon realizing her friend would never make it in time, lips pulling into the faintest of smiles, Ryuko sighed and braced herself for death, *"Sorry Mako. I guess I wasn't strong enough to beat her..."*

A loud metallic clang reverberated throughout the courtyard moments before Bakuzan could cut into her neck, the resulting concussive shockwave exploding outwards and knocking most of the student body off their collective feet. Wincing as she opened her eyes and gazed upwards, the pain permeating her body momentarily abating, Ryuko found herself staring at the one person she hadn't expected to see, "I-Ichigo?"

"Sorry I'm late, Ryuko," Ichigo apologized as Tournesol clashed against Bakuzan, his arms trembling slightly from the amount of force Satsuki was exerting. Mugetsu's boots digging into the ground as the Student Council President increased her power, blue and red sparks dancing through the air, Ichigo gritted his teeth and leaned forward until his face was almost touching hers, "I got a little lost on the way to school."

"So you've managed to arrive, Ichigo Kurosaki," Satsuki announced in a smug tone, her lips curling into a pleased smirk, "I was certain Sanageyama have stalled you for at least another fifteen minutes. Tell me, what gave it away?"

"The first time he transformed out of his Blade Regalia." A blast of energy exploded outwards as Ichigo took a single step forward, the ground cracking beneath his feet. As beads of sweat trickled down his face, Mugetsu's power slowly but surely overwhelming Satsuki, he grunted before continuing, "The power of his Three-Star Goku Uniform is impressive, which made it rather strange to see him constantly stop using it. Once I realized he wasn't actually trying to catch me I rushed back to Honnouji Academy as quickly as possible."

"I see..."

The pleased smirk on Satsuki's face widened at Ichigo's answer. Unlike Ryuko Matoi, who was too caught up in her embarrassment to properly wear Senketsu, Ichigo was easily able to wear Mugetsu over most of his body without being overwhelmed by the Kamui. He was an opponent truly worthy of sacrificing to Junketsu. A blast of blue steam shooting out of Junketsu's pauldrons as her own strength increased Satsuki stared directly into Ichigo's eyes and declared, "If you are so confident in your abilities than come at me, Ichigo Kurosaki! Show me the power that is worthy to fight Junketsu! Earn my adoration!"

There was an explosion of multicolored light as Satsuki twisted her wrists before leaping away from Ichigo. Blue heels skidding backwards along the ground while she kept her eyes firmly locked on her opponent, long black hair dancing in the wind, Satsuki flexed her fingers before swinging Bakuzan several times in rapid succession. His brown eyes narrowing as he easily spotted the nearly invisible attacks Ichigo managed to sidestep the first one before using Tournesol to deflect the rest into the crowd of surrounding One-Stars, the students sent flying dramatically into the air from the resulting impacts.

"Most impressive..." Satsuki complimented after a brief moment, Bakuzan held firmly in her right hand as she stared at Ichigo, "Only one who has truly tamed their Kamui could have deflected that attack. I can feel Junketsu shivering at the prospect of defeating Mugetsu."

"Shut the hell up," Ichigo growled before turning around to Ryuko and noticing her injured state, "Hey, are you alright?"

Coughing violently as she spat out a mixture of saliva and blood, her blue eyes full of defiance and anger once more, Ryuko shakily pushed herself off the ground, "Y-Yeah, I'll be fine. Satsuki's just a hell of a lot tougher than she looks."

"Got it," Ichigo nodded before turning his attention back to Satsuki, "Get Ryuko out of here, Mako."

"Of course!" Mako saluted from Ryuko's side, utterly confused as to how Mako managed to sneak up on her, "I'll make sure she's safe and sound. You can count on me!"

"Thanks," Ichigo gave Mako a brief smirk before turning his attention back to Satsuki. Holding Tournesol firmly in his grip as he walked towards the Student Council President, brown eyes cautiously watching her every movement, he scowled and asked, "Why didn't you attack me just now?"

"I consider myself an honorable person, Ichigo Kurosaki," Satsuki replied while lowering Bakuzan towards the ground, "I wish nothing more than to defeat you at your best. Claiming victory through deceit and subterfuge would mean nothing in the grand scheme of things. How would I know if I was truly your better if I resorted to such cowardly tactics?"

"That's good to know," Ichigo stared at Satsuki before his gaze unconsciously drifted toward her Kamui's multicolored eyes. While he was confident in both his own abilities as well as Mugetsu's strength he had no basis for how strong Satsuki and Junketsu were. He couldn't afford to hold anything back, not after seeing Ryuko's brutally beaten body. Hopefully his swordsmanship hadn't dulled too much since stopping Aizen from destroying the world.

For several seconds, nearly an eternity for the captivated crowd of students surrounding them, Ichigo locked gazes with Satsuki before slightly bending his knees and blasting forward in an impressive burst of speed. His body a white and black blur as he raced across the courtyard towards the Student Council President, his immense speed kicking up a sonic boom and causing the students to involuntarily flinch away, Ichigo managed to close the distance in the blink of an eye. Tournesol gripped tightly in his hands as he slid to a stop, twin trails of dust rising into the air, Ichigo scowled before swinging the blue katana directly at Satsuki's neck.

While Ichigo's speed was both impressive and faster than anything displayed by Ryuko Matoi it was nothing Satsuki couldn't handle.

Calmly watching as the blue blade arced through the air towards her body, sunlight glittering off the eternally polished surface, she waited until the last moment before leaning backwards and allowing Tournesol to pass harmlessly inches from the tip of her nose.

" *His attacks are not those of an amateur's,*" she mentally noted while taking several steps back. Quickly regaining her poise she attempted to lash out with her foot only for Ichigo to block the impromptu attack with his forearm.

"Your power is admirable," Satsuki commented as she slowly lowered her leg, "It has become abundantly clear that you are leagues above Matoi. Therefore I have a proposition for you."

"A proposition?" Ichigo lowered his guard. Satsuki didn't seem like she was going to attack and he was pretty sure he could react in time if she tried anything, "What are you talking about?"

Satsuki smirked as Ichigo decided to listen to her. Planting Bakuzan into the ground, the black blade piercing easily through the concrete and stone, she raised her left arm and was immediately surrounded by a bright backlight. While most students would be forced to cover their eyes at the display, Ichigo simply narrowed his eyes as she began speaking "I wish for you to become the Student Council Vice President, Ichigo Kurosaki. Instead of using your Kamui for such trivial pursuits as helping Matoi, you should instead put it towards a more proactive goal."

"You can take your offer and shove it," Ichigo answered too quickly to have given the proposition any real thought.

To his surprise and suspicion Satsuki didn't seem to be the least bit perturbed by his aggressive response, "If you choose to accept my terms I will immediately approve Two-Star accommodations for Mankanshoku's family. I will also answer any questions Matoi has about the murder of her Isshin Matoi."

As much as Ichigo wanted to refuse Satsuki he had to admit that her terms were rather beneficial. He was already well acquainted with the squalor and decay Mako and her family was surrounded with every minute of their lives. Nobody should have to live in a place like the No-Star slums. And all that was required to help Mako and Ryuko was for him to throw away everything that defined Ichigo Kurosaki.

"Thanks, but I'm going to have to pass," Ichigo took a small bit of pleasure from the barely stunned look on Satsuki's face. It was clear to him that she hadn't been expecting him to flat out deny her, especially after everything she had offered him, "You see... I have problems with someone trying to sway me to their side. It really pisses me the hell off."

Satsuki's expression quickly hardened as she grabbed Bakuzan and yanked it out of the ground with enough force to shatter the concrete around it, "Bite your tongue, Ichigo Kurosaki. Do not speak as if you know me."

Holding Bakuzan vertically to the ground with both of her hands, Satsuki sprinted towards Ichigo and swung down just as a blast of steam shot out from Junketsu's pauldrons. Quickly bringing Tournesol up to block the strike, Ichigo was shocked when his knees nearly buckled from Satsuki's attack. As the ground beneath his feet began cracking and splintering, Ichigo was forced to brace his left hand under Tournesol's blade.

When Ichigo saw that despite his best efforts, Satsuki was slowly but surely overpowering him, he decided to improvise. Waiting a few seconds until the time was right, he reared his head back and head butted Satsuki. As the student council president staggered back holding her forehead, Ichigo raced forward and punched her in the check hard enough to send her flying through several walls.

**" Ichigo..."**

"Yeah, I know."

Even though he couldn't see anything aside from dust and debris that had been kicked up from when he threw Satsuki, he knew that hadn't been enough to put her down. Raising Tournesol up to guard himself from any surprise attacks, he found his caution to be valid when Satsuki came running out of the hole in the wall her body created, a slight cut on her cheek oozing a trail of blood.

Managing to avoid the initial attack with a quick and precise parry with Tournesol, a shower of sparks raining over his body, Ichigo's eyes widened upon realizing he had fallen headfirst into a cleverly disguised feint. Unable to react in time when Satsuki pirouetted and slammed her knee into his stomach, the force behind the blow causing a crater to appear in the wall, Ichigo gasped in pain as he was propelled several meters into the air. Grunting as he quickly recovered from the blow, a small trail of blood leaking from the corner of his mouth, Ichigo spun around in midair and blocked Satsuki's third strike with Tournesol.

"Your instincts are most formidable," Satsuki complimented, "But it is still not enough to defeat me!"

Just as Ichigo was descending back towards the ground Satsuki spun around before lashing out with Bakuzan, the black blade thrumming with power. Although he was able to react quickly enough to block Bakuzan, his arms shaking from the effort, the force behind the blow launched Ichigo through the air and across Honnouji Academy until he crashed heavily into the outer walls.

As the gathered students fled to avoid getting hit by the falling debris Ichigo grumbled as he pulled himself out of the newly formed crater. Noticing something wet falling down his face, he reached up and realized he had received a cut along his forehead from Satsuki's attack, "Damn it, she's tougher than I thought."

**" *Are you alright, Ichigo?* "**

"I'm fine," Ichigo reassured Mugetsu. He didn't know why, but his Kamui seemed to be very concerned about him. Noticing that

Satsuki was not immediately coming after him, he shouldered Tournesol and asked, "You got a plan for beating her?"

**"What makes you think I could think of anything you can't?"**  
Mugetsu asked sarcastically, **"I cannot offer anything that you cannot think up on your own. Besides, I believe there is a bigger issue we have to deal with. You felt it, didn't you?"**

"Yeah. I thought it was odd that I didn't hear her Kamui talking during the fight."

Mugetsu's eyes gave the equivalent of a nod, **"I don't know whether she is unable or unwilling to, but whatever the case may be, Junketsu is withholding a lot of its power from Satsuki Kiryuin."**

Jumping out of the wall and landing back on the ground, Ichigo dusted off Mugetsu and asked, "Just how much power are we talking about?"

**"I cannot say, but I think it is somewhere around fifty percent."**

"Fifty percent?" Ichigo grumbled and looked around. Satsuki's attack had sent him clear across Honnouji Academy towards an area that was by now mostly vacant of bystanders. That meant he could afford to go all out without worrying about hurting innocent people. Now all he had to do was wait for Satsuki to eventually show up. The only question is how she would go about it. Would she simply strut towards him, talking about how Junketsu is superior to Mugetsu or would she try and preemptively attack him?

A slight tingling on the back of his neck alerted Ichigo to Satsuki's presence. Quickly turning around, he saw the student council president running along the wall of Honnouji Academy towards him. Satsuki took his noticing of her to crouch horizontally against the wall before pushing off and lunging towards him, a large crater in the wall appearing from the force she was emitting. As he watched Satsuki falling towards him with Bakuzan positioned to pierce his skull, Ichigo

jumped straight up into the air with his legs pulled up to his chest. Waiting for Satsuki to get below him, he kicked down with all the strength he could muster and drove her into the ground hard enough to buckle the concrete around them.

As a blast of energy was emitted from the impact, Ichigo decided that waiting for Satsuki to attack him again was foolish. Reaching down and grabbing her by her ankle, he spun her around several times before aiming at the central building in Honnouji Academy and let go. Watching her body sail through the air before crashing loudly back where the fight had all started, Ichigo sighed when he realized he would have to go all the way back to continue fighting her.

"Damn," he grumbled as he began running towards Satsuki, "I hope Mako managed to get Ryuko out of here."

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"Come on Ryuko, we gotta get out of here!"

With strength that was physically impossible given her stature and muscles, Mako Mankanshoku picked up Ryuko and began sprinting through Honnouji Academy towards the exit, all the while carrying her friend on her back. Dodging nonchalantly around a piece of debris that had just been blown away from the fight between Ichigo and Satsuki, she let out a gasp of astonishment.

"Oh wow!" Mako's eyes had stars in them as she beheld the fight in the distance, "Who knew Ichigo was so strong!"

"Strong..." Ryuko muttered dejectedly as she vividly remembered her fight, or rather defeat, against Satsuki. Even with Senketsu's power she had been unable to do anything more than dodge and put up a miserable defense that Satsuki easily blew through time and time again. Despite her best efforts to think up plans on the fly and



take Satsuki by surprise, Ryuko was no more a threat to her than a fly was to a whale.

*" Was the difference between our powers, our Kamui, really that large?"*

Ryuko's gaze fell downward as she remembered Satsuki's declaration about wearing Junketsu. Was not feeling shamed and embarrassed really the key to unlocking Senketsu's true power? She didn't know and in her Kamui's current state Ryuko really couldn't ask Senketsu for the answer. Deciding that she had nothing to lose she turned towards Mako and whispered, "Hey Mako..."

"Ah, you're awake, Ryuko!" Mako turned to look at her conscious friend, while miraculously dodging around a piece of debris in front of her without even looking.

"Yeah," Ryuko mumbled, "Hey Mako, I have a question for you..."

"Let me guess," Mako frowned, apparently deep in thought, before asking, "It has to do with Senketsu, doesn't it?"

Ryuko had the decency to look shocked at her friend's deduction, "But... how did you know?"

"Everyone in my family knows!" Mako exclaimed cheerfully to Ryuko. Hopping gracefully over several unconscious students, pirouetting as she went, she continued with exuberance, "I can say without a doubt in my mind that you are in no way, shape or form inferior to Lady Satsuki!"

"Uh..." Ryuko tried to come up with something to say, but all that came out of her mouth was a confused groan. Either unperturbed by Ryuko's response or simply oblivious to it, Mako continued her troll explanation.

"And that's not the best part! Your boobs are way bigger than Lady Satsuki's! I saw them myself when you were taking a shower this

morning. As I stared at them, I couldn't help but think. 'Ryuko has such a great rack!' My whole family agrees on this point! So there is no reason to be embarrassed about it, Ryuko! You are not inferior to Lady Satsuki, so get naked and show everyone your splendid body!"

Ryuko was stunned by Mako's logic because while it was convoluted and full of holes, it made a lot of sense now that she had her eyes to the world thrown up. Casting her gaze downwards, she began remembering what she had been told about Senketsu over the past few days:

***" Unlike you and Senketsu, Ichigo and I are fully synchronized. Ichigo accepts me for what I am and doesn't try to make me something I'm not."***

***" Ryuko... I only drink so much blood because you're embarrassed to wear me."***

*" If wearing this allows me to fulfill all my ambitions than I, Satsuki Kiryuin, will not degrade myself by showing shame or hesitation in doing so!"*

" *Could they be right?*" Ryuko looked down at Senketsu, the Kamui only just beginning to awaken from his temporary slumber. Locking gazes with her Kamui, his multicolored eye staring right back at her, Ryuko sighed and turned to Mako, "Mako... put me down. I need to go back."

"Go back?" Mako looked mortified at the prospect, "But if you go back, Lady Satsuki will super murder you! Her strength is above that of peons like us. It's amazing enough that Ichigo can fight her evenly, but you'll die if you try and fight her again!"

"I'm sorry Mako, but it's something I need to do," Ryuko muttered before pushing herself off Mako's back. Barely managed to stand on her feet as her best friend comically crashed to the ground from the sudden imbalance, the world seeming to spin around her, Ryuko apologized to Mako before slowly walking back towards Satsuki.

**"What are you doing Ryuko?"** Senketsu asked in worry. None of her actions were making any sense. She couldn't possibly defeat Satsuki Kiryuin, let alone stand up to her, **"You will die if you go back to her in your current state."**

"You don't need to worry about me, Senketsu," Ryuko tiredly grinned at him, "Because I finally understand what you have been telling all this time."

Senketsu's single eye widened in amazement, **"Ryuko..."**

Stumbling as she stopped in her tracks, fingers gripping the Seki Tekko, Ryuko took a deep breath and exclaimed, "I think it's time I finally wore you, Senketsu!"

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Satsuki wiped away the small trail of blood oozing from her lip as she stared at her opponent.

"It appears we are evenly matched," she declared to her equally winded opponent. For the last five minutes they had exchanged blow after blow, hitting each other only to receive a counter attack right afterwards. If there was anyone Satsuki truly considered a worthy adversary, it was Ichigo Kurosaki, "But I will still win this battle."

"That's funny," Ichigo said in response. His face had several new cuts and bruises on it, but overall he looked to be in better shape than Satsuki, "From where I'm standing I have the upper hand."

"It may be true you possess greater physical strength than myself," Satsuki admitted in a reluctant tone. While she had trained for years to hone her body and swordsmanship, hours upon hours spent improving her form and abilities, Ichigo possessed a distinct musculature and size advantage. However unlike Gamagori, whose size and weight afforded him great physical strength and endurance,

Ichigo wasn't excessively muscular or bulky, which meant he could move and attack at speeds comparable to her own.

"But there is one thing you lack that I contain in abundance..." A bright backdrop of light appeared behind Satsuki as she shouted, "And that, Ichigo Kurosaki, is ambition and drive!"

Mentally commanding Junketsu to unleash more of its power, Satsuki rocketed towards Ichigo and planted her fist in his stomach. Following it up with a punch to his face, she tried to continue her assault only for Ichigo to move out of the way of Bakuzan and counter by driving Tournesol threw her arm, the blade easily piercing Junketsu and causing Satsuki to grip her arm to stem the flow of blood.

"I don't know anything about ambition and drive," Ichigo argued, his gaze falling anywhere but Satsuki's exposed form, "But I'm not about to let you hurt Ryuko. Even if you're faster or stronger than me I refuse to lose to someone like you."

"You have the audacity to say such nonsense," Satsuki growled as Junketsu eagerly absorbed the blood oozing from the cut on her arm, "But you dare refuse to look at me while doing so?"

"That's not true," Ichigo muttered in annoyance while scratching his cheek. To her surprise Satsuki saw a faint blush appear on his face, "It's just that I can't stand looking at your Kamui. It leaves virtually nothing to the imagination!"

Satsuki took a moment to rein in her surprise as Ichigo's modesty, "Than your battle prowess is even more remarkable. To fight me without using your eyes suggests your instincts must be rather honed and refined."

"That's not true," Ichigo shook his head, "When we're fighting I'm focused on your attacks instead of staring at your body."

"You are quite the charmer, Ichigo Kurosaki," Satsuki smirked as she held Bakuzan with one hand, "Then I will not delay this fight any further on such trivial matters! Prepare yourself!"

Jumping backwards to avoid Satsuki's lunging strike, Bakuzan cleaving through the air only inches from his chest, Ichigo leaned to the side before vanishing in a burst of speed. As a series of afterimages surrounded Satsuki, her blue eyes darting back and forth in surprise, Ichigo couldn't help but mentally appreciate his Kamui's power once more. Although unable to move nowhere as fast as when he had bankai Mugetsu was more than strong enough to mimic parts of his former shinigami powers. The fact Sanageyama's Blade Regalia could create afterimages only helped to speed along the process.

" *He's gotten faster,*" Satsuki grimaced as she stared at the circle of afterimages surrounding her, "*What he is trying to do?*"

"What's the matter?" Ichigo's echoing voice came from one of the afterimages before immediately switching to another, "Am I going too slow for the great Satsuki Kiryuin? I thought you said we were evenly matched? Perhaps I should go a little faster. That might put me on your level."

"Don't get cocky!" Satsuki twisted her body around and tucked Bakuzan in close to her chest. Waiting until the right moment, she quickly struck out with Bakuzan towards where she knew Ichigo was going to be.

"Damn it," Ichigo leapt over the pressure wave released from Satsuki's blade before noticing a few locks of orange hair drifting to the ground, "She was able to see me?"

"Just because my eyes cannot track your movements does not mean my body is unable to react!" Satsuki announced passionately as she attempted to slam her knee into Ichigo's stomach, "You are not the first to try and beat me with raw speed, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

Quickly leaning to the side as Satsuki's leg arced through the air, the pressure wave kicked up causing his orange hair to blow backwards, Ichigo didn't hesitate to flow into motion as he pivoted around and swung Tournesol through the air. Multicolored sparks dancing when Satsuki managed to adjust her grip on Bakuzan and block the attack, her forearm braced against the side of her blade for support, a burst of steam exploded from Junketsu's vents as the Student Council President forced the Kamui to give her more power. A loud metallic ringing echoing in the air as Tournesol was forced to the side Ichigo quickly found himself back on the defensive when Satsuki brutally renewed her assault.

"Where is the strength you displayed earlier?" Satsuki shouted, her every word tinged with disappointment, while her blade clashed against Ichigo's, "How are you going to avenge Mato's defeat with such pitiful attacks? You are weak, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

"Shut the hell up!" Ichigo shouted back at Satsuki. Spinning around and dodging Satsuki's blade, he leaned forward and drove his elbow deep into her exposed stomach, eliciting a gasp of pain from the Student Council President. As Satsuki took a single step backwards, Ichigo followed through with an uppercut to her jaw that had spittle flying out of her mouth. Pushing himself off the ground until he was level with the hovering Satsuki, Ichigo grabbed her ankle and threw her back down with enough power to send her crashing through the floors below until she reached the ground accompanied by a loud crash.

Landing in a crouch next to the newly formed hole, his breath coming out in heavy pants, Ichigo winced and rubbed his neck. It seemed wearing Mugetsu for several hours in a row was finally beginning to catch up to him. Even the small amount of blood Mugetsu required to remain in her battle configuration became lethally dangerous after such a long time. Grunting as he pushed himself back onto his feet, the hairs on the back of his neck sticking up when a wave of power coursed through the air, Ichigo turned around and cursed, "God damn it. She just won't stay down."

Brown eyes widening when the floor began shaking Ichigo barely managed to jump away before a pillar of light blasted out of the hole and into the sky, the roar of energy drowning out all other sounds. When Satsuki appeared in front of him a moment later, streams of blood oozing from her forehead and lip, an expression of anger was clearly visible on her face. His muscles tensing in preparation as she took a single step forward, the ground cracking beneath her heel, Ichigo was taken completely off guard when Satsuki rocketed towards him with Bakuzan already screaming through the air.

"Damn it!" Ichigo's face was pulled into a grimace as he was forced to use Mugetsu's full power to block Satsuki's increasing fast and powerful attacks, "Where the hell is all this power coming from?"

***" She is pushing her Kamui to grant her increasingly more power. While it theoretically could make her more powerful than us, it is also quite dangerous. Ichigo, if you can simply outlast her, you will most likely win this battle."***

"I got it," Ichigo answered before ducking to the left to avoid Bakuzan piercing his head. As Satsuki's blow became more and more vicious and powerful, Ichigo realized Mugetsu was right. Despite his mastery of Mugetsu's power as well as the fact that they were working together in relative harmony, he was beginning to get pushed back by Satsuki's newfound strength. It was even reaching the point where blocking her strikes still gave him a small cut or bruise, the power behind the attack too strong for even Tournesol to block fully. Eventually after continually blocking her strikes, he was hit with a slash so powerful that his guard was blown right open, exposing his chest to Satsuki's next attack.

"This is the end for you, Ichigo Kurosaki!" Satsuki declared victorious as she moved in for the finishing blow. Raising Bakuzan above her head in the same manner in which she had prepared to finish off Ryuko Matoi, she shouted, "You are the closest person to my equal as anyone on Earth has the right to be! Perish content with the knowledge that you gained my utmost respect!"

" *I'm not going to be able to stop it in time!*" Ichigo tried to throw his body backwards to limit the potential damage but it appeared as if such actions were unnecessary. Moments before Satsuki could follow through on her threat Junketsu's eyes grew bloodshot while its armor convulsed and shifted around her body. And to Ichigo's ears alone a faint menacing growling could be heard.

" ***What you are observing is a lack of harmony,***" Mugetsu explained stoically when she noticed her wearer's confusion, ***"Satsuki Kiryuin, instead of bonding with Junketsu like you did with me, used her willpower to subjugate it and its power for her own use. While she would normally be able to keep Junketsu under her thumb, your battle pushed her to the breaking point. It won't be long now until Junketsu devours her body."***

"You need to stop," Ichigo warned Satsuki, who had fallen to one knee and was gripped her shoulder, "If you don't Junketsu is going to kill you!"

Satsuki's gaze hardened as she glared at Ichigo, "I don't need or want your pity, Ichigo Kurosaki! Junketsu is simply a Kamui that has been granted the honor of being worn by me. To fall victim to clothing is heresy!"

Biting her lip nearly hard enough to draw blood Satsuki managed to bring Junketsu back under her control through sheer willpower and determination. Her breath coming out in quick pants as she stood back on her feet, sweat dripping down her clearly exhausted face, Satsuki raised Bakuzan only to notice Ichigo sitting down on a nearby piece of rubble with Tournesol lazily propped against his shoulder.

"Pick up your sword. This fight is not yet over."

Ichigo stared blankly at Satsuki's determination to fight before sighing and rubbing the bridge of his nose, "Your newfound control over Junketsu is only temporary. If you try to keep fighting you're



going to die. That's not something I want to happen even if I don't really like you. A victory like that wouldn't be a victory at all."

Satsuki watched in complete silence as Ichigo stood up and walked away before closing her eyes. No matter how much she wished to deny his words he had been right. Her control over Junketsu's bloodthirsty and berserk nature was temporary for the time being. Even if she were to continue fighting she had at most five minutes before even her ironclad willpower failed to keep her Kamui in check. As she pondered her defeat, which she would never admit to anyone as such, Satsuki's lips curled into a faint amused smile. Sitting down on a piece of debris, an exhausted grunt inadvertently escaping her lips, Satsuki planted Bakuzan firmly in the ground before leaning her forehead against it.

"To think I would be defeated by you, Ichigo Kurosaki," Satsuki knew that her defeat was not so much as being beaten in a contest of strength or power but rather simply running out of time. The irony that her defeat was how she beat Ryuko Matoi was not lost on her. Willing Junketsu back to its normal militaristic white and blue sailor uniform, albeit one covered in smudges and tears, she smirked and added, "I look forward to our true contest in the future, Ichigo. Perhaps then we could determine who is stronger without such trivialities getting in the way."

"Satsuki Kiryuin!"

Satsuki pulled her forehead off Bakuzan as Ryuko Matoi, clad once more in Senketsu, crashed into the ground in front of her. It was immediately apparent to the Student Council President that in the last few minutes Ryuko had somehow managed to overcome her ridiculous embarrassment at wearing Senketsu.

"I see you finally overcame your pathetic social embarrassment, Matoi," Satsuki remarked casually, unbothered by the power Ryuko was emitting. She could tell with but a single glance that Ryuko Matoi's power had jumped up to about her level. Actually, that was a mistake. While she was below both herself and Ichigo, Ryuko's

power was enough to make determining the victor of any fight impossible. Such a battle would be determined not by power, but by strategy, determination and the will to win. What was it that her mother called it? Ah, yes, ' *der Wille zur Macht* ' or 'the Will to Power'.

"What the hell was that?" Ryuko growled as she took a step towards Satsuki, her full acceptance of Senketsu greatly altering her appearance and making his armor much more intricate and durable. The spaulders containing his eyes, both good and bad, now extended upwards much like Junketsu's and Mugetsu's while the red highlights in her hair, which Satsuki could not help but compare to her mother's rainbow undertone, were much more vibrant and feathery. Glaring at Satsuki, Ryuko pointed her Scissor Blade at her and demanded, "What's wrong? Transform so I can kick your ass!"

A haughty chuckle left Satsuki's lips as she leaned her head back, "I'm afraid you're too late for that, Matoi."

Ryuko blinked owlishly before noticing Satsuki's disheveled state of attire and smirking, "Heh... I see Ichigo managed to kick your smug ass."

"A crude statement from an equally crude person," Satsuki stated in her usual noble tone of voice. Even in her current state, she would never show weakness in front of anyone, "But then again, I wouldn't expect anything more from someone like you, Matoi. What are you going to do now that I am at the mercy of your Kamui? Will you kill me to sate your need for vengeance?"

"You're the one who killed my dad!" Ryuko clenched her hand into a fist as she stalked towards the weakened Student Council President, the glow from her hair brightening, "And now that you can't fight back I'm going to get some answers..."

"Do not take one more step, Matoi!"

Crashing to the ground hard enough to rattle the entire academy, his body barely fitting in the room, Ira Gamagori stood in front of the

other members of the Elite Four and shouted, "If you continue with your current course of action I will have no choice but to enact corporal punishment!"

"You may have a Kamui, Transfer Student," Nonon Jakuzure quipped playfully in a saccharine tone, "But even you're not stupid enough to take on all of us at the same time."

"Tch," Ryuko spat on the ground. Hefting her Scissor Blade onto her shoulder, she pointed at Satsuki and said, "Don't think this is over. I will get my answers from you, Satsuki Kiryuin! You cannot hide from me forever!"

"Humph," Satsuki stood up and calmly smoothed out a crease on Junketsu, her ragged appearance not indicative of how she truly felt, "Is vengeance for your father the only thing you can think about, Matoi?"

Senketsu's form shone with a red light, the lines covering his body growing brighter, as Ryuko shifted her gaze from Satsuki to the Elite Four before scoffing, "I don't what the hell you're trying to pull, Satsuki Kiryuin, but I'm going to take all your ambitions and aspirations and crush them one by one! You can count on that!"

Gamagori stiffened at the sheer disrespect Ryuko was showing Satsuki but before he could begin chastising her slander, his body already seeming to increase in size, slow and deliberate clapping echoed through the ruined classroom. To the surprise of everyone, Ryuko included, Satsuki has a smug smirk on her face while slowly clapping her hands, "Is that so, Matoi? You say you are going to crush my ambitions... destroy my aspirations... but you forgot one thing. Honnouji Academy is my kingdom!"

Her heel clicking loudly against the ground as she stepped forward, a backdrop of white light immediately bursting into brilliance behind her, Satsuki raised Bakuzan into the air before slowly and deliberately sheathing it at her waist. Forced to cover her eyes, the

bright light causing spots to appear in her vision, Ryuko raised the Scissor Blade and shouted, "What the hell?"

"If you are bold enough to declare war against me when I am exhausted from fighting an opponent many times your superior than I shall assume you are speaking the truth," Satsuki answered calmly as she turned around and began walking away. As the Elite Four stepped into line behind her, their individual bodies outlines in colored auras, Satsuki paused and added, "Consider your challenge accepted, Matoi. In two days I shall announce that a prize awaits anyone who can defeat you in combat. Do you still have what it takes to win when there is nobody you can trust?"

"You bet I do!" Ryuko declared boldly as she pointed the Scissor Blade at Satsuki's retreated figure, "I don't care how many goons you send at me! I'm going to pay you back tenfold, Satsuki Kiryuin! And when I finally beat your smug ass I'm going to get some answers from you!"

"Very well," Satsuki looked over her shoulder just before vanishing into the darkness, "Defeat each and every student that rises to challenge you. If you can manage to get that far without stumbling than you shall be graced with the honor of fighting Junketsu once more. Perhaps by that point you will finally be worthy of my full power..."

Ryuko growled as she watched Satsuki and her Elite Four disappear into Honnouji Academy before spinning around and kicking a large piece of rubble with enough power to shatter it. Senketsu, noticing the shift in his wearer's attitude, blinked and looked upwards, **"What's wrong, Ryuko?"**

"I'm just a little pissed off," she answered angrily, "Just when I finally managed to overcome my embarrassment and wear you, I find that Ichigo already defeated Satsuki!"

**" This could be an advantage,"** Senketsu pointed out, **"Despite what may have happened, you are well aware of what Satsuki**

***Kiryuin is capable of. She, however, has no idea of my true power. If you play your cards right, you could surprise her when you finally confront her."***

"I suppose you have a point, Senketsu," Ryuko admitted as realization dawned on her - Ichigo's interference meant Satsuki didn't have a clue about Senketsu's full power. While she didn't like being saved by Ichigo, her face cringing slightly at remembering how much Satsuki kicked her ass, if it meant returning the favor the next time they fought Ryuko was willing to let it slide, "Something's bothering me. Satsuki seemed fine and dandy yet she admitted Ichigo beat her."

***" There are many ways to lose, Ryuko," Senketsu explained sagely, "Perhaps Ichigo simply found another way to defeat her."***

"I guess," Ryuko huffed before turning around and walking away. Propping the Scissor Blade against her shoulder as she leapt out of the ruined classroom, her heels easily finding purchase on various pieces of debris, Ryuko's face twisted into a scowl as several thoughts raced through her mind, "Great, now I need to track Ichigo down and find out how the hell he managed to beat Satsuki. I need to know everything about Junketsu if I'm going to have any shot at kicking her ass."

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Satsuki pushed back against Junketsu's attempts to drain her blood as she walked through the halls of Honnouji Academy, her face covered in cuts and blemishes. She could not understand her Kamui's behavior in the aftermath of her defeat against Ichigo Kurosaki. Even though she had only been wearing Junketsu for less than a day, the events of the previous night still fresh in her mind, the rapid shift in Junketsu's behavior was enough for even Satsuki to notice.

Putting such trivial questions on the backburner for the time being Satsuki turned her attention to Houka Inumuta, who was walking just behind her, and asked, "I take it you were able to procure data on Ichigo Kurosaki's Kamui?"

"Partially," Inumuta answered, the collar of his Goku Uniform automatically unzipping as he replied. Pulling out a state of the art PDA and hooking it up to his sleeve, information streaming across the screen within seconds, the Information and Strategy Committee Chair's green eyes frowned in thought before explaining, "Unfortunately your battle against Ryuko Matoi destroyed or rendered inoperable nearly ninety percent of my cameras and bugs. Thus for the time being all available data on Ichigo Kurosaki and his Kamui consists of visible observations."

"I see..." Satsuki replied as she entered the specially secured elevator that would take her directly to the Sewing Club, "Keep me informed about any new information you discover about Ichigo Kurosaki. Our battle has opened my eyes to the realization that he is anything but a simple threat. He is to be carefully monitored and watched, his interactions with Matoi studied and used. You are forbidden to provoke him unintentionally until I am ready."

"As you wish," Inumuta bowed.

As the elevator doors closed, Satsuki placed her hand against the door and looked Inumuta square in the eyes, "Has the matter I discussed with you earlier been taken care of?"

Inumuta smirked as he subtly adjusted his glasses with a single finger, "The task is being completed as we speak. Gamagori managed to acquire an expert to finish the job..."

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Atop the large tower adorning Honnouji Academy, Ira Gamagori peered out across the city using his customized Disciplinary Committee Mark-III Binoculars. Modified for someone of his stature, the binoculars features up to 100x zoom, temperature and wind speed statistics as well as night vision capabilities. Everything someone looking to enforce the rules of Honnouji Academy would need.

As his Goku Uniform rustled in the breeze, he lowered the binoculars and pressed a finger against his ear. Waiting for the static from activating the connection to die down, he said, "Are you able to accomplish the task of which you were assigned?"

"But of course," a figure, a woman from her voice, replied from over fifty feet below, "What do you take me for?"

"Just making sure," Gamagori answered gruffly and looked back through the binoculars. The target had yet to move, which made things simpler, "As for your payment, half of it has already been sent to the location you specified. The other half shall be sent as soon as you complete the task. Are there any questions on what you need to do?"

The woman raised her eye away from the scope attached to her modified M-98 Widow Vaccination Model Type-8 and smirked, "A student who fails to receive their proper vaccinations is putting everyone, not just themselves, at risk of serious health complications. If there is anything my husband taught me, it is that medicine is what separates us from the savages. It would be the noble thing to make sure Ichigo Kurosaki receives every single vaccine he is missing. To do otherwise would be tantamount to misconduct."

"I'm glad we are in agreement," Gamagori nodded, "But Lady Satsuki's involvement in this affair must never be known. If anyone were to find out, I will be forced to disavow anything you say and pursue you as the sole perpetrator. You know the stakes that are riding on making the shot."

"Don't be silly!" Sukuyo Mankanshoku smiled as she adopted her normal housewife persona. Blushing as he held a hand to her cheek, she said, "It doesn't take much effort to fire a hypodermic needle filled with a temperature sensitive concoction from a M-98 Widow at nearly Mach 0.9 at a distance of 1.5 kilometers."

"Err... yes of course," Gamagori simply could not believe what Mako Mankanshoku's mother was capable of. He, of course, knew about her skills but he had no idea who she was until she waltzed into Honnouji Academy claiming she was here for the specified job. Gamagori was about to politely escort her off campus when she began describing in very intricate detail how she would go about doing the job. What disturbed him the most was the sheer lack of menace or professionalism about her. Someone Sukuyo Mankanshoku could make discussing firearms and the various attachments needed in different climates sound like something a family talks about at the dinner table.

Peering through her scope, Sukuyo let out a happy gasp, "Oh! I found Ichigo Kurosaki. He's lined up perfectly in my sights!"

"I see him as well," Gamagori said before adding, "Wind Speed is currently 3.4 knots south by southwest. Temperature is steady at 73 degrees Fahrenheit. Fire when you have a clean shot."

"Don't worry Ichigo. You'll feel better when I have Mako invite you over for dinner tonight," Sukuyo mumbled happily as she lined up the crosshairs directly in the small of his back. It was lucky that Mako managed to intercept him before Ichigo could leave Honnouji Academy. That would have made her shot a lot more difficult, but not impossible, "Taking the shot."

With a soft bang that did not give away just how much power was behind the shot, Sukuyo was forced back several inches from the recoil. Noticing a bright flash of light from across the academy, Sukuyo detached her scope and located Ichigo once again. The youth was currently lying on the ground rubbing his back while Mako and Ryuko looked down at him in confusion.



"A job well done," Sukuyo sighed happily as she began disassembling her M-98 Widow. This successful mission made sure her record remained perfect.

Gamagori watched Ichigo through his binoculars, a smug grin adorning his face, "No one escapes the Disciplinary Committee, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

# Wish You Were Here

*I have for you all an extra long Chapter 12. I hadn't planned on letting it get this long, but I just kept writing and writing until I was satisfied with where I managed to leave off. So Episode 24 and the ending of Kill la Kill... I cannot say that I expected anything different from Trigger, but I would have been greatly satisfied with an ending that didn't end in that kind of cliché. I don't know if I will follow the ending of the anime EXACTLY, but most likely I will divert away from it. The story would be quite boring if you already knew how it ended, wouldn't it?*

*I thank each and every person who left a review or favorite'd my story. I finally got a story link on tvtropes, which goes to show that people really like my story. Well, that's enough for an author note. Let's get on with what you all came to read.*

*Oh! New story picture by the way.*

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## Chapter 12 - Wish You Were Here

Humming a familiar tune, Nui Harime strolled down the road leading to Honnou City. While quite happy and content with herself, Nui was also feeling a tad bit depressed. Her failure to kill Yoruichi had caused Ragyo to 'punish' her and while Nui certainly didn't mind being punished by Ragyo, she couldn't ignore the fact that she still failed.

"The next time I see that Yoruichi lady," Nui reminded herself, getting pumped up in the process, "I'm going to cut off her legs so she can't run away!"

When Nui reported to Ragyo that she had chosen to not pursue Yoruichi, the Director had been beside herself with anger until Nui pointed out that Yoruichi had fled to Karakura Town. As soon as she had said that, Ragyo's expression immediately switched from anger to mild bemusement.

*" So, it has begun," Ragyo smiled as she sensuously stroked Nui's cheek, "Isshin has made the first move, forcing me to react. That is just like the man I know. Perhaps I will let him have this battle, but the war shall be mine."*

Ragyo might have been amused with the notion that Isshin Kurosaki was moving against her, but Nui was far more interested in that Yoruichi lady. It wasn't every day that Nui ran into an opponent that was not only as fast as her, but could actually damage her body. While her wounds didn't cause Nui any pain or inconvenience, nothing really did, it was still refreshing to not curb stomp an opponent in the first five seconds.

"Hmm..." Nui stopped walking and allowed a perplexed look to briefly adorn her face, "... Perhaps I won't cut off her legs. It isn't every day that I meet someone able to actually stand against me. Maybe I'll just sever one of her arms or something!"

As for Isshin, Nui could say anything she wanted about the man, but she couldn't deny that he was crazy prepared. Just a few hours ago she tried to take a single step inside Karakura Town and had her foot immediately blown off. While that would have killed a normal human, to a being like Nui it was only a mild inconvenience to regenerate her missing extremity.

She supposed it came from being a Life Fiber hybrid. Nui let out a girlish giggle as a faint purple light briefly appeared in her chest. Her body could be so fickle sometimes!

Finally entering Honnou City, Nui looked up at the pitch-black sky. It was still dark out, which meant that Satsuki wouldn't be able to spot her entering the city until it was too late. Nui knew of course that

Satsuki would eventually figure out she was here. Satsuki was anything but stupid, but Nui counted on Satsuki not making a move. She was the Grand Couturier after all, so even with Junketsu Satsuki wouldn't stand a chance against her.

Ah, but enough about that wet blanket, Nui was far more interested in Ichigo.

It wasn't everyday that Nui was able to meet another Life Fiber Hybrid. While Ragyo might be one as well, it just wasn't the same. Ragyo was a woman but Ichigo was a man, which both made all the difference and changed nothing to Nui. Perhaps it was because he was new that Nui found herself highly interested in Ichigo's strength and power, but Nui never ran on assumptions. She was better than that. Ichigo's inclusion into her tight-knit family was bound to add some spice to her dulling life.

"I wonder what he is doing right now." Nui looked upwards at Honnouji Academy looming overhead, "It's such a shame that I missed out on his big fight against Satsuki, but I do have priorities."

She may not have been there in person, but Nui was still able to catch the entire battle. Satsuki wasn't the only one with bugs and cameras throughout Honnouji Academy after all. As she watched Ichigo fight and overpower Satsuki, Nui couldn't help but wonder how powerful he truly was. It was clear to her that he had full control over his Kamui. What was it's name again?

"I really should remember something important like that," Nui stuck her tongue out childishly, "After all, Ichigo and I are far closer than Satsuki will ever be!"

When Nui informed Ragyo of the fight's outcome, the Director had been most pleased with her. In fact, Nui was certain that it was enough to wipe away the tarnish her failure to kill Yoruichi left on her record. As Ragyo watched Ichigo run circles around Satsuki while continuously holding back, she had praised Nui for bringing this to her attention.

*"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Ragyo smiled wickedly as, on the video, Satsuki began losing control of Junketsu, "I cannot wait to see Ichigo with my own eyes and witness the fruits of my labor."*

"Oh~!" Nui stopped walking and peered straight up into the sky, "That reminds me! How shall I deal with Ryuko Matoi?"

Various scenarios appeared in her head, but Nui shot them down one after the other. While it would be quite easy to *kill* the girl, that wouldn't be any fun and Nui was all about fun. If she was going to get revenge on the fake Isshin, she needed to do it in style and with finesse. Killing, on the other hand, was boring and simple. Nui had a few ideas, but she was going to wait a while to see what happens. Murdering Ryuko could be done at any time, but watching Ichigo was a lot more fun!

"It's decided!" Nui clapped her hands and gently pushed off the ground before leaping over a hundred feet into the air. Landing softly on the wall of Honnouji Academy, she raised a hand to her forehead as the sun appeared on the horizon, "I'm going to have to finally introduce myself to Ichigo. I do hope we can get along. After all, it's not like he knows I was the one to kill Mr. Urahara."

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As the first bus of the day approached Honnou City, a staple of transportation for the city over the last three years, there was a loud grinding of metal and rubber as the left side of the bus fell into a series of potholes before chaotically bouncing back out.

"Stupid potholes," the bus driver mumbled as he expertly regained control of the bus before he lost control and crashed. He had been driving this route ever since it was first created and while there were dangers most bus drivers never faced, he had yet to crash even once, "More and more potholes seem to form every week. Are

people actually fighting in the middle of the road now? It's a menace to bus drivers everywhere."

Usually the bus was empty on the way to Honnou City. Most passengers on the first run of the day were people coming from Honnou City who worked the night shift but didn't actually live in the city. Today, however, was different. Looking in the rearview mirror at his sole passenger sitting in the farthest seat from the front, the driver adjusted his hat.

"You appear to be a little nervous, miss," the driver said reassuringly. Call him an old softy, but he couldn't stand to see anyone, especially a girl that looked to be no older than fifteen, sitting all alone and without company, "This your first time going to Honnou City?"

The girl, who had been staring out the window at the pre-dawn landscape the entire time, blinked and looked towards the driver. Hesitating but a moment, she eventually answered in a slightly meek tone, "Yes. Today is my first day attending Honnouji Academy."

"I see..." The bus driver grimaced and adjusted his hat again, a nervous habit that he somehow obtained. He had seen people like this before. They get accepted to Honnouji Academy through various scholarships or something only to run into the harsh truth about the academy and city. It was best that she find out the truth from someone like him, who wasn't going to take advantage of her, rather than some punk on the street with a knife.

"I don't mean to frighten you or anything, but Honnou City is not a nice place to be. Satsuki Kiryuin, of the Kiryuin Conglomerate, runs the school and the city with an iron fist. Nothing happens in that city without her knowing about it. It's not someplace someone like you should be going."

The perpetual blush on the girl's cheeks darkened momentarily as she withdrew into herself, "I'll be fine, really."

"You don't say," the bus driver wasn't going to push his luck. If she didn't want to heed his advice, there was nothing he could do about it, "Suit yourself. I was just trying to give you some friendly advice."

As the bus descended back into comfortable silence, Ururu Tsumugiya stared out the window. She was nervous, not because of what she might expect to find at Honnouji Academy, but because she was going there. She was grateful Mr. Kurosaki managed to get her enrolled after the school year started. From his explanation, it was a rather hard thing to do. When she asked him why he had done something like this for her, Mr. Kurosaki had simply grinned clownishly and told her that it was a 'super secret' and to just leave it at that.

Ururu really liked hanging out with Mr. Kurosaki. After Kisuke disappeared, and Yoruichi went to look for him, Ururu had fallen into a depression as she began blaming herself for what happened to him. She only began feeling better about herself when Mr. Kurosaki invited her over to his house to play with Yuzu and Karin as well as help around the house.

*" I wonder how Mr. Kurosaki is doing?"* she thought to herself. When she had left earlier in the morning, he had been busy holding a bunch of red threads while dressed fully in HAZMAT gear. She had looked at him curiously until he told her that everything was fine and to go off and have fun at Honnouji Academy.

Ururu didn't know how much time had passed, but she was brought back to reality when the bus came to a screeching stop. Looking out the window, she noticed that she had finally arrived at Honnou City.

"Well, here we are," the bus driver grimly said. Before opening the door and letting in the crowd of people waiting to go home, he turned around in his seat and looked directly at Ururu, "I'm going to give you two choices, little miss. The first choice is that you can step off this bus and go on your merry way to Honnouji Academy and whatever happens will be up to you to deal with. The second choice is to go back to Karakura Town. Free of charge, of course."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Ururu politely declined the bus driver's generous offer and stood up. Straightening a crease in her No-Star uniform, Ururu was glad that Miss Yoruichi wasn't around when Mr. Kurosaki allowed her to customize her uniform. Yoruichi had been so angry when Ururu wanted to wear something new. Even though Kisuke had been fine with it, Yoruichi had forbidden her from wearing such clothing because, as the former captain put it, 'it looked ridiculous.' Mr. Kurosaki really was nice to let Ururu choose what she wanted to wear.

Ururu held her purple backpack, which she chose herself, firmly in her arms and stepped off the bus onto the dusty streets of Honnou City. Ignoring the throng of people attempting to push past her, Ururu looked around and quickly realized she had no idea where to go. Placing a hand on her cheek and tilting her head to the side, she looked back and forth across the street, "Where was it that Mr. Kurosaki said to go?"

Ururu gazed upwards at the spiraling peak in the center of Honnou City. That had to be Honnouji Academy, but she had no idea how to get up there. Usually she would just jump from rooftop to rooftop and make it there in no time at all, but she was afraid some of the normal people might see her, even at this early hour. Kisuke and Yoruichi had drilled into her head that she is to avoid showing her abilities and powers in front of normal people. The problem, they told her early on, was that people tended to ask questions they weren't prepared to know the answers to.

*"Remember one thing, Ururu," Kisuke Urahara told a younger Ururu in the Secret Training Room below his shop, "One person may be intelligent, but a group of people are what scientists call morons. If you think you might attract the attention of someone, avoid showing off how powerful or special you are at all costs."*

"That's right," Ururu said encouragingly, "I can't let Mr. Urahara down!" Taking off her backpack and rummaging through it, Ururu pulled out a map, crudely drawn on by Isshin, "I think I have to go



that way to get to the academy. It's really far away, so I better get started. I don't want to be late on my first day here after all."

As she began the long trek to Honnouji Academy, Ururu was unaware that she was being followed. After nearly half an hour of walking, interposed with getting lost several times and being chased by an overly friendly dog, Ururu finally reached the trolley station. Double-checking the map to make sure she was in the right place, Ururu was relieved to find that she wasn't lost. This was where she had to go, but there was something wrong. Looking around and noticing nobody around, she worriedly asked, "Where is everyone? Huh, what's this?"

Leaning forward over the railing separating her from the trolley, Ururu read the sign hung haphazardly on it, "Umm... 'Trolley begins at 6 AM. If you're reading this sign, you're up too early in the morning.' That's not a very nice thing to say."

"Well, boys, what do we have here?"

Ururu turned around in confusion at the taunting voice. Standing behind her on the platform, holding various blunt instruments and with sneers on their faces, were several teenage boys. Their worn and torn No-Star uniforms, a signal of their former social status in Honnouji Academy, implied that they were either thrown out or expelled from the academy for various misdeeds and crimes. Noticing that Ururu hadn't done anything except turn to face them, the lead thug grinned and stepped forward, "What's the matter, girl, cat got your tongue?"

"Cat got my tongue?" Ururu tilted her head and blinked owlishly in confusion as she tried to grasp what the thug had just said, "How could a cat have my tongue if it's still in my mouth?"

"Are you making fun of me?" The lead thug threatened as he emphasized his point by smacking his baseball bat a couple of times against the ground in order to intimidate her. Seeing that Ururu wasn't even shaking from nervousness, he said, "Here's what's

going to happen. We're the Honnou City Welcoming Party and this is your orientation. Everyone that arrives here has to pay a toll. Your toll, little girl, will be everything in that pretty little backpack of yours. Now hand it over!"

"You want my stuff?" Ururu looked at the ground, "But if you take it, then I won't have anything."

The thugs began to laugh, "That's the point. Now give it here and we'll be on our way."

When Ururu made no move to listen and hand over her stuff, the lead thug decided to take the initiative. Strutting forward confidently to take Ururu's backpack, his hand had just about reached it when he gasped in pain as a strong vice-like grip closed around his wrist. Looking down, he saw that Ururu had gripped her hand around his wrist and was refusing to let go.

"What's the big deal? Let go of me!" The thug leader tried to pull his hand out of Ururu's grasp, but found to his astonishment and fear that she was just too damn strong to escape from. Getting annoyed, and a little scared, he reared back his free hand and went to punch her in the face, "I said let go of my hand, you bitch!"

For just a moment the thug thought he had hit her. It was only when his hand continued uninterrupted through the space previously occupied by Ururu's head that he realized something was wrong. Fearfully looking down, he saw Ururu had bent over nearly in half without so much as budging her arm.

"That wasn't very nice."

Seven months ago, Ururu would have lost her sense of morality and right and wrong when faced with a potential fight. Jinta had called it her 'Extermination Mode' and that it was really freaky. Kiskeya had noticed how upset Ururu was about that and offered to help her train to control her powers better. It would be rather bad to get into a fight

against a much weaker opponent only to kill them because she couldn't control herself.

Sweeping her leg across the ground and knocking the thug into the air, Ururu grabbed the teen's shirt and spun around before throwing him into a nearby wall with very little effort.

"B-Boss!" One of the thugs stuttered as the gang stared at the smoking body of their leader implanted in a steel wall.

"It looks like I put too much strength in my toss," Ururu said gently, but her words terrified the thugs. Looking at the remaining thugs, she politely asked, "Will that be all?"

"Y-Yeah! We're sorry for the trouble!" One scared thug screamed in fear as he backpedaled before turning around and began fleeing, running right past the unconscious body of his leader. Luckily for the fallen thug, two of his associates were kind enough to stop and pick him up before disappearing into the darkened streets of the slums.

Ururu watched the thugs flee in a mixture of wonder and disappointment. She hadn't meant to toss him so hard into the wall. Even limiting her strength as much as she did, she still managed to really hurt him. The strange thing was that he didn't seem to be that injured. Could it be that Mr. Kurosaki was right, and that the people in Honnou City were tougher than in Karakura Town?

"That's good to know," Ururu said, "That means I won't accidentally kill someone."

As strong as she was, Ururu really didn't like hurting and killing people. Fighting an arrancar to protect her friends and family was one thing, but fighting for the sake of hurting someone else greatly troubled Ururu. What was even more worrying to the perpetual depressed girl was that her strength and power, which had been relatively constant throughout her life, had begun increasing more and more in the past few months. It had gotten to the point that she was able to fight Miss Yoruichi and Kisuke on relatively even terms,

which scared her. When she expressed her concerns to Kisuke, the shopkeeper had smiled and said she was just going through puberty like all normal girls do. When she said she had questions, Kisuke told her that he's not really an expert on puberty and to go ask Isshin Kurosaki if she had any questions. With two girls of his own around Ururu's age, Isshin was bound to know the answers to her questions.

Sitting on one of the benches near the trolley station, Ururu began kicking her feet in the air. The nearby clock that hung over the station said it was almost 6 AM, so she wouldn't need to wait much longer to get to Honnouji Academy. Ururu was really looking forward to meeting Ichigo. He was, after all, the only person she knew here and Ururu didn't like meeting new people.

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"Okay class," Aikuro Mikisugi drawled as he began writing on the blackboard, "Let's get started with today's lesson. The Berlin Wall, which highlighted the divide between the Eastern and Western powers, first began construction on August 13, when the border with West Berlin was closed..."

As Ichigo scribbled down some notes on Aikuro's lecture, his mind refused to focus on what was going on. Despite his best efforts to put fight with Satsuki behind him, he couldn't help but continue to think about it. It wasn't his fault really. He didn't expect her to be so powerful and he certainly didn't think he would need to step in and save Ryuko from being killed by Satsuki. He couldn't believe Satsuki had it in her to kill someone, but he had readily recognized the look on her face in the instant before he saved Ryuko and realized what she was about to do.

Glancing left at Ryuko, who was gazing out the window with her chin resting on the palm of her hand, Ichigo didn't know what to say to her. Her fight with Satsuki had been one about honor, which was something he fully understood. If Satsuki knew the identity of the

person that attacked Kisuke and killed Ryuko's father, who was he to stop Ryuko from getting the answers she sought?

Deciding to think about such problems later on, Ichigo rolled his eyes at Mako, who was sound asleep behind an upright book, and went back to listening to Aikuro ramble on about the Cold War. Ichigo didn't know why, but he was slowly finding his attention being chipped away by Aikuro's droning voice. Just before he lost focus entirely and began doodling in his notebook, he heard a phone beginning to ring.

"Hmm?" Aikuro glanced briefly at his pocket before finally deciding to answer it. Only a handful of people know his phone number and none of them were people he wanted to get on the bad side of. Fishing into his pocket, stabbing his finger on his keys in the process, Aikuro grabbed his phone and tossed it in the air once before answering it, "Aikuro Mikisugi speaking."

What followed next was Aikuro either saying 'uh huh' or 'I understand' for more than a minute. After one last confirmation about something, Aikuro snapped shut his phone and turned to his staring class, "Well, it looks like we have a new student enrolling in our class. I have to go down to the front office and get her, but there shouldn't be a problem finding her a free seat. While I'm gone, please try and keep the chaos down to at least a misdemeanor level. I don't want a repeat of what happened the last time I stepped out of the room."

Most students remembered the last time Aikuro left early to go do something. While no one knows exactly what happened during those five minutes he was gone, everyone remembered Gamagori walking into the classroom and only half of the class walking out.

As soon as the door closed behind Aikuro, the room descended into a form of organized anarchy. No one was willing to test the limits of the Disciplinary Committee's patience and tolerance. Snapping out of her slumber at the first sign of Aikuro's disappearance, Mako quickly looked around before she reached under her desk and pulled

out a bento box that could not have physically been down there. Licking her lips and clapping her hands together, Mako proudly announced, "There's no better way to start the day than with a healthy lunch."

Ichigo watched with mild disgust as Mako dove into her lunch. Turning away from the nauseating scene before he lost his appetite for the rest of the day, he found himself inches away from a scowling Ryuko.

"Are you going to tell me about what happened yesterday or not?"

Ichigo propped his head on his hand and asked, "What's there to talk about?"

Frankly, he was getting sick and a little annoyed with the amount of rumors surrounding him. Ever since his technical defeat of Satsuki yesterday, rumors had begun spreading through Honnouji Academy about how he walked away from the fight still in clad in Mugetsu while Satsuki left tired and beaten. While Ichigo wasn't someone to let rumors get the better of him, since he knew what exactly happened, he was going to kill whoever it was that started the particular rumor about Satsuki and him having a love affair. That was perhaps the only thing he and Gamagori could agree on. Whoever found that particular person would make sure the other was informed before being the crap out of them.

Ryuko spun her chair around and sat back down, an annoyed scowl on her face, "Tell me how you managed to beat Satsuki Kiryuin."

"I didn't really beat her," Ichigo grumbled, "It was more like I wore her down."

Ryuko knew full well what Ichigo was talking about. She had gone into battle against Satsuki aware that she could only wear Senketsu for a set time before the amount of blood he consumed would render her unconscious. She had assumed Satsuki would face the same problem and was mortally surprised when Satsuki not only didn't

have that problem, but also was also far stronger than her. While Ryuko was getting her ass kicked, she couldn't help but notice that Satsuki didn't seem to be exhausted at all. Her full acceptance of Junketsu's appearance allowed Satsuki to tap into its full power with a minimal amount of blood and effort.

"So the great Satsuki has a weakness after all," Ryuko quietly pondered. Usually that would be great and fantastic news, but she had other, more important, things on her mind. One of which was how Ichigo managed to beat her, "So how did you wear her down?"

"I'm not sure," Ichigo said hesitantly. He found it strange that Junketsu had made no attempt to communicate with Satsuki. Even if she couldn't hear her Kamui speaking, he should have been able to. If what Mugetsu said was the truth, Junketsu was actively fighting against Satsuki's mental control over it. Ichigo didn't want to think about fighting Satsuki if she could wield Junketsu's full and complete power.

"I have a theory though," Ichigo sat back and folded his arms, a frown on his face, "You know how you and Senketsu work together? I don't think Satsuki has that kind of relationship with her Kamui. Mugetsu told me that she forced Junketsu into submission in order to access its power. I'm pretty sure that pissed her Kamui off. Since our powers were pretty much even, I just had to keep fighting her until she became too tired to hold back Junketsu anymore."

So Satsuki wasn't so powerful after all! That piece of news actually brought a smile to Ryuko's face. Now that she accepted Senketsu's true appearance and was working together as colleagues and partners, she could fight Satsuki on even terms, "You just made my day, Ichigo. With Senketsu's full power at my fingertips, all I have to do is fight her until she can't control her Kamui anymore!"

"I hate to say it, but that's probably not going to work" Ichigo hated to burst Ryuko's bubble, but the cold hard truth was preferable to a lie, especially a lie that could get Ryuko killed, "You know Satsuki about

as well as I do. Do you honestly think she is just going to sit back and allow you to fight her knowing she has a weakness?"

"So I'm back to square one," Ryuko slammed her head down on her desk and mumbled dejectedly, "I just can't catch a break."

"Instead of sulking, why don't you train?" When Ryuko turned her head towards him, Ichigo explained further, "I mean, Senketsu and Mugetsu give us a lot of power and speed, but training would help to boost that further. I have no intention of getting into a fight with Satsuki again unless I have no choice, but if you're so intent on getting answers from her, you should train your body and work on your swordsmanship."

"I know that," Ryuko grumbled into the palm of her hand, "After you left that night, I took your advice to heart and spent a few hours seeing how my Scissor Blade really works. It's funny. I've had it for over six months, but it wasn't until last night that I figured out I could change its size with a simple flick of my wrist. You should have seen the look on Satsuki's face when I surprised her with that. If I had been truly wearing Senketsu at the time, it would have ended the fight right then and there."

With a rusty creak, the bulkhead that functioned as the classroom door swung open and Aikuro shambled back into the classroom, but he was not alone. Several steps behind him stood Ira Gamagori, who had to duck in order to fit inside the door. While Aikuro leaned against the chalkboard with his hands in his pockets and a bored expression on his face, Gamagori stepped in the exact center of the class, folded his arms across his massive chest and addressed the seated students.

"Listen up!" Gamagori shouted loud enough to dislodge dust from the fluorescent lighting and have the teacher next door quickly duck his head inside the room to find out where all the noise was coming from, "I am only going to say this once so there will be absolutely no talking until I have finished speaking!"



"Uh..." One student in the back of the class raised his head, "Can I go to the bathroom?"

Even before the student had finished speaking, a whip shot out of Gamagori's sleeve and wrapped around the surprised student. As the student was dragged kicking and screaming to the front of the class, Gamagori grabbed him with a single hand and threw him out the room, "No speaking until I'm done!"

Gamagori waited until the noise from the student crashing through the wall died down before continuing, "If there will be no further interruptions, I would like to introduce a new student. She has just recently transferred from Karakura High School and will be starting Honnouji Academy today!"

"Ichigo," Ryuko whispered, ignorant of the slight twitch from Gamagori's ear, "Isn't that where...?"

"Yeah," Ichigo slammed his head down on his desk and groaned, "It is. Just please don't let it be Orihime or Tatsuki..."

Ichigo didn't have anything against Orihime or Tatsuki. In fact, it would have been a nice change of pace to have someone from Karakura Town here. At least he would be able to speak normally to someone without having to hold back the majority of what he knew. The reason he didn't want them here was simple - he knew some serious shit was going to go down soon. Call it instinct or intuition, but Ichigo could sense that his fight against Satsuki was only the start. Pretty soon something major was going to happen and he did not want anyone he cared about to get caught in the crosshairs. His friends were strong, but Satsuki and her Elite Four were stronger.

Gamagori's right eye began twitching as Ichigo and Ryuko blatantly ignored his rule and continued talking. Clenching his fist to stop himself from administrating their well-deserved punishment, Gamagori kept reminding himself that there would be time for punishment later. Right now he had a job to do and he would do it to

the best of his abilities, "Please give a full Honnouji Academy welcome to your new fellow student."

When he saw everyone staring incredulously at him, Gamagori double in size and barked, "I said be enthusiastic and clap!"

After a short period of fearful clapping, Gamagori calmed down and turned towards the door, "Please come in and introduce yourself to your new colleagues."

There was a few seconds after Gamagori's urging that nothing happened, but eventually a girl walked into the classroom. With her head hung downwards and a faint blush spread across her cheeks, she looked the epitome of shy and meek.

"Oh, goddamn it," Ichigo threw his head back and gave up on thinking logically. There was no reason whatsoever that she should be here. He wanted to blame Kisuke for pulling a stunt like this on him, but he was dead, or soon will be once Ichigo found him. Yoruichi wouldn't have the political or bureaucratic knowledge to enroll a student and Tessai was much more interested in looking for Kisuke. There was only one man on Earth who would pull a stunt like this and expect Ichigo to fall right in it...

"Hello," Ururu bowed respectfully to the class, her twin pigtails moving chaotically as she did so. For a few months after Aizen's defeat she had foregone her characteristic short pigtails for a more natural straight hair look. Without Jinta around to pull on them and annoy her, Ururu could go back to the hairstyle that she preferred, "My name is Ururu Tsumugiya. I'm looking forward to spending the school year with all of you."

Ururu looked around the classroom and, noticing Ichigo's orange hair, smiled softly and waved, "Hello Ichigo."

"Please," Ichigo all but begged as he dragged his hands across his face, causing Ryuko, Aikuro and even Gamagori to turn to him, "Somebody just kill me."

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Clad in a simple white robe, Satsuki stared at the struggling Kamui pinned to the wall in front of her behind a sheet of thick glass in irritation.

"What could have caused such an event?"

Iori Shiro stopped reading over the data printout and turned to Satsuki, "You'll have to be more specific Lady Satsuki."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed as Junketsu stared at her with bloodshot eyes and tried to pull itself free from its confinement, "Junketsu should have been under my thumb without any difficulty. After subduing its animalistic nature, there should have been no chance that it could have overcome my will."

As much as he wanted to tell Satsuki that there was nothing to worry about, Iori was not someone who would cover the truth to save his own ass. If he had to deliver bad news that could potentially bring him harm, Iori would do so without a single regret. Sighing wistfully, he began explaining what he found, "This was bound to happen sooner or later. While your willpower is greater than the majority of humanity's, Junketsu has a mind of its own."

"I am well aware of that," Satsuki sat down, her eyes never leaving Junketsu, "What I want to know is what exactly happened to cause Junketsu to escape my control."

"It was never under your control," Iori bluntly informed her, the perpetual frown on his face deepening as Satsuki turned to glare at him. Knowing that she wanted him to explain his reasoning to her, he continued, "You said that you had to force Junketsu to obey you through sheer willpower, correct? If that is the case then it is safe to presume that it was never truly under your control. During your fight

against Ryuko Matoi and then Ichigo Kurosaki, your willpower was enough to keep Junketsu in line. However..."

Iori trailed off and brought up the sole clip of her fight against Ichigo Kurosaki. As Satsuki watched him match her blow for blow, she couldn't help but admire his strength and conviction. To not only step in to stop her from finishing Matoi, but also fight against her with his life on the line required dedication few besides her had. Iori noticed Satsuki watching the clip and coughed gently to get her attention, "As you can plainly see, Ichigo Kurosaki pushed you beyond what you expected to face. Your battle against Ryuko Matoi required so little of your power that you didn't need to focus on the fight, allowing you to keep Junketsu in check. Once Ichigo Kurosaki stepped in and began matching you move for move, you began accessing more and more of Junketsu's power in order to keep up. Eventually... well, you know what happened."

"So what you're suggesting is that Ichigo Kurosaki pushed me beyond my limits?" Satsuki rhetorically asked. Leaning back in the chair and closing her eyes, Satsuki realized that made perfect sense. Nothing else could explain why Junketsu went berserk, "Is there anything you can do about it?"

"Not at the moment," Iori regretfully informed Satsuki, "My skills might be enough to create Goku Uniforms, but modifying a Kamui is far beyond my reach. If you are truly set on doing this, there is one person you could - "

"Don't finish that sentence," Satsuki warned Iori, a hint of venom evident in her voice. No matter what the case may be, she was never going to call *her* in for help. As she pondered what to do, Satsuki's eyes widened as an idea hit her.

"Iori, is there any indication that Ichigo Kurosaki's Mugetsu was commissioned by Revocs or anyone associated with my mother?"

"I had Inumuta look into that as soon as it was discovered he had a Kamui. As far as we can tell, Revocs is just as determined to find the

creator of Mugetsu as you are."

"I see..." Satsuki saw two paths in front of her, both of which involved choices she did not want to make. On one hand she could simply force Junketsu into submission using more and more of her willpower and mental tenacity. While that would be her nominal choice, the downside was that she would be forced to battle on two fronts, one against Junketsu and the other against her opponent. The other option would be to ask Ichigo Kurosaki for help, but that was completely out of the question. Without a shred of doubt in her mind, Satsuki knew the likelihood of Ichigo helping her was about the same as Nui Harime willingly giving her purple Scissor Blade to Matoi and allowing her to kill her.

"Unfortunately, our options on how to deal with this problem are limited at the moment," Satsuki folded her fingers in front of her face as she stared at Junketsu, "Continue working on improving the Goku Uniforms, Iori, and iron out any flaws or weaknesses you may find. I can control Junketsu for the immediate future without any problem."

"What about Ichigo Kurosaki?" Iori asked. As a loud ripping sound tore through the air, Iori and Satsuki saw that Junketsu had managed to pull a sleeve free and was in the process of escaping. Without even hesitating, he flicked his wrist and pinned the Kamui down with several large sewing pins.

"Ichigo Kurosaki will not do anything," Satsuki smirked, "As much as he cultivates the image of a punk or delinquent, he is much more complex than he appears. As long as I do not move against Ryuko Matoi or any of his friends, he will not lift a finger to fight me."

Satsuki had closed her eyes to think when a beeping noise disrupted the peace and quiet she was attempting to cultivate. Without opening her eyes, she reached for the cell phone in the breast pocket of her robe, "What is it Inumuta?"

Iori did not know what Satsuki was told, but it couldn't have been good news. He watched as the expression on her face shifted from

annoyance to confusion before finally switching to anger.

"Are you sure about this?" She asked, her tone demanding an answer. Iori couldn't hear what the answer she received was, but it must have not been the one she wanted, "Very well then. Assemble the others."

Snapping the phone shut, Satsuki stared at the device in silence, causing Iori to ask, "Is there a problem, Lady Satsuki?"

"A new student showed up this morning," Satsuki answered as she walked towards the trapped Junketsu, "Inumuta was able to determine that she registered only two days ago, which is impossible without my express consent."

"You think she's a spy?"

"Or worse," Satsuki said bluntly as she prepared to release Junketsu and force it under her will once more.

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Ichigo was trying to enjoy his lunch and perhaps have a peaceful moment at Honnouji Academy, but it appeared the fates were conspiring against him. Stalking up to him, visibly ticked off, was Ryuko. Stomping to a stop just in front of him, the scowl on her face matching his own, she scoffed at his attempt to avoid eye contact.

"What's the big idea about this girl?" Ryuko demanded an answer from Ichigo. For the past hour, he had been avoiding the question like it was the plague. Despite the evidence that he knew her, Ururu even waved to him, Ichigo refused to say a word on the subject. As soon as class had let out, Ichigo bolted through the door so fast that Mako, who had been in his way, had been left behind dizzily spinning in circles.

"It's nothing," Ichigo 'tsked' and looked away, "Just drop the subject already."

"No!" Ryuko argued and folded her arms. She was going to get answers if it killed Ichigo, "Not until you explain how you know Ururu!"

"If you're so curious, then why don't you just ask her?" Ichigo argued. Trying to stand up, he harshly discovered Ryuko blocking his path.

"You don't think I've tried," Ryuko rolled her eyes and motioned with her head to the right. Sitting on one of the decorative chains wrapping around part of Honnouji Academy was Ururu merrily eating her lunch, "I've tried talking to her, but every time I do she just gives me a one or two word answer and then ignores me complicated."

Ichigo sighed and looked up at the sky, "It's complicated."

"Ichigo?"

Ryuko nearly jumped straight into the air as Ururu, who until a moment ago was sitting down and eating her lunch more than one hundred feet away, tapped her on the shoulder. Turning around, thoroughly shocked at what just happened, Ryuko noticed Ururu was avoiding making eye contact with her.

"How the hell did you do that?"

" ***Ryuko...***" Senketsu's eye was trembling for some reason, "***Her hand was freezing cold. Unless you want to wear a frozen Kamui, don't let her touch you again.***"

"Calm the hell down," Ichigo scolded Senketsu, but couldn't help but wonder on the Kamui's specific choice of words. Mugetsu had said nearly those exact words that night when that creepy girl had touched him. Ichigo was willing to assume it was just a coincidence, but he wasn't going to ignore it. Turning to Ururu, who had been

patiently waiting for him to address her, he calmly asked, "What is it Ururu?"

"Umm... hold on a second," Ururu reached into her uniform, causing both Ichigo and Ryuko to cover their eyes. When it became clear that Ururu was simply reaching for something and not trying to undress, they hesitantly removed their hands to find Ururu holding a letter in her hand. Taking the letter from her, Ichigo looked it over in confusion.

"What is this?"

"Your dad said to give this to you," Ururu softly answered, "He also said not to take no for an answer."

"That old goat sent me a letter?" Ichigo was interested in what his dad could have possibly had the time to write, but he was mostly annoyed. Leave it to Isshin to get involved in his school life. Tearing open the letter, Ichigo began reading it, not noticing Ryuko subtly reading it over his shoulder.

*Ichigo, if you're reading this letter then you no doubt already know that I had Ururu enrolled at Honnouji Academy. Before you get annoyed or pissed off, know that it is just for your safety and protection. I mean, getting into a fight within the first week of school? That's embarrassing not just to you, but also to every Kurosaki! Your rampant disregard for social norms and rules will be death of me, so therefore I decided to have Ururu come to Honnouji. She really wasn't fitting well in Karakura High School so I thought it would be nice to her to be able to get a new start at a school where she might meet people more like her. Keep an eye on her, Ichigo, and don't forget that I am always watching you. Don't do anything stupid.*

"That bastard!" Ichigo seethed. Just before he crumpled up the letter, he noticed something written on the back, "What the hell is this, a P.S.?"



*P.S. - Don't forget to watch your back, Ichigo. An old associate of mine has no doubt taken an interest in you and, knowing them, it is not a good thing. So instead of giving you advice on what to do and not to do, I'm just going to place my faith in you. Don't screw up. After all, it's not like the fate of the world is riding on your shoulders or anything. Oh! And don't forget to find a girlfriend. I don't want to continue making excuses about your sexual orientation like I do with Uryu.*

*~ Isshin Kurosaki, #1 Dad*

"Even when giving good advice he still manages to sound like a complete moron," Ichigo groaned and turned to Ururu, "So did my dad tell you anything?"

"Yes," Ururu gazed off to the side for a moment before continuing, "He said that while I should have a fun time and enjoy the school year, I should also protect you. Don't be mad Ichigo, but your dad said you were a 'no-good hooligan who could use some help in straightening his life out.'"

"Damn that bastard," Ichigo cursed and, noticing Ururu looking upset, sighed and said, "I'm not mad at you Ururu. That old goat is always dragging people into his business."

"Ryuko! Ichigo! New Girl!"

Ichigo and Ryuko turned to find Mako Mankanshoku running towards them with a wide smile on her face. She would have been frantically waving at them if it weren't for the fact that Shinjiro Nagita was riding on her shoulders and laughing his ass off.

"Salutations Ichigo and Ryuko!" Shinjiro waved at them, "Are you enjoying this fine autumn day?"

"Shinjiro and Mako together..." Ryuko deadpanned and looked at Ichigo, who was sporting a similar expression, "How is it that he is your friend again?"

"I don't know," Ichigo shook his head in frustration, "I'm more curious about where he was yesterday. One moment he's on me like glue and the next he's just gone. It's highly annoying."

"Don't be mean to Shinjiro!" Mako slid on her knees between Ryuko and Ichigo, "He's just doing the best job that he can given his limitations!" Making a motion of typing and sporting a clear visor, Mako continued ranting, "Reporting isn't easy! It takes time and dedication! Both of which normal people do not have in abundance! That makes Shinjiro a superhero!"

As Mako struck a familiar pose, Ryuko tried to stop her before her rant reached critical mass, "Mako, I don't think you understand what we're talking about."

"She doesn't, but I certainly do!" To Ichigo and Ryuko's collective horror, Shinjiro had joined in on Mako's soliloquy. Holding out his pad and pencil, a bright purple light shining behind him, he continued, "A reporter's task in life is to go where the story is, not where it's safe! While you may have thought I was ditching you during your epic battle against Satsuki Kiryuin, I was actually knee-deep in a story!" Shinjiro made a motion of hiding under a cardboard box that randomly appeared, "There I was, hiding from the Disciplinary Committee as they tried to silence me when I stumbled upon a bewildering sight! Walking passed me was a woman carrying a strangely shaped purple weapon."

"What!" Ryuko grabbed him and began shaking him frantically, "What did you see?"

Pulling free from Ryuko's grasp, Shinjiro coughed and continued, taking a moment to remember where he left off, "So there I was, hiding beneath a cardboard box like some sort of spy, when a woman with a purple sword walked by. While I was unable to see her face, I noticed that she was wearing an entirely white outfit boots that went up to her thighs.

"Satsuki Kiryuin!" Ryuko growled and slammed her fist into the table, "I knew it was her who killed my dad!"

" ***This is awfully convenient Ichigo,***" Mugetsu warned.

"Yeah, I know." It was suspicious as hell that Shinjiro would just so happen to run into someone with a purple Scissor Blade, but also pin the blame on someone that could only be Satsuki. Still, despite all that Ichigo couldn't see what his angle was. Could Shinjiro be a spy for Satsuki and was simply trying to lead Ryuko astray or perhaps he actually *did* see the woman. Ichigo was leaning towards the former.

"Oh!" Mako gasped as she finally noticed Ururu. Grabbing the girl's hands and holding them to her chest, Mako gazed at Ichigo with wonder, "Ichigo, I didn't know you knew the new student! Would you like to be my friend Ururu?"

"Friend?" Ururu let Mako's question sink in deeply before nodding, "Yes. I would."

"Yay!" Mako leapt into the air in joy, "Mako Mankanshoku has made her fourth friend in two weeks. A new personal best!"

"Ichigo," Ururu let go of Mako's hands and turned towards him, "You dad told me that it would be nice if I were to spar with you. When do you want to get started?"

If Ryuko were to guess what Ichigo's reaction would be to Ururu's perfectly innocuous question, she would have guessed something along the lines of politely declining Ururu's offer. She, nor anyone else, expected Ichigo to back up in fear.

"Nope! No way!" Ichigo shouted as backed away from Ururu, "There's no way in hell I'm going to fight you again!"

"Really?" Ururu looked dejected, "But I brought my safety gear with me."

"That means nothing!" Ichigo pointed a finger accusingly at Ururu. Ryuko, who was confused about what was happening, noticed that Ururu didn't seem to be overly upset about Ichigo's rampant denial, "I haven't forgotten what you did to me last time Ururu, or shall I call you Little Miss Muffet? You nearly killed me with your freakish strength!"

"Nearly killed you?" Ryuko was now serious confused. There was no way that Ururu, who looked delicate enough to blow away in a strong breeze, was powerful enough to beat up Ichigo. Scratching her cheek and gazing suspiciously at Ururu, she asked, "Are you sure you're not making this up. Ururu doesn't look like she could hurt anyone."

"I'm stronger than I look," Ururu informed Ryuko before giving a small punch accompanied by a cute grunt.

"Nuh uh!" Mako crossed her arms in front of her body before reaching forward and hugging Ururu, "There is no way Ururu is a monstrous killing machine! Ichigo is just scared of fighting a girl! Isn't that right Shinjiro? Shinjiro?"

Ever since he noticed her, Shinjiro had been staring at Ururu, looking as if he was trying to recognize her from somewhere. When he noticed Mako calling out to him, he blinked and shifted his focus, "Oh, sorry Mako. I was just so entranced by Ururu that I lost track of time!"

"It's ok!" Mako nodded and pumped her fist, "Ururu entranced me as well!"

Ichigo looked back and forth before saying to Mako, "I bet you don't even know what entranced means."

"I do too," Mako defended vehemently, "It means not being conned into a crime by a policeman!"

"That's entrapment, Mako," Ryuko corrected. She couldn't understand how Mako could confuse those two words, "Anyway, I don't think - "

"We meet again, Ichigo Kurosaki, and far sooner than I anticipated."

"Satsuki Kiryuin..." Ryuko seethed as Satsuki, followed closely behind by her Elite Four, strolled towards them. Ignoring the throngs of students running away, bowing respectively or even doing both at the same time, Ryuko stood her ground defiantly, "Couldn't wait for our rematch, could you?"

Pointedly ignoring Ryuko, a small smirk appearing on her face when Ryuko became even angrier, Satsuki turned to address Ichigo more casually, "I must thank you for your help yesterday."

"Thank me?" Ichigo never would have guessed those words would grace Satsuki's lips, "For what?"

"If you hadn't fought me so valiantly yesterday, I would never have been able to discover where my current limitation is. It is due to your actions that I now know how far I can push myself and what I must do to improve. Do not assume our next fight will end with the same result."

"What makes you even think I'm going to fight you again?" Ichigo countered, catching a bit of surprise in Satsuki's expression, "I have no intention of ever fighting you again. Yesterday was just a one-time thing! Besides, I don't think someone like you would come all the way down here just to offer me a simple thank you. If you really wanted to do that, you could have just sent one of your henchmen with the message."

"Who are you calling henchmen?" Nonon Jakuzure squeaked, stamping her foot down several times in anger, "We are the Elite Four of Honnouji Academy! Who the hell do you think you are to demean us as such? I'm going to kick your ass, Strawberry!"

"Strawberry?" Ichigo sneered at Jakuzure, "Look who's calling the kettle black."

"What did you say?" Jakuzure shouted, "That's it! I'm going to kick your - "

"Do not fret, Jakuzure," Satsuki raised her hand calmly and while Nonon stopped what she was saying, she was still visibly angry with Ichigo, "Ichigo Kurosaki does have a point, after all. My purpose for coming here was not to engage in ideal chatter." Turning to Ururu, who had been talking with Mako for the last few minutes, she narrowed her eyes and asked, "And who are you supposed to be?"

"Ururu Tsumugiya," Ururu bowed respectfully to Satsuki.

"Indeed..." Satsuki's eyes narrowed before she snapped her fingers, "Sanageyama."

"Right, right," Uzu Sanageyama scratched the back of his neck as he stepped forward. Reaching for the bamboo sword strapped to the back of his Goku Uniform, he went over the plan Satsuki had told him just minutes before. He was to confront Ururu and determine who she really was. Satsuki did not like the fact that Ururu enrolled without her knowledge. Ichigo Kurosaki was something she could prepare for, given that she had three weeks before the year started to enact plans and preparations. She had nothing on Ururu and needed more information. That was where he came in.

"Look," Sanageyama sighed. He had problems fighting little girls, apart from Jakuzure of course. Say about him what you will, but Sanageyama was no bully. Investigating Ururu with his keen eyes, looking for any sign of a weapon or something, Sanageyama couldn't figure out what it was about Ururu that interested Satsuki so much. Still, he couldn't refuse a direct order, "I really don't want to fight you, so why don't you just do us all a favor and tell us who you really are?"

"Who I really am?" Ururu's eyes rolled upwards as she pondered the question. She knew who she was, and even told them, so why were they asking again? She couldn't understand the question, so she answered as truthfully as possible, "My name is Ururu."

Sanageyama let out a deep breath and glanced back at Satsuki. When he saw her subtly nod, he groaned and pulled out his bamboo sword, "I guess we have to do this the hard way."

"Picking on a new student just because she knows Ichigo? That's low, even for you, Satsuki Kiryuin!" Ryuko growled angrily and reached towards the pin on her Seki Tekko. Even if she had just met Ururu, Ryuko was not about to just sit back and allow her to get hurt.

" *Such naïveté,*" Satsuki didn't know if Ryuko was simply ignorant of the world outside of her revenge or just ignorant in general. As much as Ryuko paints her as a heartless and ruthless leader who would gladly sacrifice her followers to win, in reality she had no intention of Sanageyama attacking Ururu. Satsuki had her suspicions about who Ururu truly was, but after the debacle involving Ichigo and his Kamui, which she had no knowledge of until he exposed Mugetsu to her, she was not about to make assumptions.

Before Ryuko could pull out the pin and activate Senketsu, she found a firm grip around her wrist stopping her. Following the arm and noticing that it was Ichigo, she was about to argue when she noticed a familiar look in his eyes. She had seen the look before, and it could only mean that Ichigo knew something about Ururu that she didn't.

"Don't," he warned, "Just watch. You'll understand just how strong Ururu is in a few moments."

"Get ready to taste my bamboo sword!" Sanageyama shouted as he ran towards Ururu. Despite his bluster and seemingly crazy attitude, Sanageyama had no intention of harming Ururu besides a few light taps on her body. He had practiced long enough with his Blade Regalia to stop his bamboo swords within an inch of a target. This

meant he could swing his blade so quickly that the untrained eye couldn't follow it only to give his target a light tap on the head.

Sanageyama expected a few things to happen, ranging from Ururu attempting to dodge his blade all the way to taking a full hit without reacting. He never in his wildest dreams anticipated her simply reaching up and grabbing his bamboo blade out of the air in the palm of her hand.

Ururu looked down at the bamboo sword in her hand that Sanageyama was struggling to remove from her grip, "Why did you attack me?"

The calm way that Ururu asked him greatly disturbed Sanageyama. At that moment he knew that he had gotten in over his head against an opponent far stronger than himself. Before he could think of a plan to free his bamboo sword, Ururu gently squeezed her hand and shattered it into splinters of wood. As Sanageyama tried to rationalize what just happened, Ururu raised her hand and gently flicked him on the forehead, causing him to go tumbling backwards along the ground.

"Holy crap!" Ryuko shouted in shock. She was not the only one that was stunned at Ururu's superhuman strength. Satsuki and her Elite Four were of similar mind, which Gamagori's mouth hanging wide open and Inumuta frantically typing on his PDA in an attempt to find a logical source of Ururu's strength.

"That's Ururu for you," Ichigo sighed and rubbed his temple. Leave it to Ururu to complicate his life without even meaning to. He just hoped she had matured enough to not go into what he dubbed her 'killer mode' and pulverize Sanageyama into dust.

"How could a girl like that be so strong?" Ryuko, who was no lightweight herself when it came to fighting, paled in comparison to Ururu. Ignoring Mako, who was still entranced by Ururu, and Shinjiro, who was watching the fight almost religiously, she noticed Ichigo



wasn't even shocked. In fact, he looked like he had seen this all before.

"I told you she was strong," he repeated in a half-bored tone, "You didn't believe me. Now if you don't mind, I have to stop Ururu before she kills Sanageyama."

Across the courtyard, picking himself off the ground, Sanageyama was beginning to think attacking Ururu was a mistake. How could someone that small and introverted have such phenomenal strength? He couldn't figure out where she was getting her power and to top it all off, Ururu had shattered his bamboo sword. Pushing himself back onto his feet, Sanageyama reached towards the collar of his Goku Uniform. Satsuki may have ordered him not to use his Blade Regalia, but if he didn't do something, there was a high chance that Ururu was going to kill him.

"I didn't want to have to use this," he muttered, "But you left me no - "

Sanageyama found himself brutally and painfully cut off as Ururu basically teleported over one hundred feet and grabbed him by his neck before lifting him off the ground with a single hand.

"I'm sorry, but you are a threat," Ururu informed Sanageyama sadly as her hand squeezed down tighter on his throat. As Sanageyama struggled to both breath and free himself from her grasp, Ururu pulled her left arm back and clenched her hand into a fist. She didn't want to have to end the fight like this, but Sanageyama had attacked her without provocation. Letting him leave would be dangerous in the long run, "Goodbye."

"That's enough, Ururu! Let him go!"

Ururu tilted her head to look at Ichigo, who was walking towards her. Lowering her fist slightly, but continuing to hold Sanageyama aloft in the air, she said, "But Ichigo..."

"I know he attacked you," Ichigo said as he approached her, "But you know he couldn't have hurt you even if he tried. Put Sanageyama down."

"Ok..." Ururu stared at the ground sadly. She hadn't even been at Honnouji Academy a day and she's already messed everything up. She wanted to leave what happened at Karakura High School behind her, but it seemed that no matter where she went, she always let those around her down. Releasing her grip on Sanageyama's neck, allowing him to collapse onto the ground in a breathless heap, tears began welling up in her eyes. She was just about to cry when Ururu felt a hand patting the top of her head.

"There's no reason to cry," Ichigo consoled her gently, "Granted, you kicked Sanageyama's ass pretty badly, but I don't think you did anything wrong."

Ichigo had experience dealing with this sort of thing. Karin may bottle up her emotions and act like the only adult in the family, but Yuzu always wore her emotions on her sleeves. Even though Ururu might have freakish strength and be able to kick his ass, she was still just a fifteen-year-old girl.

Feeling slightly better now that she knew Ichigo wasn't angry with her, Ururu noticed Sanageyama on the ground and began apologizing profusely, "I'm really sorry about what I did to you."

"Err... I... uh..." Sanageyama didn't know what to say to be honest. One moment he was getting his ass kicked by a girl and the next she was apologizing for kicking his ass. Sanageyama was confused as hell, so he said the only thing that came to mind, "... It's not a problem."

Ichigo would have turned and left with Ururu at that point if he didn't find his way blocked by Satsuki, who was staring alternatively between Ururu and himself.

"That was impressive, Ichigo Kurosaki," Satsuki didn't know how he managed to make Ururu stop, but somehow he had control over her. For a time Satsuki was convinced that she would have to intervene to stop Ururu from killing Sanageyama, but to her surprise, and interest, Ichigo was not only able to make Ururu stop but also apologize for her actions. Satsuki was getting more and more interested in Ichigo Kurosaki, "I suppose saving Sanageyama's life puts me in your debt?"

"No, it doesn't," Ichigo looked to the side and noticed Ryuko making her way towards him followed closely by Mako and Shinjiro. He had a feeling that he was going to have to explain what just happened in far more detail than he would have liked, "Saving someone's life shouldn't require being paid. I stepped in and stopped Ururu before she could seriously hurt Sanageyama because it was the right thing to do. There is no more to it."

As he began walking away with Ururu, he asked, "Did my old man say anything else to you?"

"Uh huh," Ururu nodded as she followed closely behind him, "But he said not to tell you anything since it would ruin his big plan."

Ichigo's shoulders slumped, "Of course that bastard would say something like that..."

Satsuki watched Ichigo leave with a puzzled look on her face. Just when she thought she was beginning to understand how Ichigo Kurosaki thought, he comes and proves her wrong. Sheathing Bakuzan back in its scabbard, she glanced down at Sanageyama, who was sitting on the ground recovering his strength.

"Did you learn anything from your defeat, Sanageyama?"

"Yeah," Sanageyama nodded and laid on his back, "Don't go picking fights with little girls unless I want to get my ass kicked. Did you get everything that who needed?"

"Yes. Your assistance was invaluable in collecting data about Ururu Tsumugiya, although I must apologize. I had not expected her to possess such strength or speed. If I had known, I would have given you permission to use your Blade Regalia from the very beginning."

"I have a question, Lady Satsuki," Still on his back, Sanageyama turned his head towards where Ichigo was arguing with Ryuko Matoi about something. Watching Ryuko throw her hands up into the air in defeat, he asked, "That girl, Ururu, is she the one that you warned me about?"

She shook her head, "She is not, but that only makes her more dangerous. Ururu Tsumugiya is a very dangerous variable, even more so than Ichigo Kurosaki or Matoi. Fortunately for us, she seems to have no inclination to stand against us."

"She looks up to Ichigo though," Sanageyama remembered how easily Ichigo had saved his life, "Couldn't he, you know, order her to attack you?"

"If there is one thing about Ichigo," Satsuki smiled softly and Sanageyama failed to notice that she had dropped Ichigo's last name, "It is that he is honorable. His saving of your life shows that he is someone that does not throw away lives callously. If he was, he would have simply stood back and allowed Ururu to finish you off."

"Yeah," Sanageyama popped off the ground with a groan and felt several of his bones creak, "So what's the plan now?"

"For now we do nothing," Satsuki turned and began walking back towards the academy, "Tomorrow is No-Late Day. I need you to help Gamagori set up the athletic obstacles. With the inclusion of Ichigo and Matoi, I think we'll need to up the difficulty of the course this year to weed out the weak from the strong."

# Disco Inferno

*\*Well, here is Chapter 13. You might notice this chapter is slightly longer than the last one, which is a good thing. I've reached over 60,000 views! That is the most any of my stories have reached and now I'm hoping to make 100,000.*

*\*To be honest, I found writing the No-Late parts of this chapter to be incredibly boring, which is why I condensed all of Episode 4 into this chapter. Of course everything ends quite a bit differently than in canon, which is a good thing!*

*\*At the end of this chapter you will find the first of my omake segments titled "Kamui Tales." Expect nothing that is told in them to be canon. They are here just to be funny or to break the fourth wall. That is all.*

*\*Also, check out **Kill el Kitsune** by The Swordslinger . It is probably one of the only good Naruto / Kill la Kill crossovers on the site and I highly recommend that you read it. You won't be disappointed.*

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## Chapter 13 - Disco Inferno

Ichigo opened his eyes and immediately felt as if he had gone ten rounds with Zaraki Kenpachi.

Pulling himself out of bed, he yawned and looked out the window as he remembered what was so special that he had to get up before the crack of dawn. When Satsuki Kiryuin gathered all the students yesterday afternoon and announced that today was No-Late Day, Ichigo had immediately thought she was joking. That line of thought

had quickly ended when Gamagori stepped forth and proceeded to bellow out directions on where to go and when to be there by.

"What the hell is wrong with this place?" Ichigo groaned and stood up. Whoever thought it was a great idea to have No-Stars, which he technically was one of, race through an obstacle course for a chance at a One-Star Goku Uniform was insane.

Glancing at his clock and seeing that it was nearly three in the morning, Ichigo grumbled and cursed Gamagori one more time before shuffled past a slumbering Mugetsu, a snot bubble expanding and contracting every few seconds from just below her collar, and into his kitchen.

Flicking on the lights, Ichigo's eyes took a moment to adjust to the abrupt change in brightness. Once he was able to see, he went to grab a bowl, passing by a smiling Nui Harime, who was watching him with a single blue eye full of mirth. In his tired state of mind it took Ichigo a moment, but after a few seconds he put together what he just saw. Quickly turning around towards where he had seen Nui, he frowned when he found the spot where he had been sure she was standing completely empty.

"It's too early in the morning for this crap," Ichigo muttered. He must be more tired than he thought if he was seeing things that weren't there. Shrugging it off, he opened his refrigerator and pulled out the carton of milk. As he turned around and kicked the door shut, Ichigo caught out of the corner of his eye Nui Harime lying on top of his fridge, her legs kicking aimlessly in the air and her chin propped on her hand.

Ichigo managed to take several steps before he quickly spun around and once again noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

"I'm losing it," Ichigo looked around his room, his eyes focusing intently on the various shadows in search of something, anything, that might explain what he was seeing. After more than a minute of fruitlessly searching for Nui, he gave up and sat down to hopefully

enjoy his breakfast before leaving to go take part in the stupid No-Late Day.

"Do you really need to participate in No-Late Day?" Nui Harime asked from right next to Ichigo, "After all, it's not as if Satsuki can do anything to you."

"Ryuko and Mako are there, so I might as well go," Ichigo answered before his mind could inform his mouth that there shouldn't be anyone talking to him, "I don't trust... Satsuki... to..."

With his spoon held frozen in midair, Ichigo slowly turned his head and saw a smiling Nui inches from his face, " *Bonjour* Ichigo!"

"Gah!" Ichigo fell out of his chair. From on the ground, he pointed at Nui, who was watching him in amusement, and shouted, "How did you get in here?"

"Gosh you're silly!" Nui bobbed her head back and forth as she briefly pondered Ichigo's obvious question, "I can go wherever I want, and no one can stop me!"

"That's nice," Ichigo growled as he regained his composure. What was with people breaking into his room to talk to him? It started with Rukia right after he obtained her shinigami powers, then the rest of the shinigami and now he had this blonde haired girl smiling at him. How long had she been in his room waiting for him to awaken? Both his door and windows were locked, which meant she had gotten in without taking the obvious ways. Standing back on his feet, "But get the hell out of my room before I call the Disciplinary Committee... I can't believe I just said that."

"Why should I leave?" Nui stood on toes of her feet and leaned forward to stare more closely at Ichigo, a smug smile on her face, "It's not like I did anything wrong. Besides, those sticks in the mud will never be able to do anything to me. You should know that by now, Ichigo!"

As much as he wanted to think otherwise, the girl had a point. From both her display of strength the other night and her ability to break into his room without getting caught, it was clear she was not someone to screw around with. Deciding to find out what she wanted, he sighed and asked, "So what do you want with me?"

"There's no rush to talk," Nui twirled around and took a few steps away from him, "But if you must know, I decided to come and check up on you. I saw your fight against Satsuki was and was very impressed. Simply *incroyable* . But enough about that! I came here to tell you that I was not the one that attacked Kisuke Urahara. "

Ichigo narrowed his eyes as Nui basically admitted to knowing Kisuke, "How do you know about him?"

Nui smiled and propped a fist against her cheek, "You ask me such silly questions, Ichigo, but I like that you go directly to the point! Do I look like someone that can take down a fully grown man?"

"Yes."

"La vie est drôle!" Nui slid forward until she was leaning inches from Ichigo's face, "That is so untrue! While I am strong, I couldn't possibly have killed Kisuke Urahara. I was far too busy keeping an eye on you."

Ichigo's blood froze in his veins, "What?"

Nui smiled as she saw the gears in Ichigo's head click into place. He was quite smart, so she knew he would eventually figure out what she meant. That was one of the things she liked about him. Clapping her hands behind her back, she puffed out her cheeks, "I already told you that we're family, so it makes sense that I would check up on you, right? Of course I couldn't get too close, but I made sure to watch you when you were at school, out with your friends, walking your sisters home... I've seen it all."



"But that just makes you even more interesting!" Nui continued, ignoring Ichigo's shocked face. Raising a single finger in front of her lips, she whispered, "So perhaps it is time that I introduced myself. They call me Nui Harime, but let's keep that our little secret. If people find out I'm here, then I'm going to have to start killing them to keep my secret safe. You don't want the deaths of some humans on your hands, do you Ichigo?"

Ichigo went to say something when the door to his dorm, for the second time in less than a week, was blasted off its hinges. Standing in the smoking frame with her fist extended out from her body, was Ururu Tsumugiya.

Ichigo stared at the black haired girl in confusion. How had she known he was in trouble or, better yet, where he lived, "Ururu? What are you doing here?"

Clad in a standard No-Star uniform, Ururu never took her eyes off of Nui as she answered, "I sensed that you were in danger. I came as soon as quickly as I could."

"That super impossible!" Nui smiled menacingly at Ururu, "There's no way that you could have sensed I was here. I made sure of that long before introducing myself to Ichigo."

"You can say whatever you want," Ururu stood protectively in front of Ichigo as she answered, "But I was able to sense something wrong with Ichigo."

"Wait just one second," Ichigo mentally calculated how far away the One-Star Residential District where Ururu was staying was from his dorm. Coming to a conclusion that didn't make much sense, he asked, "How did you manage to get here so fast?"

"Please don't doubt my abilities, Ichigo," Ururu scolded, which was a weird turn of events for Ichigo coming from the usually meek girl.

"It doesn't matter how strong or fast you are!" Nui cheerfully pointed out, bringing a hand up to cover her mouth. Giggling softly with her single eye closed in mirth, she moved forward to touch Ichigo and prove her point, "After all, you're just a naked ape! You cannot even touch - "

There had been exactly eleven times in Nui's life that she had been truthfully shocked at a turn of events and not just trolling with people's emotions. Being tricked by Isshin Matoi into taking his Scissor Blade and losing an eye in the process was one of those times. Another was Kisuke Urahara distracting her long enough for someone to take the Kamui he was working on from his shop. The most shocking turn of events was that time when... actually that was a story for another time! The important thing is that what was currently happening to her raised that total to twelve.

"How odd..." Nui glanced at the hand clasped around her wrist in confusion. Her hand, which was inches from Ichigo's heart, was held firmly within Ururu's grasp. Attempting to pull herself free, quite an easy feat for someone like her, Nui found to her continuing interest that she couldn't do so.

"Please do not touch Ichigo," Ururu said gently, but Ichigo could detect the threat in the shy girl's tone, "If you continue to try and do so, I cannot guarantee your safety."

"That's so cute of you!" Nui beamed as she tried to pull her arm free, this time with more force, only to find Ururu's hand still firmly gripping her arm. How fascinating! Nui didn't know who Ururu was or where she came from, but after the events of the last two days, she really wanted to find out more about her, "You can actually restrain me, if only for a little bit. How strong of a human are you, anyway?"

"Strong enough to stop you," Ururu replied evenly, squeezing down on Nui's wrist with enough pressure to break a normal person's femur. If she was feeling any pain or discomfort from the pressure, the Grand Couturier was skilled at hiding it.

"Stop me you say?" Nui hummed to herself as she thought about what to do. Going with the easy route, she smiled and stuck out her tongue, "Stop me from doing what? I haven't done anything to Ichigo. All I came to do was introduce myself to my cousin! If anyone should be stopped, it should be you. I'm not the one threatening to kill someone."

"You're wrong," Ururu answered calmly. Without giving away any indications, her leg snapped out as she tried to kick Nui. The Grand Couturier's single blue eye widened in surprise as he attack approached her face before she spun cartoonishly over Ururu's leg, freeing herself in the process.

"How fun!" Nui flipped backwards and landed delicately on her feet near the entrance to Ichigo's dorm. With the same cutesy smile plastered on her face as always, she looked directly at Ururu, "I do hope we meet again, I look forward to crushing each and every hope and dream you have for interfering in my conversation with Ichigo! Goodbye Ichigo! I got things to do so don't be a stranger!"

Ichigo watched as Nui strolled out of his room, her giggles quickly fading away as she went. Waiting a moment before deciding to move, he ran to the door and stuck his head out only to find the hallway completely deserted.

"Where the hell did she go?" he asked himself. There was only one way up to his room, and that was the elevator at the far end of the hall. There was no way that Nui Harime, or whoever that girl was, could have made it to the elevator and left in the few seconds between leaving the room and Ichigo sticking his head outside.

"Damn," he cursed and leaned back inside his room. There was something off about the way Nui Harime moved and talked. The way she called Ururu a human implied that Nui was anything but one. Damn, why did he have to come to Honnouji Academy and complicate his life so much? Turning to walk back inside, Ichigo stopped and stared when he saw Ururu sitting at his table eating the bowl of cereal he had prepared for himself. When she saw him

staring at her, Ururu mumbled a simple excuse with her mouth still full of food.

"I was hungry."

"Yeah, yeah," Ichigo waved off Ururu's comment and went to make himself another bowl. Sitting down at the table across from Ururu, he asked the question that had been bugging him ever since she showed up, "How did you know Nui was here?"

Ururu lowered the spoon in her hand before answering, "I don't know. I just remember waking up and feeling that you were in trouble."

"There's something off about Nui," Ichigo concurred, "Usually I can get a sense of a person's motives or feelings, but I got nothing from Nui. It's almost as if she doesn't have a reason for doing anything."

"I don't like her Ichigo," Ururu mumbled, "Stay away from her."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Ichigo sat back in his chair and sighed. Someone he just knew he was going to fight Nui someday, and at his current level he wasn't sure he could beat her even with Mugetsu's help. He needed to figure out a way to get stronger, but without his spiritual powers he had no idea on how to proceed. As an idea sprang to mind, Ichigo paused momentarily before asking, "If it came down to it, could you defeat Nui?"

"I... don't know," Ururu's gaze was cast downwards as she answered, "I was unable to tell much from her movements, but she was holding back a lot of her strength."

"That's what I figured," Ichigo would have said more, but he was distracted when sirens began going off in the distance. Freezing up as he realized what was happening, he looked at the clock and saw that it was almost ten minutes to four. Cursing as he leapt to his feet, Ichigo frantically began running around the dorm.

"Damn it! I'm going to be late!"

"Ichigo..."

"Oh man, I still haven't brushed my teeth or taken a shower or..."

"Um... Ichigo?"

"Huh?" Ichigo turned to Ururu, who had been calling his name,  
"What is it Ururu?"

"Um..." Ururu pressed two of her fingers together nervously, "I can get you down to the starting line in less than five minutes."

"You can? That's great!" Ichigo, still clad in a pair of pajamas and a white t-shirt, began heading to his bedroom to retrieve Mugetsu,  
"Just let me get - "

He was cut off as Ururu grabbed him and proceeded to leap out of his window into the early morning Honnou City air, but not before spinning around and kicking his door back into place. For the rest of the day, the various One and Two-Star students, still asleep in their own beds, would say that they had the same dream of someone screaming in fear.

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Sitting on the guitar case holding her red Scissor Blade, Ryuko looked at Mako in confusion as she explained the concept of No-Late Day, "No-Late Day? What the hell is that?"

Mako took a deep breath and opened her mouth to answer, but was stopped as a spiked ship exploded out from behind some nearby houses. Ryuko and Mako watched in awe as it sailed directly over their heads before crashing to the ground on the other side of the street. Standing with his arms crossed in front of his massive chest

and laughing manically the entire time, Ira Gamagori was completely unperturbed as he literally crushed dozens of people underfoot.

"I notice that you are confused by what is happening, Ryuko Matoi! Shall I give you a hint?"

"Oh it's you, that Elite Four jerk..." Ryuko stared daggers as Gamagori smirked down at her, "Gamagori bastard, right?"

"Hold your tongue, Ryuko Matoi!" Gamagori shouted angrily as Ryuko referred to him by Ichigo Kurosaki's insulting nickname, "I am Ira Gamagori, Disciplinary Committee Chair and a member of Honnouji Academy's Elite Four! You will do well to remember that!"

"Great, I know your name now," Ryuko yawned into her hand. No one should be forced to get up at four in the morning, "So why don't you just skip the introductions and explain No-Late Day already."

"Humph, very well then," Gamagori snapped his fingers and immediately one of the One-Star students lined up behind him handed Gamagori a megaphone. Turning it on and facing Ryuko, he began shouting so loudly that Ryuko and Mako's hair was being blown back, "No-Late Day is an event that occurs once a semester here at Honnouji Academy! In order to combat the rising tide of slackiness amongst you No-Star students, the Disciplinary Committee springs various surprises and obstacles to whip you into shape!"

"Slackiness?" Ryuko scoffed and placed her hands on her hips, "That's not even a real word."

"Yes it is!" Gamagori shouted indignantly and held out a small brown booklet, "If it is printed in the Honnouji Academy Disciplinary Guidebook, it must be the truth!"

"You wrote that, didn't you?" Upon receiving a nod of affirmation from Gamagori, Ryuko grinned, "So you're saying you didn't know slackiness wasn't a word when you wrote it?"

"Enough!" Gamagori shouted into the megaphone loudly enough to cause several nearby students to be blown away, "I will not stand for such slander from a slacker like you, Matoi! One more outburst from you and you will be immediately expelled! Am I clear?"

"Whatever," Ryuko sat down and waved dismissively, "Just get on with it already."

Gamagori narrowed his eyes, "At 4 AM, the sirens placed throughout the slums will go off, signaling the start of No-Late Day. All No-Star students are required to evade the various traps that have been built with all the technology available to the Disciplinary Committee and make it to Honnouji Academy before the first period bell rings at 8:30 AM! If they happen to be late, they are immediately expelled. What do you think of - WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU WEARING, RYUKO MATOI?"

Finally noticing Ryuko clad in extremely tight and form-fitting orange pajamas with white bunny head print, Gamagori shouted, "What kind of slacker outfit are you wearing?"

"What?" Ryuko looked down and immediately blushed and futilely attempted to cover herself, "My Kamui's being washed at the moment! It'll be dropped off any minute now!"

"Excuses! Excuses!" Gamagori declared bombastically, "All I hear from your slacker mouth are excuses, Ryuko Matoi! Attempting to go to school in such a slovenly outfit is degrading to woman everywhere, not to mention a mortal insult to Lady Satsuki! MORTAL INSULT!"

"Ah! Is it though?"

Gamagori took a step back in shock as Mako Mankanshoku seemingly vanished from where she was standing next to Ryuko and reappeared in front of him. As he looked around for any sign of how she did that, Mako puffed her cheeks out and began explaining.

"Ryuko can't get blamed for anything because she was asleep until only a couple of minutes ago! It makes perfect sense for someone sleeping to wear pajamas. That shouldn't be something to laugh at! Don't you wear pajamas when you go to sleep, Gamagori?"

Gamagori coughed nervously, "Uh... no, I sleep in the nude."

Mako wagged a finger at an embarrassed Gamagori, "You shouldn't do that! If you sleep in the buff, you'll be sure to catch all kinds of illnesses. If you were to get sick, then how would you be able to work to your full potential in an emergency such as a war, meteor impact or alien invasion? Please be sure to wear pajamas like a normal person when you sleep!"

Gamagori stared down at the much shorter Mako, "Tell me, what is your name?"

"I am Mako Mankanshoku! My favorite pair of pajamas has one Mt. Fuji, two hawks, and three eggplants printed on them!"

"You say you're Mankanshoku? I'll be sure to remember that in the future," Gamagori nodded sagely before turning his ire back to Ryuko, "Matoi! What you're wearing right now doesn't concern me anymore, but do you think you can reach the academy without the help of your Kamui?"

"I don't know." Ryuko grumbled sarcastically, "Do you think you can ask a question without sounding like a complete asshole?"

Gamagori's eyes glowed with a malevolent yellow light, "Such arrogance! As a member of the Disciplinary Committee I will not stand for such slander! Prepare yourself, Ryuko Matoi, for... wait a second, where is Ichigo Kurosaki?"

Even with the variety of different colored hair in the crowd of No-Star students, Gamagori could not find the annoyingly familiar crop of orange. This was not according to plan. Lady Satsuki had expressively said that Ichigo Kurosaki had to participate in No-Late



Day. His absence would jeopardize her, and by proxy his own, plans. Folding his arms menacingly, he glared down at the still oblivious Ryuko and asked, "Why is Ichigo Kurosaki not here?"

"What I am, his keeper?" Ryuko yawned and scratched her cheek, "Why do you care if Ichigo's not here? I thought you were looking for an excuse to expel him?"

"Ichigo Kurosaki will be expelled, have no doubt in your mind about that!" Gamagori hastily came up with an excuse. He found himself feeling quite proud of his imagination as he continued, "But being expelled in such a matter is unbecoming of someone like him. When Ichigo Kurosaki is to be expelled, it shall be a momentous occasion at the hands of Lady Satsuki, with the entirety of Honnouji Academy in attendance! Tell Ichigo Kurosaki to get here pronto!"

"How am I supposed to do that?" Ryuko asked sarcastically while motioning to her pajamas, "I don't have Senketsu and like hell I have a cell phone."

Gamagori was saved from having to come up with another excuse when he caught a glint of something in the sky. His eyes narrowing in confusion, he raised a hand to his forehead, "What in blue blazes..."

His comment was cut short as something flew downwards and crashed into the ground directly in front of the ship he was on, causing Gamagori to wobble as he tried to keep his balance. As the smoke cleared, Ururu calmly walked out and saluted him, "Ururu Tsumugiya, reporting for duty."

"Oh god..." Ichigo held his head as he stumbled out of the crater. With the world spinning around him, all he wanted to do was go back to bed, "Note to self - don't accept Ururu's offer to help ever again."

"Ichigo Kurosaki..." Gamagori stared at the orange haired youth with what could not be confused with anything but satisfaction, "You are just in time for the start of No-Late Day. I was beginning to think you

were too scared to show your face. Now then, let us... where is your Kamui?"

Ichigo glanced down at his attire before pointing a thumb at an oblivious Ururu, "You can blame her for this. She dragged me out of my room before I was able to get dressed. For what possible reason would I want to go out looking like this?"

Much like Ryuko had been dragged out of Mako's house while Senketsu was getting cleaned, Ichigo had been forced to attend No-Late Day without the help of Mugetsu, who was probably still asleep in his room. But while Ryuko was clad in a pair of pajamas several sizes too small for her, exposed both the bottoms of her arms and legs as well as her midriff, Ichigo wore a simple sleeveless white shirt and a pair of sweatpants. The annoying thing was that he could *feel* the various stares of the female students ogling him. Tatsuki had managed to scare off every girl that had eyes on him back in Karakura Town, but Ichigo wasn't sure he could fend off admirers in Honnouji Academy, especially when nearly all of them wore Goku Uniforms that granted them supernatural powers.

Noticing Ryuko's gaze on him, which quickly shifted to the opposite direction, Ichigo asked Gamagori, "Do you mind if I go back to bed? I have much better things to do with my time, like sleeping or getting my teeth pulled."

"That is an interesting suggestion. Let me consider that for a moment." Gamagori adopted a pensive pose and began humming while tapping the detonator switch in his hand against his cheek. After about a minute, he stopped, looked down at Ichigo and pressed down on the button, "NOT A CHANCE!"

With that simple press of a button, there were a series of explosions as spiked ramps and staircases appeared throughout the city, "Beyond the Disciplinary Committee's greatest masterpiece! The Honnou City Mighty Guard!"

"Amazing!" Mako watched in awe as various traps and obstacles appeared in front of her eyes, "It's like the entire city turned into an amusement park! I've never seen something so awesome before! It certainly tops last semester's No-Late Day! Ah!"

Mako checked her watch fearfully, "We don't have much time before our first class starts. We gotta get moving!"

Ryuko blinked once before a smug grin adorned her face, "The people here really like to hear themselves talk. You ready for this Ichigo?"

"Nope."

"Huh?"

"This is completely stupid," Ichigo declared and emphasized his point by waving towards Gamagori, "Who in their right minds would allow someone as insane as this bastard to create a death course?"

"But we have to do this, Ichigo!" Mako cried and pointed to her watch. When Ichigo looked at the watch, his eye began twitching because instead of an actual watch, there was just a miniature Mako with her arms spinning around in circles, "If you don't participate, you'll be expelled and be forced to go back to Karakura Town and your normal life!"

It couldn't be that easy, could it? Ichigo thought it over for a moment, which was longer than he thought it would take, before deciding to stay. While he would have easily taken the choice of getting expelled if it meant going back to Karakura Town and away from all this craziness, he didn't put it past Satsuki Kiryuin to make up some excuse for him to remain at Honnouji Academy. Then there was Nui Harime. Ichigo didn't know what to make of her, but he wasn't willing to take any chances. If that girl could get inside his locked dorm room without being detected, then it was reasonable she could track him to Karakura Town.

"Ah, damn it! Fine." Ichigo scowled and stared up at Gamagori, "I'm ready for this stupid thing whenever you are, Gamagori bastard."

"That's right!" Ryuko shouted in agreement, pointing her red Scissor Blade at Gamagori, "These traps aren't going to slow us down at all!"

"As you wish!" Gamagori shouted and stamped his foot down. One day he was going to get Ichigo Kurosaki to address him with the proper respect, "All students commence commute! Forward, march!"

Ichigo and Ryuko were the first two out of the gate. Ichigo managed to get in the front of the pack by jumping on top of the crowd and stepping from head to head until he reached the front while Ryuko used her Scissor Blade as an impromptu battering ram and simply knocked the students out of the way.

"Ichigo! We can't get separated from Mako and Ururu!"

"I know," Ichigo glanced over his shoulder and saw Ururu and Mako in the front of the pack of No-Star students. While Mako looked like she was running for her life, and was as exhausted as she should be, Ururu appeared to be doing nothing more than a light job, "But Mako's with Ururu, so she'll be safe."

"We should slow down," Ryuko suggested between breathes, "And let them catch up."

Back at the finishing line, Ira Gamagori heard Ryuko's suggestion and grinned viciously as he pushed a special button labeled 'In Case of Protagonist Teamwork', "Not if I have anything to say about it, Matoi!"

Just as Ichigo and Ryuko ran through the first checkpoint, a large gate came crashing down, causing the students at the front of the pack to crash into it comically. When Mako saw the trap being activated, she closed her eyes and prepared for the worst, but was surprised when Ururu grabbed her by the hand and jumped out of the crowd of students onto a side street.

"I'm safe?" Mako felt around her body, making sure everything was in place, before she shouted happily, "I'm safe! Thank you for saving my life!"

"Don't mention it," Ururu said with a small smile on her face, "But we should keep moving. We don't want to be late after all."

"Ah! You're right!" Mako screamed and began running up a large flight of stairs, ducking and weaving around giant saw blades, "Let's get going Ururu! Nothing can stop a Mankanshoku when they have their eyes on the prize!"

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"Do be sure to be on your best behavior, Uryu," Ryuken Ishida warned his son as he adjusted his tie for the third time in five minutes. Taking a drag from the cigarette in his hand, he breathed out deeply, "I do not want to have to tell you what will happen if you make a fool of yourself."

"Who do you think I am, Ichigo?" Uryu snorted and looked away from his father and out the elevator. He had honestly thought he would never come back to Revocs. After he managed to steal the Life Fibers and give them to Kisuke Urahara, he was sure that Revocs would send someone after him, but after months passed with nothing happening, he grew complacent. That was when he heard that Kisuke had been attacked and was now missing, "I don't know why you brought me with you to one of your business meetings if all you're going to say is how much I'm going to disappoint you."

"What makes you think I was talking about my reaction to your behavior?" Ryuken glanced at Uryu and, noticing the puzzled look on his son's face, continued, "I was warning you to be on your best behavior because if you don't, Ragyo Kiryuin will most likely kill you."

"What?" Uryu thought his father was joking.

"Ragyo is not a woman to be trifled with," Ryuken said in a tone that someone discussing the weather might use, "She's a highly motivated woman who will do anything in her power to advance her goals. Even I would be hesitant to confront her after getting on her bad side. To put it in perspective, take what you know about the hierarchy of power in the Soul Society and throw that away. The only person on Earth that could possibly stop Ragyo after she sets her eyes on something she wants is your friend Ichigo's father, and even that is a gamble at best."

Uryu didn't know what to say. He had heard from Ichigo that his father was a shinigami able to fight evenly against Aizen Sosuke, but what was so special about him? As the elevator dinged, signaling their arrival at their destination, Uryu went to step out only to find his father's arm blocking his path.

"Follow my lead and do not say a word unless spoken to," Ryuken warned his son, "Despite whatever her appearance may be, Ragyo is not someone to underestimate nor should you underestimate the Grand Couturier if she happens to be at the meeting. You may not believe it, but as your father I do care for your wellbeing. Now come, we have arrived."

The two of them stepped out of the elevator and was immediately confronted by Ragyo's personal secretary and assistant, Rei Hououmaru. The dark skinned woman looked at Ryuken before shifting her gaze to Uryu.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Ishida," Rei greeting Ryuken politely and shoot his hand, "Lady Ragyo has been expecting you, but we did not know you would bring company."

"This is my son," Ryuken answered as stoically as Rei, "I brought him today so that he may gain experience in the field of business. I trust that with the topic of today's discussion there will not be any issues with my decision?"

"Of course not," Rei motioned with her arm for them to follow her, "Your meeting with Lady Ragyo contains nothing proprietary nor confidential. I am sure she will not mind having your son observe the meeting."

"Thank you," Ryuken stubbed out his cigarette on the ashtray near the entrance to Ragyo's office. One thing he had learned over his various interactions with the woman awaiting him was that she did not like anyone smoking in her presence, "Come, Uryu. We should not keep Ragyo waiting any longer."

As Rei opened the door to Ragyo's office, Uryu heard a smooth and silky voice speak and immediately broke out in a cold sweat.

"It is good to see you, Ryuken Ishida," Ragyo Kiryuin addressed the businessman with a tone as close to respect as she would ever give. While to her Ryuken may be a normal human, she had to respect the man's ability to ruthlessly dominate the medical industry with the same efficiency as she did clothing, "And I see you brought your son. What brought on this development?"

"I don't think that is relevant to our meeting," Ryuken answered calmly, "But I suppose you won't be satisfied until you receive an answer. I brought Uryu so that he may experience how I conduct business with my clients. Books are one thing, but actually experiencing the world at large does more for personal evolution."

"Indeed it does," Ragyo turned to Uryu, "Tell me, son of Ryuken, how did you find the experience at Revocs? Was it everything you hoped and dreamed it would be?"

Remembering what his father instructed him to do just minutes ago, Uryu coughed and adjusted his glasses, "I found the experience to be very illuminating. While my father permitted me to work in the local branch of his hospitals, it was completely different working at Revocs. I am gracious that you allowed me to work here for as long as I did."

"How polite," Ragyo sat down in her chair and propped her cheek on her hand, "And so well behaved. If my Satsuki was anything like your son."

Ryuken glanced around Ragyo's office and noticed something missing. It hadn't hit him initially, due to the fickle nature of who he was looking for, but now that he had time to think about it, it was quite obvious. The Grand Couturier was nowhere in sight. While that would have normally been a good thing, Ryuken did not like standing in the same room as the Grand Couturier, her absence greatly alarmed him. She had been at every single one of his meetings with Ragyo, so her absence was not a good sign.

"I do believe that is enough about our personal lives," Ryuken said softly to gain Ragyo's attention without seeming rude, "Shall we get down to business."

Ragyo motioned for Ryuken to take a seat, "But of course. Have you read through my proposal?"

"I did," Ryuken nodded, "Several times in fact."

"And?"

"Before I make my decision, I have a question," Ryuken folded his hands in front of his mouth, "What will be the cost of supplying my hospitals with Revocs-brand clothing?"

"Right down to the crux of the matter as always," Ragyo chuckled, and it was not a sound that Uryu would want to hear a second time, "As head of the Ishida Conglomerate, which controls most hospitals in Asia and Europe, you are poised to influence and benefit the lives of half of humanity. I wish to be a part of that whichever way I can. Therefore I have decided to extend to you a very generous offer. Each doctor, nurse, and staff member at each hospital will receive Revocs uniforms, which will repair small tears on their own and will repel blood and other hazardous liquids and materials. All of this will be completely free of charge."



"Free of charge?" Ryuken might have looked composed, but Uryu knew his father was greatly disturbed by something. It wasn't very apparent; a slight twitch of the man's finger, but it was enough to know something was wrong, "Free is such a broad term. A man such as myself cannot presume to think my definition is the same as yours. Please explain what you mean."

Ragyo leaned back in her chair, "I am referring to cost. What else could I possibly mean?"

"Free to one person may not be to another," Ryuken narrowed his eyes and flicked his wrist, "Shall we discuss what happened during your supposed partnership with Sears-Macys, which controlled the entirety of the American apparel market until they signed a partnership with Revocs? Within a matter of months, a series of lawsuits and whistleblowers brought the company down, leaving your company free to move in and corner the market, as per the agreement you signed."

"Surely you don't mean to imply that I had something to do with the rapid collapse of Sears-Macys?" Ragyo smirked and steeped her fingers in front of her face.

"Of course not," Ryuken shook his head, "Such a notion would imply that you possess abilities that are far beyond that of a human. I am simply expressing concern for the nearly two million people working at my hospitals and clinics that would be affected by such a monumental decision."

"I assure you Ryuken that my offer is nothing but beneficial," Ragyo's eyes glanced over to Uryu, "But I feel as if you made your decision long before you arrived."

"Indeed," Ryuken chuckled dryly, "Your offer is quite generous and I could see the benefits of such an arrangement, but I'm afraid I will have to decline your offer. The current apparel cost of my hospitals is nowhere near the point where a complete change of brand would be

necessary, even if it were free. I hope you have a good day. Come, Uryu, we are leaving."

Uryu said nothing as he followed his father. As he left Ragyo's office, he could not help but think that he had turned his back on someone ready and willing to kill him. The look that Rei Hououmaru gave them as they walked towards the elevator did not help. When the elevator doors closed, separating Uryu from the two people he did not want to fight, he turned to ask his father what just happened only for Ryuken to speak first.

"Be on your guard, Uryu," Ryuken's eyes were narrowed, "We will not be able to leave Revocs unharmed."

Uryu could sense something wrong, "What are you talking about?"

"Ragyo is not one to take rejection well," Ryuken reached into his suit and pulled out several sewing needles, each of which was emblazoned with the Quincy symbol, "Do not give me that look. Your Quincy powers will not work on someone like Ragyo or anyone like her. If we are to get out of here alive and with our minds intact, we need to fight at her level. When the doors open, I will provide a distraction while you run to the car. Do not try to assist me. I may not have known Ragyo for as long as Isshin Kurosaki, but I know her well enough to realize she had no intention of allowing me to leave no matter what my answer to her proposal was."

"Are you crazy?" Uryu raised his voice to his father, "I'm almost as strong as a shinigami captain! I can - "

"Do nothing but die needlessly," Ryuken interrupted harshly, "If what awaits us in the lobby is who I think it is, it will take someone the likes of Zarakii Kenpachi's level to at least slow her down. You would not be able to do anything more than draw her attention. Once you have her attention, she will easily and painfully kill you. That is all there is to it."

"What awaits us?" Uryu wanted answers to what the hell was going on. What on Earth could make his father, a man whose picture was in the dictionary right next to the words stoic and unemotional, panic?

When the elevator doors opened, Uryu and Ryuken noticed the lobby, which had been packed to the brim of Revocs employees and managers, was now dead empty. Empty, of course, for one person standing in the middle of the exit and facing them, a large smile on her face.

"It seems I was correct in how Ragyo would confront us," Ryuken removed his glasses and handed them to Uryu, "Watch these for me. I will be coming back for them."

Uryu looked in worry at his father's glasses before turning to the blonde haired girl across the lobby, "Who is she?"

"She, my son..." Uryu did not fail to notice that Ryuken called him 'his son.' That could only mean that Ryuken was serious about what was to come, "... is the Grand Couturier and is someone that should not be trifled with. If I do not go all out against her from the very start, I will die. Now go."

Uryu heard a girlish giggle in response to his father's declaration and barely caught a glimpse of purple before the entire lobby exploded around him.

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Ryuko stared daggers at the obstacle blocking her path. The wall stretched upwards over two hundred feet starting at the base of the slums all the way to the One-Star Residential District. If that were all it was, Ryuko wouldn't have a problem with it. The issue was that there were plastic explosives instead of plastic handholds. That meant she had exactly ten seconds to move before she was blasted

off the wall. While that had already happened to her twice, she had managed to save herself by stabbing her red Scissor Blade deep into the metal wall and was using it as an impromptu seat.

"The Disciplinary Committee sure went all out on this thing."

"Tell me about it," Ichigo grumbled from next to Ryuko. Suppressing a yawn, he added, "How the hell did Satsuki manage to build this death course overnight?"

"Beats me," Ryuko shrugged, "But it just makes me want to kick her ass even more."

It was amazing how much Ryuko learned about her Scissor Blade on the fly. While she knew she could shrink it down to the size of a normal pair of scissors, knowing that she could also expand it to double its length opened up various possibilities. Now all she needed was a name for the technique... Decapitation Mode sounded appropriate. After all, the Scissor Blade expanded into a sword that looked like it could sever Life Fibers with but a flick of her wrist.

"This is crap," Ichigo groaned and leaned back before quickly realizing there was nothing to lean against. After recovering his balance, he said, "What the hell does Satsuki have against me? She knows she can't expel me, but she puts me through No-Late Day? What is she up to?"

"Perhaps the great Satsuki Kiryuin has a crush on you?" Ryuko smiled mischievously at Ichigo, who was about to deny it before seeing the look on her face. Waving off Ichigo's annoyance, Ryuko added, "I'm kidding. You thought I was serious? I don't think Satsuki even knows what love or compassion feels like."

"You're really funny," Ichigo muttered sarcastically.

"So now that we're stuck here for the time being..." Ryuko was temporarily cut off as a massive explosion sounded off nearby. Staring at the section of the death course that the explosion

originated from, she could see several No-Stars being ejected into the atmosphere after stepping on booby trapped panels, "Anyway, since we have nothing to do for at least a few minutes, perhaps we should get to know each other a bit better."

"What?" Ichigo stared at Ryuko suspiciously, "Is this really the time for that?"

"Get you're mind out of the gutter!" Ryuko shouted and punched Ichigo hard in the shoulder. Rubbing her sore knuckles, although she did manage to hurt Ichigo in the process, she grumbled, "I wasn't asking about *that* . I'm curious to know more about you."

Ichigo sighed, "Such as?"

"How you managed to piss off Satsuki Kiryuin so much," Ryuko emphasized her point with an exaggerated waving of her arm, "There's something about you that really annoys her, not to mention that you were able to go toe to toe with her using Mugetsu."

"I'm not that special," Ichigo folded his arms and frowned, "And it's not like I try and find trouble. Trouble always seems to find me. I just wanted to have a normal school year, but as I expected I got drawn into some weird crap. I didn't even know about Life Fibers, Goku Uniforms or Kamui a month again."

"Really?" Ryuko didn't know anyone that wasn't aware, at some level, of what Life Fibers were. When she was travelling around the Kanto region, Ryuko overheard many people talking about what Life Fibers were, with theories ranging from simply a name for a top secret Revocs clothing line to some type of government invention. She didn't know anyone that *didn't* know what they were.

"Have you ever been to Karakura Town?" When Ryuko shook her head, Ichigo continued, "It's probably the most normal place in Japan. There's none of this Life Fiber crap. Nothing was out of the ordinary and people didn't have clothing that gave them

superpowers. The worst we had there was a fake ghost hunter that had a really annoying and stupid laugh."

"Sounds nice," Ryuko sighed wistfully, "Perhaps I'll visit after I find out why my dad was killed. I spent most of my childhood in boarding schools, never fitting in with the other kids and thinking my dad didn't care for me."

"Well, you're not going to get any closer to finding out anything sitting around here," Ichigo argued and pointed to something in the distance, "Look."

Ryuko followed Ichigo's line of sight and saw a series of explosions rocking the One-Star Residential District, "Are those explosions?"

"Yes," Ichigo stood on top of the Scissor Blade and stretched his shoulder. Raising a hand to his forehead and staring at the remaining distance he had to climb, he added, "We should get out of here before Gamagori starts wondering where we are."

"Why should I care what he thinks?" Ryuko countered and propped her chin in the palm of her hand, "He wants to expel me, remember?"

"I remember," Ichigo leapt towards the nearest handhold. After quickly getting his grip, he began climbing up the wall at a rapid pace, but not before adding, "But I really don't want him to wonder what's taking us so long. He might just decide to come and check up on us."

Ichigo had a valid point. As much as she despised No-Late Day, Ryuko didn't want to give Satsuki or any of her minions an excuse to expel her. Crouching on top of her Scissor Blade, she spun around once, removing the blade in the process, and latched onto two handholds. Panicking slightly when her left hand slipped off, Ryuko quickly recovered and followed after Ichigo.

They reached the top of the wall after only a few minutes of intense and nerve-wrecking climbing. After Ichigo climbed over the top of the wall and reached the relative safety of a completely horizontal surface, he turned and offered Ryuko a hand. Both of them, completely exhausted from the climb, lay on their backs and stared at the sky.

"Damn it..." Ryuko huffed tiredly, "I don't ever want to do that again."

"Ugh," Ichigo groaned in response, "Knowing Gamagori, he has another trap waiting around the corner."

"Screw... him..." Ryuko cursed in between breaths.

As the two of them lay on the ground, the sound of a helicopter approaching could be heard. They barely had a moment to consider what was happening before a Revocs helicopter ascended over the lip of the wall and turned to face them.

"I must congratulate you two on completing the Wall of Despair," Sanageyama shouted over the din of the whirring helicopter blades. Hanging out the side of the helicopter, one hand grabbing a handle and the other his bamboo blade, he smirked haughtily at his exhausted targets, "But did you think No-Late Day would be a simple physical challenge? Lady Satsuki wants to test both your physical and mental aptitude. Prepare yourselves! The true Mighty Guard has only just begun! Fire!"

At Sanageyama's signal, the helicopter's pilot fired all eight of the helicopters missiles at Ichigo and Ryuko, trails of winding smoke expanding behind them as they flew towards their targets.

"Shit!" Ichigo curse as he sprung to his feet and ducked under a missile.

"Can you feel the pressure?" Sanageyama laughed as Ichigo and Ryuko attempted to avoid being hit, "Let this be a lesson to you. Do not mess with the Elite Four!"

"Is he trying to kill us?" Ichigo yelled over the din of exploding missiles.

"What the hell do you think?" Ryuko answered sarcastically as she used her Scissor Blade to cut a missile in half lengthwise. As the two sides of the missile exploded on either side behind her, she growled and began running away, "We can ask him later, but for now let's just run away!"

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While Ryuko and Ichigo were having extended difficulty reaching Honnouji Academy, courtesy of Sanageyama's contributions to Honnou City's Mighty Guard as well as his revenge against Ichigo for the humiliation he suffered the previous day, Ururu and Mako were have trouble of an entirely different kind.

"Faster! Must go faster!" Maiko Ogure shouted hysterically as she pointed out the window with her good arm at the giant spiked ball chasing after them. It didn't make sense how a ball could be rolling uphill towards them.

"I'm trying!" Mako blubbered as she floored the gas and shifted gears, causing the bus to lurch forward, "But I don't know how to drive stick!"

After they got separated from Ichigo and Ryuko due to Gamagori's interference, Mako and Ururu were forced to follow the course as it sprung hidden traps and obstacles on the two girls. Surprisingly enough, the obstacles and traps they encountered weren't that difficult or dangerous. Mako remembered Ururu stepping on a hidden panel and getting a giant boxing glove to the face. She couldn't stop laughing when Ururu just continued to stand where she was completely uncaring about everything before ripped the boxing glove off its spring and throwing it at a nearby One-Star Observational Stand.



"Then learn!" Maiko screamed as the spiked ball grew closer and closer. Scrambling towards the front of the bus, she pushed Mako aside and took the wheel. Punching her hand through her cast, she declared passionately, "Move over. I'll drive!"

Gripping the wheel and pulling hard to the right, Maiko caused the One-Star armored bus to swerve violently out of the way just as the spiked ball passed through and continued up the road before bouncing off the edge and falling to the slums below. As the bus skidded to a stop, Maiko breathed heavily and gave Mako a thumbs-up, "That's how you drive a bus!"

"Wow..." Mako had stars in her eyes and grabbed Maiko's shoulders, "You have to teach me how to drive like that."

"I'm sorry to interrupt..." Ururu meekly said from in the back of the bus. Throughout the entire ordeal with the spiked ball, she had been sitting in the very back of the bus without a care in the world. Pointing out the window, Ururu continued, "But it appears that we have visitors."

Maiko and Mako looked outside and, true enough, relatives of the One-Star students that lived in the area were beginning to gather around the bus.

"Do you think they're here to help?" Mako asked innocently.

"No! Hang on!" Maiko shouted and floored the gas pedal. As the tires of the bus screeched to life, the One-Star citizens began pulling out different types of weaponry ranging from handguns to RPGs and opened fire on the bus. It was only due to the fact that the One-Star bus was armored to the teeth that the three girls managed to get out of the trap alive and uninjured.

"It should be smooth sailing from here," Maiko turned her head around and grinned, "The armor on this bus should be able to stop all that small caliber fire. All that's left to do is go through the Two-Star Residential District and we're home free."

"That was a close one," Mako wiped sweat off her forehead. Sitting down on a bullet-ridden couch, Mako's face lit up, seeming to remember something important. Reaching into her No-Star uniform, she pulled out a cloth-covered box and turned to Ururu, "Mom said that you should eat more, Ururu, since you're all skinny and thin. Here, have half of my breakfast!"

"Really?" Ururu tilted her head to the side and took what Mako was offering her. Opening the container and seeing the steamed rice, natto and nori stacked neatly inside, Ururu smiled softly, "Thanks Mako, but I already had breakfast."

"So did I!" Mako answered proudly as she dove into her food, "But we're growing women! We need all the calories and nutrients that we can get if we want to grow up tall and beautiful!"

"Ok," Ururu made a show of eating Mako's food. She was not really hungry, but she didn't have it in her to say no. As Mako was busy eating, Ururu stared at Maiko. She couldn't explain why, but she was getting a bad vibe from the crippled girl. Ururu had learned early on to trust her senses and if they were telling her that Maiko was not to be trusted, she was going to believe them, but she couldn't just attack her. Despite whatever her motives may be, Maiko was still just a normal human. If she tried to subdue her, Ururu wasn't certain she wouldn't injure Maiko further.

"I have a question," Mako looked happily at Ururu, her breakfast already fully devoured, "How do you know Ichigo?"

"How do I know Ichigo?" Ururu's mouth was slightly agape as she thought about the question, "I helped train him to become stronger. That's all."

"Train him?" Mako looked perplexed as she continued, "I know you're super strong and fast, but how could you be Ichigo's sensei? You're so young and - "

Mako was cut off as Maiko slammed on the brakes and harshly turned the bus. As Mako flew forward, only saved from crashing into the side of the bus by a timely intervention from Ururu, Maiko shouted back, "Hold on to your hats! It's going to be a bumpy ride. What the... oh, come on already!"

Ururu and Mako looked in the direction Maiko was pointing and saw several turrets on the roofs of nearby buildings, all of which were trained on them.

"Holy moly!" Mako shouted in fear. Waving her arms around dramatically and in a panic, she turned to Ururu, "Save us with your super powers!"

"Super powers?" Ururu had never thought of her abilities like that. Smiling at the comparison, she stood up and nodded, "Ok, but please keep your head down. I don't want you to get hurt in the crossfire."

Mako tilted her head in confusion as Ururu reached down her No-Star uniform and pulled out the impossibly large and repurposed for combat against the living, Senren Bakusatsu Taihou Mark II.

"Wow..." Mako stared at the weapon in Ururu's hands with what could only be described as awe, "What in the seven kingdoms is that?"

Ururu's favored weapon of choice for fighting enemies at a distance was the Senren Bakusatsu Taihou. The problem with the original model was that the missiles and rockets fired from it weren't very effective against anything stronger than an average hollow. If she tried firing it at a shinigami or arrancar, they would easily be able to avoid the missiles and counterattack.

The Mark II was designed by Kisuke to help alleviate some of those issues. While it was the same general shape and size as the original model, it weighed nearly four times as much as the original. To a normal human such a change would make the already heavy

weapon impossible to wield, but Ururu found no difficulty from the increased weight. The added weight had a purpose, though Kisuke didn't tell Ururu or anyone about it. During his research involving Life Fibers, Kisuke took the Senren Bakusatsu Taihou and weaved Life Fibers throughout its construction, leading to nearly a ten-fold increase in the amount of power and destruction it was able to cause.

Ururu glanced at her cloth-covered weapon, "This is Senren Bakusatsu Taihou. Please get down. I'm not sure how big the recoil is going to be."

When Mako nodded and ducked down, her hands covering her hair, Ururu reached up and punched a hole clear through the roof of the bus. Sticking her head out of the newly formed hole, Ururu looked around for the nearest turret. Once she spotted it, she raised the Senren Bakusatsu Taihou, closed her right eye, and fired.

Only one missile left the weapon, but the recoil was enough to cause the bus to swerve slightly to the right. The missile flew towards the nearest roof before exploding into a myriad of smaller projectiles that all homed in on the various turrets and took the emplacements out in one enormous and beautiful cacophony of colors and purple stars.

Mako stared at the colors with stars in her eyes, "How pretty..."

From the driver's seat, Maiko's reaction was identical to Mako's, but for an entirely different reason. Her whole plan had been to intercept Ryuko Matoi during No-Late Day and gain her trust before stealing her Kamui for its magnificent power. Not only did she not end up running into target, but she also ran into two of her friends, one of which was apparently a supernaturally strong freak of nature. Her plans were in tatters and she didn't even reach Phase Two yet!

"If you're all done back there, I could use some covering fire on our flanks!" Maiko needed to keep her cover as a poor and injured No-Star student for just a little longer. There were still a few

contingences she could play, "Those turrets aren't all Lady Satsuki has planned for us!"

"Right," Ururu nodded and stuck her head back outside. With the wind blowing her pigtails back, she looked up as several unmanned drones, a gift from the Aerial Warfare Club, began heading towards their position. Raising Senren Bakusatsu Taihou back onto her shoulder, she took a deep breath and fired.

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Ichigo and Ryuko stumbled into Honnouji Academy with almost half an hour to spare. Their bodies were covered in various burns and scraps, their clothing was torn and they were completely exhausted, but they had made it in time.

"Ichigo Kurosaki... and Ryuko Matoi." Standing to the side with a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other was Ira Gamagori. Wearing a pair of reading glasses that made him look smarter than he actually was, he checked their names off the list in his hands, "Both of you are on time. I am thoroughly surprised. Nevertheless, congratulations on completing No-Late Day! You two are among the few No-Stars with the grit and determination to complete the challenge on time and relatively uninjured! Kudos to you both!"

"Shut up you frog bastard," Ichigo cursed as he continued to walk past Gamagori without stopping, "I don't care what you say or do to me, but I'm going back to bed."

"Not so fast..." Gamagori warned, "First period begins in half an hour. That gives you enough time to get changed. I will not allow you to go to class dressed like that!"

"Oh shut up," Ichigo retorted and groaned. Why did Honnouji Academy have to be so freaking insane? It wasn't just the fact that everyone seemed to be in the pocket of Satsuki Kiryuin. It was also

that everything seemed to be bordering on the cusp of the impossible. Goku Uniforms and Kamui that granted the wearer supernatural strength and durability... if Ichigo hadn't experienced it with his own eyes, he would have thought it was bullshit.

"Hey, did Mako or Ururu make it through yet?" Ryuko tried to look at the clipboard, but Gamagori angrily moved it away.

"Mankanshoku and Tsumugiya..." Gamagori leafed through the pages and pages of students before coming onto the two names he was looking for, "No. Both students have yet to make it to the academy and with only twenty five minutes remaining, their chance of staying enrolled is quite slim."

It was at that moment, tempted by either fate or Gamagori's words, that a loud explosion sounded from just outside the entrance to Honnouji Academy before a One-Star bus, or what was left of one, flew through a hole in the walls surrounding the academy.

Ichigo stared at the flying vehicle, his face the epitome of skepticism, "What the..."

"... hell?" Ryuko finished. Noticing something strange about the bus, she narrowed her eyes and made out a familiar crop of hair, "Wait a second... is that Mako?"

"What did you say? MANKANSHOKU!" Gamagori shoved Ichigo aside and glared at the flying bus. It wasn't that he cared about who was on it so much that it was breaking enough of Honnouji Academy's rules to give him a conniption, "Mankanshoku! Honnouji Academy transportation vehicles are not to ascend more than ten feet above the ground and I know you are not wearing your seatbelt! Don't make me come up there and get you!"

"I'm sorry Gamagori!" Mako's tear-filled voice echoed through the air as she stuck her head out the window, "But I'm not the one driving this crazy thing!"

"That is not a legitimate excuse!" Gamagori began listing off all the other rules Mako was breaking, but was cut off when the bus crashed into the middle of the academy courtyard. After a moment or two of nothing but silence, the door to the bus was blasted off its hinges, courtesy of a kick from Ururu, and Mako leapt out, closely followed by Ururu and another girl who was tied up and unconscious.

"I'm all ok!"

"Glad to see you're alright Mako," Ryuko sighed in relief that Mako wasn't injured. Noticing the third student, she asked, "Who's that?"

"Huh?" Ururu looked at the unconscious Maiko before addressing Ryuko's question, "Oh. She said she's the Head of Trap Development for the Disciplinary Committee. I wasn't really paying attention, but when she tried to attack us I was forced to defend myself."

"Maiko Ogure!" Gamagori's voice was loud enough to wake the unconscious girl. As Maiko sputtered back to the waking world, she looked around and cowered once she saw Gamagori, "What are you doing outside?"

"I... was... um..." Maiko desperately tried to think of an excuse but her mind just couldn't come up with anything.

"NO EXCUSES!" Gamagori appeared to triple in size as he rained down his punishment on the poor girl, "You were supposed to remain within the control room and keep an eye on the various traps and obstacles throughout the course. What reason could you possibly have for leaving your station to participate in No-Late Day? Did you have an ulterior motive?"

"What?" How had Gamagori figured it out? There was no evidence that she had done anything wrong, "How could you think that? I was participating to simply make sure everything was working correctly! As the designer of most of the traps, I knew my way around them

and how they should work. I couldn't afford for them to be broken or nonfunctioning! I was just taking the initiative!"

"That makes perfect sense!" Gamagori nodded sagely, "But I am no fool. On the miniature scale model of Honnou City in the control room I found the evidence I need to charge you with treason against Lady Satsuki! Maiko Ogure! You are expelled from Honnouji Academy henceforth!"

As Maiko collapsed to a sobbing heap on the ground, Gamagori strolled past the four remaining students. With his arms folded behind his back, he turned to Ichigo, "I realize that I may have kept you four here due to my position as the Disciplinary Committee Chair. For that I apologize. I will grant the four of you an extension of fifteen minutes to get to class before being expelled. Do not make my leniency unnecessary."

With his honor intact and the rules of Honnouji Academy enforced once more, Ira Gamagori walked towards Honnouji Academy with his mind free of troubles. Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi both managed to get to the academy before time ran out, which meant that he had fully completed his objective. He needed to inform Lady Satsuki that they did so without the use of their Kamui. Satsuki had designed the obstacles Ryuko and Ichigo were to face to require the use of Kamui to survive. The fact that they did so without Kamui implied that the Mighty Guard just wasn't hard enough.

"Ok," Ichigo rubbed his forehead and groaned, "Now that my morning is officially ruined, I'm going to go to my room and take a shower. I'll catch up to you guys later."

"Bye Ichigo!" Mako waved vigorously to Ichigo before turning to Ryuko, "How was No-Late Day Ryuko? Did you enjoy it? Was it fun? Was it? Was it?"

"Calm down, Mako," Ryuko had to press down on Mako's head to stop the girl from bouncing around. Once her friend appeared to



relax slightly, Ryuko looked around and asked, "By the way, where's your dad with Senketsu?"

"Oh!" Mako smacked her head as she remembered something important, "Dad dropped off Senketsu a while ago! It was so strange that just as he was about to hand over your uniform, he suddenly swerved to the left and ran smack dab into a telephone pole! You should be happy that Ururu managed to somehow grab Senketsu along the way."

"Ururu has Senketsu?" Ryuko leaned to the side and looked at Ururu, "Are you sure?"

"Ururu!" Mako called out to her new friend, "Can you please give Ryuko her uniform back?"

"Oh," Ururu reached down the front of her No-Star uniform and pulled out a coat hanger with Senketsu hanging off it. Ryuko noticed that the Kamui's eyes were swirling around and it looked like he was about to throw up, "Here you go."

**"Where am I? What just happened?"** Senketsu blinked and looked around. Once he saw Ryuko, he began struggling to get free. After managing to pull himself off the hanger, he cried tears of joy and leapt into Ryuko's surprised arms, **"Ryuko! I'm so happy to see you! You don't know how horrible my day's been!"**

"Calm down, Senketsu," Ryuko was embarrassed by her Kamui's display and was just glad that Mako and Ururu apparently couldn't hear his speak, "What are you talking about?"

**"It was terrible!"** Senketsu blubbered nearly incoherently in her arms, **"Mrs. Mankanshoku cleaned me so thoroughly that my Life Fibers are still quaking in fear. Granted, the ironing was pleasant and I wouldn't mind doing that again, but please don't allow her to clean me again! I know I'm hand wash only, but I don't think I'll survive another cleaning by that woman! She cleaned me in places I didn't know existed!"**

"Fine," Ryuko rolled her eyes dismissively as Senketsu split in two before sliding on her body. As his suspenders snapped into place, she said, "I'll find out from Ichigo who washed Mugetsu. Will that make you feel better?"

Senketsu sighed contently and tightened himself around Ryuko, ***"Yes. Yes it will. Mako's mother uses too much detergent for a delicate garment like myself anyway."***

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## **Kamui Tales**

"Hey Ryuken, I've been wondering something for a while now..."

From his desk, Ryuken Ishida stopped writing his latest report to briefly turn his eyes towards his old friend, "I was unaware that you had the mental capacity for concepts such as thinking. I'm impressed. You must have been practicing all day just to get this far."

"Smart ass," Isshin rolled his eyes and leaned against the nearby wall. He was dressed in a fine black suit, which made him look badass in his own opinion, and huffed indignantly. Why Ryuken treated him like a child completely escaped him, "Anyway, isn't it strange that you and Ragyo have similar hair colors and are the CEO's of world-spanning conglomerates?"

"I would refrain from pursuing such a line of thought," Ryuken warned and glared at Isshin.

"I'm being completely serious here," Isshin continued completely unconcerned about the potential danger he was in, "The readers are sure to pick up on this and begin to ask questions! Everything makes sense if you really think about it. Both of you have silver hair, are really snooty to those beneath you and have children with dark black

hair. If I was a reader of this story, I would assume that you two were related."

A barrage of sewing needles and pins, numbering in the hundreds, flew at Isshin, causing the man to duck and weave his way to safety.

"What the hell, Ryuken?" Isshin called back as he fled the room towards the relative safety of the hallway, "It was just a simple question!"

"That was completely uncalled for!" Ryuken responded as he chased after the former shinigami captain, throwing pins and needles along the way, "Comparing me to Ragyo like that. You must pay for your insinuation!"

"Ah!" Isshin grabbed a chair and used it to block the projectiles, "Why are you attacking me anyway? You know I'm essential to this story!"

"You only think you're essential," Ryuken towered over Isshin, a backdrop of light making the Quincy seem even more malevolent, "I'm sure Ichigo can do what he needs to do without your help. Now, as for your punishment, I'm sure someone like you will be perfectly fine in a couple of hours."

"Now hold on..." Isshin tried to persuade his old friend to not kill him, "Let's just think things logically for a moment..."

# Psycho Killer

*Well, here is chapter 14 and after the annoyance that was Episode 4 and No-Late Day, this was so much easier to write. In fact, I had most of this done two days ago, but I spent a lot of time making sure I did everything up to my usual standards while also introducing several major (and minor) plot points and revelations. So take away from this what you want.*

*A favorite character of the anime makes his appearance in this chapter, but how will the addition of the Bleach universe change things up? Read and find out!*

*I appreciate each and every review that comes in for this story. They motivate me to write faster and get the chapters out as soon as I feel they are ready. Enough about that, let's get on with the story!*

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## Chapter 14 - Psycho Killer

"I'm coming!" Isshin Kurosaki shouted tiredly as he shuffled down the steps towards the front door. Whoever it was that was calling better have a good reason for doing so at three in the morning. He was in the middle of a fantastic dream involving his old lieutenant, a box of chocolate and, for some reason, his cousin. Isshin didn't know what to make of the dream, but he was willing and determined to go back to sleep and find out what it meant first hand.

"Alright already," he grumbled irritably as he unlocked the door, "I heard you the first - "

"Sorry for late call, Isshin," A battered and bloody Ryuken Ishida greeted him from across the threshold, "But I could really use your

help."

As Ryuken collapsed to the ground, Isshin quickly stepped forward and caught his old friend before he could hit the ground. Wrapping Ryuken's arm around his shoulder, Isshin began carrying him into his house, "What the hell happened to you?"

Ryuken coughed harshly before answering and grimly smirking, "Revocs tried a hostile takeover."

Isshin led Ryuken into one of the two patient rooms in the Kurosaki Clinic and laid the doctor on the examination table. Pulling out a pocket flashlight, Isshin began removing Ryuken's blood-soaked clothing in order to examine his wounds, "Revocs, huh? What, did you lead an all-out assault on Rago herself? Even I could have told you that was a dumb idea."

"Enough with the patronizing, Isshin," Ryuken grunted as Isshin examined a rather large gash on his thigh, "I was at Revocs strictly for business. I had no intention on getting into a life-or-death battle with the Grand Couturier that started in the lobby before spilling out into the nearby street."

"Nui Harime..." Isshin's eyes narrowed as he spotted something deep within one of Ryuken's wounds. It was just like Nui Harime to strike where the most amount of blood could be split but where the chances of dying quickly were minimized. Placing his flashlight in his mouth and biting down on it to keep it in place, he leaned in closer to get a better look at what he thought he was seeing. After just a second Isshin got the conformation that he needed.

" *Leave it to Nui to try something like this,*" Isshin sighed and rolled backwards along the floor in his chair. He really should have expected the Grand Couturier to try something like this. It was, after all, her modus operandi when it came to long-term assignments given to her by Rago.

"Why don't you start at the beginning," Isshin needed to figure out what Ragyo's plan was. Granted, he knew most of it, or at least he thought he did, but it was always helpful to have new information. Life Fibers were a rather dirty business and Ragyo was in so deep that she couldn't see the surface.

"I should have realized something was wrong when Ragyo invited me to Revocs to finalize a business deal," Ryuken bit back a grunt as Isshin started disinfecting and sewing his larger wounds shut. When Isshin gave him a perplexed look, Ryuken rolled his eyes, "I had no intention of actually going through with it. I needed to find out what Ragyo's true motive was. I know the woman almost as much as you do. Anything she touches quickly becomes hers, whether it wants to or not. I know that lesson quite well. I thought with my power and intelligence I would be prepared for anything she tried."

"So I take it you refused her offer as politely and respectfully as possible?"

"Of course," Ryuken nodded and watched as Isshin began wrapping bandages and gauze around the large wound on his torso where Nui had gotten a clean hit with her purple Scissor Blade, "I knew the moment I left her office that Ragyo wasn't going to let me leave Revocs alive. I told Uryu to run to the car while I held off any opposition that might come after us. I did not expect Ragyo to send the Grand Couturier personally."

"Nui really did a number on you. I'm counting at least six major and ten minor wounds. From the looks of it, she was using that Scissor Blade she is so fond of," Isshin chuckled before breaking out into laughter, "After all these years of putting up with your insults about me not being a real doctor, look who is the first person you go to after fighting Nui!"

"I do not miss the irony of the situation," Ryuken argued, "Even with the information you gave me on Nui Harime's combat prowess, I still found myself outmatched in both speed and power. That blade of hers made my Blut as meaningful as paper armor. I do not doubt that

without your information I would be dead. However, the most frightening thing about her was her nearly instantaneous regeneration. I cannot count how many times I landed a hit on her only for the blood and wound to disappear a moment later. I only managed to survive by allowing her to hit me before pinning her to a concrete wall several meters off the ground with needles pierced through her hands, feet, stomach, neck and shoulders. It may not have hurt her, but it bought me enough time to get away."

"What about Uryu?" Isshin thought about what he needed to do. If he wasn't careful, it could end quite badly for his friend.

"Uryu is fine," Ryuken had ordered his son to the basement level of the Karakura Hospital as soon as they got back. While he wasn't sure it would keep someone like Nui Harime out forever, it should buy Uryu enough time to escape, "I thought you were exaggerating, but Nui Harime is a complete psychopath."

As Ryuken explained what happened, Isshin was busy unlocking a special cabinet in the back of the room. As he rifled through its contents, he started talking, "That's Nui for you. Take it from me, Ryuken. Whenever you fight Nui, you have to hit her hard and fast and completely ignore anything she says and does. She's not stupid despite her behavior or appearance. She can and will wait for you to let your guard down after you think you injured or killed her before springing back onto her feet, happy as a princess, and stabbing her head through your chest with a smile on her face the entire time. Usually I would be surprised that you managed to escape her, but I don't think that is the case this time..."

"What is that?" Ryuken's gaze was focused upon the red and black instrument in Isshin's grasp. He had been a doctor for over two decades, travelled around the world to improve the standards of living for millions of people, and yet he had never seen a tool such as that.

"Oh, this?" Isshin turned over the tool in his hand a few times before motioning for Ryuken to lie down, "This is going to help remove what

Nui Harime put inside of you."

Ryuken tried to sense anything wrong with his body, a hidden kido perhaps, but came up with nothing, "What do you mean? I did not notice the Grand Couturier cast any techniques during our battle."

"That's because it isn't a technique, at least as far as you are concerned," Isshin answered bluntly, "You might be wondering why she failed to kill you. That's not true. Nui let you get away. During your battle, did you notice anything odd about the way she fought?"

"As a matter of fact I did. While she seemed to be fighting to kill me, and I was doing everything in my power to do the same, it seemed as if she was... playing around. From your description of her I expected as much, but not to the extent I witnessed."

"That's because she was playing with you. While she would have killed you given half a chance, her true goal was that you would come to me," Isshin answered seriously, "It's something that Nui does every now and then when she needs to go after a target that she cannot immediately take out on her own. She will find someone close to the target and weave Life Fibers into him or her. Then, when that someone gets close to the target, the Life Fibers will activate and transmit everything they feel, hear and see back to Nui and Ragyo."

"But why take such a risk?"

"To get at me," To emphasize his point, Isshin stabbed the instrument into a wound on Ryuken's leg. A moment of pain later, he slowly removed the tool and, to Ryuken's shock, began pulling out a glowing red fiber that appeared to be swaying in an imaginary wind.

"Your skills obviously caught Nui off-guard," Isshin complemented as he pulled out the meter-long Life Fiber, "I've examined all your wounds and only managed to find a single Life Fiber. Usually Nui would have enough time to weave dozens inside an unsuspecting



person. You should consider yourself lucky she only had time to put one in you."

"One is too many," Ryuken said sarcastically as he watched Isshin hold the Life Fiber in his hand before immediately crushing it between his fingers, "But I thank you for the assistance. I thought I would be able to deal with anything Ragyo Kiryuin could throw at me. I did not expect her to actually send the Grand Couturier."

"That's Ragyo for you," Isshin muttered as he washed his hands, "Using dynamite to get rid of a mole hill."

"Are you suggesting something?" Ryuken threatened as he put his jacket back on.

"Don't get your shirt in a twist," Ichigo waved away Ryuken's anger, "I'm just saying that Ragyo could have simply let you leave without any trouble. The fact that she sent Nui to attack you means she's planning something big."

"Perhaps you can clear something up for me, Isshin," Ryuken reached for a cigarette before remembering where he was, "Why hasn't the Soul Society gotten involved? I would think that with everything Ragyo and Revocs are doing, the shinigami would come down in full force to stop them."

Isshin sighed and when he answered, his tone was flat and lacked any mirth, "There is a very good reason why the Soul Society hasn't gotten involved, but I'm afraid I cannot tell you yet. It is still much too dangerous and if I were to tell you, it would put both of our families in danger."

Ryuken scoffed, "What can Ragyo do to us here? Aren't your protections and defenses strong enough to keep someone like her and the Grand Couturier out of Karakura Town?"

"It's not Ragyo or Nui that I'm worried about," Isshin opened the door to the room and began to walk out, but stopped and said, "There is

evidence to suggest that Life Fibers have been around for thousands of years, far longer than modern humanity has existed. If that is the case, then why has the Soul Society, an organization thousands of years old as well, failed to move against such a threat? I'm going back to bed, Ryuken. You can either stay here for the night or go back home, but please be sure to lock the door behind you as you leave."

With that said, Isshin left the room and Ryuken alone with his thoughts. As he stood there, pondering what Isshin just told him, Ryuken began to piece together what his friend was suggesting. At first he assumed Isshin was just being himself, but the more he thought about it, the more that everything made sense.

"That's impossible," he shook his head and walked towards the door, "But if it is true, then things are much, much worse than anything I could have possibly imagined."

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From his vantage point up on the terraces surrounding Honnouji Academy, Tsumugu Kinagase planned out what he needed to do.

The Nudist Beach member had arrived earlier in Honnou City that morning on his customized armored motorcycle and immediately he had felt the stench of Life Fibers on the city. Years of fighting against the oppression of Revocs and their goal to spread Life Fibers across the globe had gifted Tsumugu with the innate ability to sense large concentrations of the unholy fibers. While he would never be able to accurately pinpoint where Life Fibers were, he was able to track large concentrations and Honnou City was lit up like an old-fashioned Christmas tree.

"Hmm," Detaching the scope from his M-98 Widow Anti-Life Fiber Model Type-3, Tsumugu triple checked each component of his weapon. Unlike most guns, his M-98 Widow fired specialized

needles designed to sever the bond between Life Fibers and their hosts. In most cases it would simply render the wearer unable to access the unholy power their clothing gave them, but he wasn't sure how effective it would be on a Kamui. He could always increase the potency of his needles, but he would quickly run into the problem of it being too effective and potentially killing the Kamui's wearer. He needed everything to be perfect in order to kill the Kamui while leaving Ryuko Matoi alive.

After a quick blank firing to make sure it was in working order, Tsumugu reattached his scope and prepared himself for the task at hand. Peering in through each window at the unsuspecting classes, Tsumugu focused on each student and uniform until he found the one he was looking for. On the fourth floor, in the third seat from the front and second from the window, sat his target, Ryuko Matoi. Zooming in and focusing on the colors and texture of her school uniform, it took him less than a second to determine that she was wearing her Kamui. Frowning at the Life Fiber being, Tsumugu began to squeeze down on the trigger to complete the mission when he spotted a familiar crop of orange hair right next to Ryuko Matoi.

"Is that?" Tsumugu zoomed in as much as possible, hoping to be wrong. When the boy turned slightly towards the window, exposing a bored scowl, Tsumugu knew exactly who it was, "Why is Masaki's son here at Honnouji Academy? I thought Isshin was keeping him safe in Karakura Town?"

Ichigo Kurosaki's presence changed nothing. Tsumugu was still going to complete his mission. He just needed to avoid confronting Isshin's son until... wait. There was something odd and strangely familiar about Ichigo's uniform.

"So he has a Kamui as well," Tsumugu scowled and collapsed the scope. Are they giving out Kamui at garage sales now? It didn't matter. He would destroy Ryuko Matoi's Kamui before moving on to deal with Ichigo. The only problem was whether or not he had enough ammunition and supplies to take out two Kamui. He would have to deal with such a matter when the time came.

Sensing someone behind him, Tsumugu grunted and stood up, "What is so important that you've deigned to bother me?"

Standing in front of the many One-Star students dressed in gardening attire stood the diminutive captain of the Terrace Gardening Club, Kusanosuke Yaguruma. Laughing sarcastically, Kusanosuke sneered at Tsumugu, "I've noticed that you've been looking after our flowers for us in our absence. I thought it would be nice to offer you a thank you present for all your hard work!"

Tsumugu glanced to the side and noticed that he had walked through a garden on his way here, trampling the flowers in the process. Perhaps that had been rude and insensitive of him. It was obvious that despite the fact Kusanosuke was wearing Life Fibers, the kid had put a lot of time and effort into the garden. Using a road flare to light his cigarette, Tsumugu took a large drag from it, causing Kusanosuke to shout angrily at him.

"What do you think you're doing?" The diminutive club president slammed his foot against the ground a few times, "This is a nonsmoking area! What do you think might happen if you drop your cigarette in the garden? Months of cultivating and fertilizing would be destroyed!"

"Let me tell you two pieces of information. One. Those that rely on Life Fibers to do jobs they are capable of accomplishing on their own aren't entitled to complain about anything," Tsumugu scolded before adding, "Two. I can smoke wherever I want to."

With a causal flick of his wrist, Tsumugu tossed his still lit cigarette into the garden. As the One-Star students behind him gasped in shock, Kusanosuke shouted, "What the hell did you do that for? You're going to pay for that!"

Tsumugu watched with an annoyed expression as the One-Star students suddenly piled around Kusanosuke and began pouring water into the container on his back. As several large man-eating plants grew out of the container and lunged at him with maws full of

sharp teeth, Tsumugu slid to the right, avoiding one plant before springing off the ground and vaulting over a second. As he continued to dodge each predictable assault, Tsumugu heard Kusanosuke gloating at him, which was made more annoying by the club president's nasally voice.

"Taste the power of the Gardening-Spec Two-Star Goku Uniform: Green Thumb Edition!" Kusanosuke gloated haughtily as he thought he was witnessing Tsumugu's death, "How do you like my Piranha Plants? They are going to eat you alive!"

Leaping into the air, Tsumugu stomped down on one of the plants for balance, aiming his sewing machine gun at Kusanosuke and fired several hundred sewing needles.

Kusanosuke was completely unperturbed by his fellow club members collapsing to the ground from the barrage of needles. Either unwilling or uncaring to help, he bravely weathered the assault from Tsumugu, "You're a fool to think that a gun is effective against a Goku Uniform! Who do you think I am anyway?"

"I think you're a fool," Tsumugu answered in mid-air, spinning around an attempt by a plant to eat him before firing dozens of needles in retaliation.

"I told you that won't work!" Kusanosuke gloated, but began to feel something was wrong. Despite weathering the storm of bullets effortlessly, he was beginning to feel his power slipping away. Collapsing to his knees in exhaustion, he mumbled at the impossibility of the situation, "W-What's going on? My power is being drained... but how?"

Walking around the dying plants, Tsumugu approached the fallen Kusanosuke and aimed his sewing machine gun at him, "Let me tell you two further pieces of information that you might find useful. One. Overconfidence in ones abilities is the downfall of many a man. Two. I hate Life Fibers!"

In a classroom across the courtyard, Ryuko Matoi was woken up from her nap by what sounded like a gunshot going off before she quickly decided it wasn't worth thinking about.

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"Prepare to die, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

Ichigo rolled his eyes at the declaration as he lazily swung Tournesol through the air, cutting down each and every arrow that the Archery Club President fired at him.

" ***This is annoying,***" Mugetsu said irritably.

"You don't need to remind me," Ichigo responded flatly. He didn't know why his opponent hadn't given up by now. The ground around him was littered with dozens upon dozens of arrows and yet not one had managed to penetrate his defenses. Not bothering to give the fallen One-Star members of the club a second glance, Ichigo rested Tournesol on his shoulder and sighed.

"Can't you just, I don't know, go home or something?" Ichigo was beginning to think it was a bad idea to get involved in Ryuko's issues. Satsuki had initially proclaimed that any Two-Star student that defeated Ryuko would receive a Three-Star Goku Uniform, but it was earlier this morning that he found out that she amended her earlier statement. In addition to that, anyone who defeated *him* would not only receive a Three-Star Goku Uniform, but also become a member of the Elite Four, thereby making it the Elite Five or something as stupid sounding.

"Feeling scared? Surrender your Kamui!" Artemis shouted as she fired an arrow, only for Ichigo to deflect it with Mugetsu's sleeve.

"Just give up already," Ichigo said exasperatedly as he grabbed the two arrows Artemis fired out of the air and threw them onto the

ground.

"You think I'm scared of you?" Artemis asked boldly, hiding the fact that she was indeed scared of his prowess. She had seen Ichigo deflect her arrows with Tournesol, but to watch him catch or repel them with his hands caused her to break out in a cold sweat. Steadying her shaking hands, she pulled back on her glowing black and red compound bow, a sign of the Life Fibers composing it, and materialized five glowing arrows before releasing them, "I am the reincarnation of the Greek Goddess of the Hunt! You shall fall to my power!"

Ichigo watched the arrows fly towards in what could only be described as slow motion. Ducking under the one aimed at his head, the bladed tip passing inches from his nose, he quickly spun around and brought Tournesol up to deflect three more. Still in motion, he pivoted on his left foot and used the sole of his right foot to basically destroy the fifth and last arrow.

"What? Impossible!" Artemis stepped back in fear as she watched Ichigo stop her attack without even breaking a sweat. With her hands shaking more noticeably, she tried to bring her bow back up, "I wear a Two-Star Goku Uniform! I will not be defeated by the likes of - "

Artemis was cut off as Ichigo disappeared from in front of her, a small ring of expanding dust signaling where he had just been standing, before he reappeared behind her with Tournesol resting on his shoulder.

"What was it that Ryuko called her move?" Ichigo frowned as he tried to remember what she named it, "Oh right. Seni-Soshitsu."

There was silence as several cuts slowly spread across Artemis's uniform before it suddenly ripped into dozens of pieces, leaving the club president as naked as the day she was born. Quickly averting his gaze from the nude girl, Ichigo noticed something floating haphazardly through the air towards him. Plucking it out of the air

before it could reach him, he looked in interest at the glowing red thread held firmly between his fingers.

"Is this a Life Fiber?" Ichigo examined the glowing Life Fiber suspiciously. There was something off about it, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Perhaps he was just being paranoid, but given everything that has happened to him since arriving at Honnouji Academy, he concluded he had a right to be.

" **Yes,**" Mugetsu answered emotionlessly. For some reason she was still upset that Ichigo hadn't taken her on No-Late Day despite him telling her that he wasn't given a choice in the matter, ***"That is the Banshi. It is what holds the Goku Uniform together and gives it the 'will to be clothing.'"***

Letting the Banshi go, Ichigo watched as it was quickly absorbed into Tournesol, causing the blue blade to briefly glow with a purple outline, "What just happened?"

" ***I don't know. Kisuke Urahara imparted a lot of knowledge into me, but several key things continue to elude me. Perhaps over time I will be able to answer your question.***"

Ichigo locked gazes with one of Mugetsu's eyes before sighing, "Don't make that face. Look, I'm sorry about yesterday. You know I would have taken you if I was given the choice."

" ***I'm not upset with that,***" Mugetsu growled before she added, ***"As a Kamui I do not have a face to make. Therefore, there is no doubt that your statement is idiotic."***

"Why you - "

"Are you talking to yourself Strawberry?" A familiar sweet voice asked from behind him, "And here I thought you were cute, not insane."



Ichigo turned from the unconscious Artemis and towards Nonon Jakuzure standing across the rooftop from him, backed by at least fifteen members of the Marching Band Club. Pointing her baton at Ichigo and with her mouth spread in a cheerful grin, she said, "You've been busy Strawberry, taking out all the club presidents left and right. Lady Satsuki has ordered me to bring you to her for a little chat. So why don't you make it easy on yourself and just surrender?"

He gave Nonon a deadpan look before scratching his cheek, "Oh, it's just you Snake. You can tell Satsuki to take her offer and shove it."

"The name's Nonon Jakuzure!" Nonon stomped her foot angrily and cursed profusely under her breath. She hated that Ichigo wouldn't stop calling her Snake. She was the only one able to call people by cute nicknames! Where did Ichigo get off mocking her name like that? Gritting her teeth and reigning in her anger and annoyance, she asked, "I'm a member of the Elite four, dammit! Why do you continue to address me with such disrespect?"

"You call me Strawberry," Ichigo pointed out dryly with his hands in his pockets, "I'll stop calling you Snake when you stop calling me Strawberry."

Nonon pursed her lips and spit on the ground, "Fine I... Ic... Ich... Ichi... aw, screw it! You're coming with me, but only after I kick your ass! Marching Band: Trumpet Division front and center! Give Strawberry here a test of our jubilant spirit!"

Ichigo had a deadpan look on his face as two rows of One-Star girls, each of them dressed in a marching band uniform, slid in front of Nonon and raised their trumpets, "Wait... what?"

That was when the Marching Band Club started playing and Ichigo found himself being blown back by the sheer volume and power of the music.

"How do you like the William Tell Overture?" Nonon gloated safely from behind the One-Star Students, "Embrace the music,

Strawberry!"

" ***This music is really annoying, Ichigo,***" Mugetsu shouted over the sound of the music, ***"Do something about it before I go deaf."***

"You can't go deaf if you don't have any ears," Ichigo commented to his Kamui, but he knew Mugetsu had a point. He didn't like getting blasted point-blank by weaponized music anymore than she did. Gritting his teeth, he began pushing against the music and started gaining ground.

"Are you trying to resist?" Nonon quipped at Ichigo. Raising her baton, she smirked and shouted, "I'll just have to introduce you to the beauty of classical music! Flute Division! Show Strawberry here what you're made of!"

Another line of girls stepped into position and Ichigo immediately found his ears under assault by what could only be described as music in the loosest terms. With his ears ringing from the harsh sounds, Ichigo was about to attack when he somehow managed to hear Ryuko scream out Mako's name.

"Ryuko!" Ichigo didn't have any time to waste. Rushing forward, he jumped up and over the Marching Band as they attempted to stop him. Landing on the other side, he raced towards Ryuko, but not before turning around and giving Nonon a mock salute, "I'll be back to deal with you another time, Snake. Tell Satsuki she can go to hell."

"For the last time, the name's Jakuzure!" Nonon shouted back, pissed off that Ichigo managed to get away from her, "I'll wipe that smirk off your face if it's the last thing I do, you orange haired son of a bitch!"

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"Mako!"

Ryuko examined her friend's fallen and paralyzed body. Stuck in the same pose she had been in a moment ago, with a large smile on her face, Mako resembled a statue more than a person at the moment. Reaching over to pull out the needles, Ryuko was forced to pull her hand back as a needle embedded right next to it.

"There is no need to be concerned for your friend," a deep voice echoed out from across the courtyard, "I simply got her out of the way for a while. She won't be able to see, hear or sense anything for the next ten minutes, so what is discussed between us will be kept private."

Ryuko turned and saw Tsumugu walking slowly towards her, "What did Mako ever do to you?"

"There is no need to fret, she is unharmed," Tsumugu answered as calmly as ever as he came to a stop some several meters away from Ryuko, "Those needles in her body are quite special. When she awakens, the exhaustion permeating her body will disappear and all her sicknesses cured."

"Oh," Ryuko looked at the fallen Mako before adding, "Thanks for that, but couldn't you have asked first?"

Tsumugu did not answer her as he leveled his Sewing Machine Gun at Ryuko, "On the other hand, your uniform will not receive the same mercy!"

**" *Run, Ryuko!* "**

"I'm not going to run away!" Ryuko bit back sourly. She had no idea what this man wanted with her, but like hell was she just going to run away like a coward.

Without saying a word, the man leveled his strange looking weapon at her and pulled the trigger. Ryuko didn't even bother to think about

the abnormal ammo he was firing as she flipped backwards and vaulted off the rusty chain she and Mako had been eating their lunches on. As the sound of needles ricocheting reverberated through the air, Ryuko shouted, "Just what the hell's your problem with me anyway?"

"I don't need to answer that," Tsumugu answered flatly as he stood on top of the chain and stared down at her, "Your athleticism is impressive, but it won't be enough to stop me from doing what needs to be done."

"Go to hell!" Ryuko growled and pulled out her Scissor Blade. Deflecting and parrying almost every needle Tsumugu fired at her, she hissed in pain every time one of the abnormal ammo slipped through her guard and stabbed deep in her body. Ignoring the pain to focus on the battle, she jumped up and clashed weapons with Tsumugu. If he was surprised that she was still able to move, Tsumugu didn't show it.

" *She is skilled, even without her Kamui,*" Tsumugu thought calmly as he parried away her Scissor Blade with his Sewing Machine Gun. Pushing her away and firing a dozen rounds into her back, he landed on the ground and stared at Ryuko, "*But she is predictable. While she seems to have some skill in wielding that Scissor Blade, she still swings it around like a novice.*"

During the momentary lull in the fighting, Ryuko took the opportunity to reach over and pull several sewing needles out of her shoulder. She glanced at the blood-tipped ammo for a moment before tossing them to the ground in disgust. She didn't know who this man was or what he wanted, but he had already hurt Mako and was now trying to kill her. It was time to activate Senketsu and take her revenge on the man. As she reached for the pin on her glove, Ryuko suddenly found the world spinning around her. Desperately trying to steady herself on her feet, Ryuko grabbed her head, "What the hell's going on?"

"Your fortitude is remarkable," Tsumugu dashed forward and delivered a kick to Ryuko's sternum that forced her on her back.

Coughing harshly from the strike, she grunted in pain as Tsumugu planted his foot on her stomach and aimed his Sewing Machine Gun at her heart, "But even the most determined person cannot fight off the effects of thirty tranquilizer rounds. You have my respect for forcing me to use my specialized ammunition."

"You bastard!" Ryuko struggled to pull herself free, but Tsumugu's strength was too great in her untransformed state. That, compounded with the fact that her muscles weren't responding to her thoughts, made escape impossible, "What club are you a part of?"

Tsumugu's eyes drifted to the side as he felt someone approaching. He didn't have much time, perhaps a minute at the most, before Ichigo Kurosaki would arrive. He needed to move quickly, "When I remove my foot, you will take off your clothes."

Ryuko had been expecting many things, but that question wasn't one of them, "What kind of question is that? I don't even know you! You're in that stupid Pervert Club, aren't you? I bet you're the president of the Pervert Club!"

Tsumugu made sure to keep his Sewing Machine Gun trained on Ryuko's heart, "Let me tell you two useful pieces of information. One. I am not a pervert. I find the idea of a man stalking and idolizing a woman he has never talked to both morally repugnant and utterly disgusting."

"Say whatever you need to sleep at night," Ryuko spat and tried to pull the pin out of her glove with her teeth only for Tsumugu to fire something out of his wrist and pin her hand to the ground.

"Two. I will not let you transform in front of me. If you are unable to transform, you are no more powerful than a regular human."

Leaning over Ryuko and training his weapon over her throat, Tsumugu growled, "If I were to fire at this range, the likelihood of

your death is guaranteed. If you wish to survive to live a full life, take off your clothes. I do not like to take lives unnecessarily."

"Bastard..." Ryuko could feel sweat dripping off her face as she gazed up at the man that had so easily taken her out, "What do you have against Senketsu?"

"So you're refusing to comply?" Tsumugu felt a pang of guilt for what he was about to do, but for the sake of humanity he would bury his emotions and guilt. Destroying a Kamui was a top priority, even if it came at a cost of an innocent life. The repercussions of failing and letting the Kamui get out of control were too severe, "You leave me no choice. I know it may seem hollow to you, but I will derive no pleasure from what I am about to do. I hope you find peace in whatever awaits beyond this world."

As his finger squeezed on the trigger of his weapon, Tsumugu glanced to the side as he felt someone rapidly approaching him. Quickly jumping off Ryuko and hopping backwards a few times, he skid to a stop as Ichigo landed on the ground in front of him, still clad in Mugetsu's released form.

"I did not expect you to arrive so quickly, Ichigo Kurosaki," Tsumugu depressed a button on the bottom of his Sewing Machine Gun, ejecting the five-hundred needle clip before quickly inserting a new one, "Your speed is impressive."

"You know me?" Ichigo asked suspiciously as he swung Tournesol to the side, destroying the needles holding Ryuko to the ground.

Tsumugu ignored the question as his eyes lingered on Mugetsu. It seemed the boy was firmly in control of his Kamui, which wasn't that surprising given his parents. Unlike Matoi, who seemed to be trying to stab him with her eyes, Ichigo was firmly in control of his emotions. He was angry, anyone would be given the situation, but the problem with Matoi was that she wore her emotions on her sleeves. If there ever came a time where she was pushed to the

brink, there was no doubt in Tsumugu's mind that her Kamui would immediately try and devour her.

"Why are you here, Ichigo Kurosaki?" Tsumugu circled around Ichigo, who always kept himself between the man and Ryuko, "You are supposed to be in Karakura Town."

"How do you know about me?" Ichigo growled and pointed Tournesol at Tsumugu, "Who are you and what do you want with Ryuko?"

Tsumugu glanced over at Matoi and reassessed the situation. The odds of him being able to successfully destroy her Kamui and get away were slim to none. He didn't even care if he was captured as long as the Kamui was destroyed, but even that was highly unlikely at this point. The best thing to do would be to retreat and reformulate his plan of attack. First, he needed to gather some information about what Ichigo was doing at Honnouji Academy.

"Let me give you two pieces of useful information," Tsumugu lit a cigarette using a device on his wrist and began walking towards Ichigo, "One. Who I am does not concern you."

Sprinting forward, Tsumugu fired several dozen rounds from his Sewing Machine Gun at Ichigo. While Ichigo managed to avoid or block every single one of them, that was Tsumugu's plan the entire time. Leaping into the air as soon as he finished firing, when he tried to drop kick Ichigo in the face, he was surprised to find the youth already spinning around his attack. Landing in a crouch, he quickly brought his gun up to stop Tournesol from hitting him.

"Two," Tsumugu grunted as he was forced closer and closer to the ground from Ichigo's enhanced strength, "I knew your mother, Masaki."

"What?"

Ichigo froze at the mention of his mother's name, but that was all Tsumugu needed. Rolling forward, Tsumugu twisted around and

aimed his gun at several spots along Ichigo's Kamui. Before he could pull the trigger, something shot through the air and pierced his hand, paralyzing the muscles and preventing him from moving his finger. Scoffing irritably and looking up at a building, Tsumugu realized he had run out of time. Standing up and turning around, he began walking away, "Do not go anywhere, Matoi. I'll be here tomorrow to strip you of your Kamui. Don't try to run because there will be no place you can hide."

As Tsumugu walked away, disappearing into the shadows, Ryuko stood back on her feet and looked at Ichigo, "Who was that guy and how did he know your mother, Ichigo?"

"I don't know," Ichigo's hand clenched tightly around Tournesol's hilt. Looking at Ryuko, he asked, "What happened to Mako? I heard you screaming her name."

Ryuko slapped herself at the mention of her friend. In all the excitement, she had completely forgotten that not twenty feet away her best friend was lying on the ground covered in dozens of sewing needles. Rushing over to help, she scolded herself, "I can't believe I forgot all about Mako! I'm a terrible friend!"

Ichigo watched Ryuko start pulling out needles by the handful from the paralyzed Mako's body before he knelt down and picked up one of the needles that Tsumugu had fired at him. Turning the strange ammunition over in his fingers, he pondered why someone would use something like a needle as ammo.

**" *There is something odd about this needle,*"** Mugetsu focused both her eyes on the object in Ichigo's hand before emitting a feminine growl, ***"I can feel it trying to sever the bond between you and myself. If you were to be hit by enough of these needles, I would be forced to sleep."***

"I see..." Ichigo knew that Tsumugu was a dangerous threat. That man had all but decimated Ryuko without even trying. There was no telling what he would do given enough time to prepare. He needed to



be on his guard in case Tsumugu decided to spring a surprise on him, "Be on your guard, Mugetsu. That guy seems to have it out for you and Senketsu."

" ***Bring it on,***" Mugetsu scoffed at Ichigo's concern, "***That man might be strong enough to deal with Senketsu, but you and I are on a different level. There is no way that he can beat us!***"

Ichigo rolled his eyes and walked towards Ryuko and a now-conscious Mako, "Don't get too full of yourself. You said the same thing about Satsuki and we barely managed to beat her."

" ***Shut up, Ichigo.***"

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Aikuro Mikisugi preferred the bars in the slums to those in the One-Star Residential District. Call him a sentimental fool, but he found personal interactions to be much more realistic when one didn't have to worry about social appearances or peer pressure. The fact that the loud noise and rowdy crowd made being overheard extremely unlikely was simply a bonus.

Gazing at his watch and noticing what time it was, Aikuro was about to finish his drink and leave when he noticed a quilt pin floating in his sake. Aikuro smirked at his colleagues introduction, "I see you were able to figure out it was me. Aren't you going to say you hate being interrupted while working or something, Tsumugu?"

Leaning against the bar next to Aikuro with his hands in his pockets stood a stern-faced Tsumugu. He didn't appreciate the fact that Aikuro interfered with his clash against Ryuko and Ichigo. His intolerance for being interrupted was, for the moment, overshadowed by a much more serious question plaguing his mind, "Why didn't you tell me Masaki's son was attending Honnouji Academy?"

"Heh," Aikuro plucked the pin out of his sake before swallowing the alcoholic liquid in one gulp, "Would you have believed me if I had said he was here?"

Tsumugu's silence to the question was all the answer Aikuro needed. Tsumugu was one of Nudist Beach's best operatives and prided himself on researching all the necessary information about a target before going after them. He had singlehandedly taken down several Revocs factories using just his intelligence, so it was clear to Aikuro that Tsumugu's pride as a Nudist had taken quite the blow upon finding Masaki's son attending the same academy as Ryuko Matoi.

"He has a Kamui," Tsumugu pointed out bluntly and without caring who overheard him. He didn't like Kamui in general, and the fact that Masaki's son possessed one was tantamount to spitting on her grave, "Where did he get it?"

"Do you remember Isshin talking about a man by the name of Kisuke Urahara?"

That set off quite a few bells in Tsumugu's head. It had been over a decade since he heard that name, "Yeah, I remember."

Aikuro raised the bottle of sake and refilled his cup, "About two days after Ichigo arrived, Isshin called out of the blue. He said that Kisuke created that Kamui for Ichigo and that I should make sure he survived whatever may come. Needless to say, I haven't had much to do. After all, he was the one to singlehandedly fight Satsuki Kiryuin and her Kamui to a draw."

Tsumugu's frown deepened as he thought back to how Kisuke Urahara managed to save the life of his sister, Kinue Kinagase, all those years ago when she foolishly decided to try on an experimental Kamui. It was also the first time he met the man he would come to know as Isshin Kurosaki.

*Flashback - 11 Years Ago*

*Isshin Matoi, otherwise known as Dr. Matoi to his colleagues and associates, turned to the other two men in the room, "Is everything in place?"*

*Clad in a brown turtleneck under a white lab coat, Aikuro typed a few keys on a nearby computer, "The Life Fiber inhibitors are in place and are performing at optical efficiency. I've run them through several test runs and no problems have been detected."*

*" Good, good," Dr. Matoi stroked his knee-length beard and hummed impatiently at the third man pacing nervously across the observation room, "You seem perturbed about something, Tsumugu."*

*A much younger Tsumugu stopped pacing and looked at Dr. Matoi. While his hair already possessed its familiar deep red streak, Tsumugu had it styled it a much more manageable crew cut.*

*" I know my sister wants to go through with this, but I think this is a dangerous idea!" Tsumugu knew his argument was pointless. Whenever Kinue focused her mind on doing something, nothing on Earth could stop her. Usually he would simply step out of the way until she was done, but what Kinue was volunteering to do was dangerous and potentially life threatening.*

*Dr. Matoi huffed and walked towards the observation window overlooking the fitting room. Tsumugu wasn't the only one concerned about the possible consequences of such an early fitting. While he was certain he had ironed out all the possible kinks and flaws in the prototype Kamui, there was always the chance that he missed something. He was human, after all. It would be hubris to assume that the Kamui he created was perfect in every single way.*

*" You aren't the only one to think that," he told Tsumugu honestly, "I tried to talk Kinue out of volunteering, but she is firm in her belief that humans and clothing can coexist peacefully. If you are truly worried about something going wrong, Aikuro and I have taken much time out of our schedules to implement several safety measures that should stop the fitting if anything should go wrong."*

*" I still don't like it," Tsumugu countered weakly.*

*" I will admit that our safety measures will never be perfect," Dr. Matoi did not like confessing his failures. His life was already full of mistakes and guilt. He didn't want to add another to his already long list, "But I brought in someone to help."*

*" Someone? Who?"*

*Dr. Matoi turned towards Aikuro, who answered, "He's currently getting the prototype out of storage. He should be entering the fitting room in a few minutes."*

*That didn't make any sense to Tsumugu. Everyone who touched the prototype Kamui had been violently assaulted by it, with the Life Fiber creature attempting to devour them completely within seconds. Who could touch such a violent creature without fear for their life?*

*Tsumugu didn't need to wait long to find out. Less than five minutes after Dr. Matoi's announcement, alarms began going off in the observation room, signaling that the negative pressure door on the far side of the fitting room was being accessed.*

*" It looks like Isshin is ready to come in," Aikuro swiveled around in his chair and faced Dr. Matoi.*

*Dr. Matoi kept his eyes on the fitting room through the thick, protective glass as he answered, "Let him in."*

*Tsumugu had heard of Isshin Kurosaki. He was practically one of the reasons Nudist Beach was able to survive without Revocs striking them down. While Isshin wasn't actually a member of the organization, his presence seemed to dissuade Ragyo from moving against them. When the door opened with a hiss of pressurized air leaving the room, Tsumugu expected someone composed and implacable, someone whose innate resistance to Life Fibers was so high that they could touch an animalistic Kamui for a short period of*

*time without being consumed by it. He did not expect, nor could he have ever expected, to meet the real Isshin Kurosaki.*

*" Down boy... girl... thing! Bad Kamui! Stop that this instant!" Isshin was holding the Kamui at arms length away from his body, but for good reason. The Kamui was trying, and failing for some reason, to wrap around his arms. Every time it tried to put itself on Isshin, it would succeed for a second before something snapped and it lost its grip.*

*" Hey Matoi!" Isshin shouted towards the three men watching him, "Get the restraining device ready! I don't feel like fighting with a dress any longer than I have to!"*

*Dr. Matoi pressed a button, bringing the intercom to life, "Of course, Isshin. It's right to your left. Just put the prototype in the chamber and the machine will do the rest."*

*After kicking the prototype Kamui in order to get it momentarily under control, Isshin wrapped the Life Fiber being into a ball before throwing it into the chamber. While it took the Kamui a few seconds to reorient itself, it wasn't quick enough to escape. The moment Isshin put it in the chamber, the steel door hissed shut and a gaseous mixture of starch and bleach began filling the chamber, freezing the Kamui in place and putting it in a temporary slumber.*

*" Damn that thing was annoying," Isshin Kurosaki complained as he entered the observation room. Much like Aikuro and Dr. Matoi, he wore a lab coat over a black sweater, but unlike them he had a distinctively 80s-style mullet. Yawning and rubbing the back of his neck, he turned to Aikuro, "So was that thing the reason you called me? Masaki isn't going to be happy that I skipped town and leaving her with the twins."*

*" Don't worry about Masaki," Aikuro grinned amiably, "You're almost done here. Dr. Matoi just wanted you to help transfer the prototype Kamui."*

*" It's been a few years Isshin," Dr. Matoi offered his hand to Isshin, only to have the normally jolly man refuse to shake it. Matoi didn't seem to find such a display rude, and therefore continued speaking, "That Kamui is my first complete prototype. I created it to help us fight the tyranny being imposed upon the world by Recovs and Ragyo Kiryuin."*

*" It's a little late to be doing the right thing," Isshin hinted knowingly, getting strange looks from Tsumugu and Aikuro and a worried expression from Dr. Matoi, "But enough about the past. What makes you think this Kamui will want to go against Ragyo? You saw how it tried to eat me out there. Anyone else would have been dead by now."*

*Dr. Matoi sighed sadly and sat down, "I will admit that Project T-elos was based off of Ragyo Kiryuin's designs. Do you know how difficult it is to craft a Kamui? Her work saved me over a year of planning. I spent countless hours going off the Life Fibers while looking for any sign of internal tampering or mistakes. I can assure you that Ragyo has as much control over this Kamui as you do."*

*" In any case," Isshin walked towards the observation window and stared at where the Kamui was being held, "Who did you trick into wearing that thing?"*

*" I didn't trick anyone," Dr. Matoi defended, "Kinue personally asked to have Project T-elos be fitted to her. She believes that clothes and humans can live together peacefully and is determined to prove that. I've tried to persuade her to wait until I'm sure there is absolutely nothing that can go wrong, but..."*

*" I know," Isshin sighed. Kinue had always been a rather bold woman, which is probably why Masaki got along so well with her, "I wish I could stay around and make sure nothing goes wrong, but Masaki is having a handful with the twins as well as Ichigo, but I think I may have something that could come in handy in case you screwed something up."*

*Reaching inside his lab coat, Isshin fished around for something before pulling out a small octagonal medallion. Handing it to Dr. Matoi, he said, "I had an old friend of mine, Kisuke Urahara, whip this up. He has no idea what Life Fibers are or what this is going to be used for, so I added a few modifications of my own. All he knows is that I needed something to protect someone with no questions asked. Give this medallion to Kinue when she goes to wear the Kamui. If anything goes wrong, it should protect her from being devoured."*

*Dr. Matoi looked at the designed etched on the surface of the medallion. The object itself was pure white, but the design consisted of several black lines interwoven with each other and originating around a red ruby-like gem at the center of the medallion. He stared at the object for what seemed like forever, but when he looked up to thank Isshin, he was already gone. Contemplating what he was going to do, Dr. Matoi hobbled over to Tsumugu and placed the medallion in his hand.*

*"Give this to Kinue," he ordered, "Make sure she knows what to do with it."*

*End Flashback*

Tsumugu snorted and forced his memories to the back of his mind, "Nearly tens years since he dropped off the grid and now he comes back? If you ask me, it's a little suspicious."

"You know exactly why he left," Aikuro reminded Tsumugu. The death of Masaki had hit Nudist Beach hard, even if Isshin wouldn't say what exactly happened to her besides the fact that she was murdered. Dr. Matoi had volunteered to use Nudist Beach's immense resources to hunt down the killer, but Isshin had been quite clear that he didn't want an investigation. He had a family to care for and searching for Masaki's killer would force him to split his attention.

Seeing no point in leaving, Tsumugu grabbed a nearby stool and sat down next to Aikuro. Grabbing the bottle of sake off the counter, he poured some into a cup before speaking, "Ragyo Kiryuin starts becoming active and now Isshin sends his son to Honnouji Academy, where her daughter is consolidating power? I don't like it."

"That's not the worst part," Aikuro reached into pocket and pulled out a photo. Sliding it across the counter to Tsumugu, he said, "Look who decided to show up in Honnou City a few days ago."

Tsumugu grabbed the picture and stared at the figure on it, "The Grand Couturier. Why would she be here?"

Aikuro shrugged, "I have no idea, but knowing her, it can't be good. She doesn't go anywhere without Ragyo's permission. When I first discovered she was here, I thought she may have been going after Ryuko, but to my surprise the Grand Couturier seems to be fixated on Ichigo."

"Ichigo?" Tsumugu thought long and hard about why someone like the Grand Couturier would be interested in Ichigo Kurosaki, "I cannot begin to comprehend what someone like her thinks, but I suppose it has to do with Isshin. It always seems to come back to that man."

"Possibly," Aikuro smirked before his expression hardened, "By the way, I've been meaning to ask you something for a while now. How is Kinue doing?"

There was the sound of ceramic shattering as Tsumugu clenched his hand hard enough to break the cup it was holding. Staring down at the shards on the counter, he threw down a few bills to cover the damage and stood up, "She's doing fine, considering everything that's happened to her. Thank you for the concern, though."

Kisuke Urahara's invention, which Isshin made sure Kinue was holding when she tried on Project T-elos, had worked perfectly. Despite all the precautions and safety measures Dr. Matoi and Aikuro put in place, as soon as Kinue put on the Kamui it had



immediately tried to devour her. As Aikuro grabbed a chair and tried to shatter the safety glass to save Kinue, there was a bright green flash from within the room. After several seconds of painful waiting to see what was going on, the light died down and to everyone's relief Kinue was lying unconscious on the floor of the fitting room, still clad in the Kamui that had been trying to kill her moments before. As he burst into the room through the door, Tsumugu's relief at his sister's state soon turned to horror and shock when he saw exactly what was keeping her alive.

The medallion that Isshin gave them, the same one that was supposed to save Kinue's life if anything went wrong, seemed to have fused with her chest. As he tried to pull the Kamui off her body, which seemed to not be fighting him for some reason, Tsumugu noticed the black arrow pattern burned into her sternum right over her heart. After being pulled away from his sister by Aikuro so that Dr. Matoi could examine her, Tsumugu was given some startling news.

The medallion may have saved Kinue's mind and body from being devoured by the Kamui, but it forever bound her to it. After Dr. Matoi frantically called Isshin to ask what the medallion was supposed to do, Isshin reluctantly confessed that it was supposed to act as a 'bridge' of sorts between the Kamui and Kinue in case the worst came to pass. If all else failed, and the Kamui's inherent violent and animalistic nature overcame their precautions, the medallion would activate and effectively trick the Kamui into thinking Kinue was part of it, thereby stopping it from doing any further damage. The only problem was that Kinue would be forever bound to the Kamui. She would also never be able to take it off or remove the medallion, which was now as much a part of her body as the Kamui was.

"But that's not what you called me down here for, was it?" Tsumugu's sister was still a sore topic for the man, even though she was still the same woman, no matter what she wore, "If it's about Ichigo, you can stop worrying. I haven't forgotten what Isshin tried to do. As long as

Ichigo doesn't interfere with my mission, I will leave both him and his Kamui alone."

"You know me too well," Aikuro smirked before frowning, "I need you to also leave Ryuko Matoi alone, at least for now. This is a critical time and with Isshin's recent involvement, I don't know what to expect."

"I got the message," Tsumugu had known Ragyo was going to make her move sooner or later, but Isshin's confirmation sped up Nudist Beach's operations, "To think Revocs is already moving on to the next stage, it's going to be chaos around here soon enough. But, as for Matoi... I'm afraid I won't be able to listen to you."

"Need I remind you of little miss Satsuki Kiryuin's recent expansion?" Aikuro asked Tsumugu sarcastically, "Her national school conquest is nearly complete apart from the Kansai region and, of course, Karakura Town."

The Kansai region was where Nudist Beach's headquarters were. It was the only place left in Japan besides Karakura Town where Revocs did not have a firm hold on the populace. Even with all of the resources at her disposal, Satsuki Kiryuin would need to increase her manpower if she wanted any chance of breaking through Nudist Beach's front lines, but even that would not be able to penetrate Karakura Town. Tsumugu didn't know how or why, but Isshin Kurosaki had something so dangerous on Ragyo Kiryuin that she had forbid her daughter from attempting to conquer Karakura High School.

"Let me give you two pieces of useful information," Tsumugu grabbed the cup of out Aikuro's hand and downed it in a single swallow, "One. I know that you're going to tell me Dr. Matoi's words about using the Kamui to stop the ambitions of the Kiryuins. As much as I would prefer for humans to solve this problem on our own, against someone like the Grand Couturier we are sorely outclassed. Two. I'm well aware I'm going against our organization's current goals. Do not try and lecture me."

Aikuro chuckled, "Am I that obvious of a Nudist?"

Tsumugu didn't appreciate Aikuro's joke. Taking a drag from his cigarette, he said, "You know how dangerous a Kamui is. In the hands of a normal person it is merely dangerous, but Matoi is emotional and easy to anger. There will come a time when she will let her anger get the better of her."

"What if Ryuko turns out to be a powerful ally?" Aikuro ignored the inference of Tsumugu's comment, "Now that Satsuki Kiryuin possesses a Kamui of her own, it makes sense to fight fire with fire. That is not to mention Ichigo's Kamui."

Aikuro tried to pour Tsumugu some sake, but the man stopped him short, "You must know what will happen if Matoi ever loses control of that thing. She will become a threat even greater than the Kiryuins. I've seen Ichigo's power. If such an event were to ever occur, I don't think he would be able to stop Matoi. That's why I need to destroy that thing before things get out of hand. I trust Masaki's son to never lose control, but the same cannot be said about Matoi. It's better she die as a human than live to get consumed by her uniform."

"Is that your final answer?" Aikuro swirled his sake around but didn't drink it, "If the higher ups find out about your mission, they'll strip you of every last bit of equipment."

"Then I'll just be a nude Nudish. I owe you a debt for everything you've done for me, Aikuro, and therefore I would do almost anything you asked of me," Tsumugu began walking away before quickly stopping, "But the debt I owe Isshin and Masaki is even greater. I refuse to stop pursuing Matoi under her Kamui is destroyed, but if it makes you feel any better, I will offer Matoi a single chance to relinquish her Kamui without a fight. That is the most you are going to get from me."

Aikuro watched Tsumugu disappear into the Honnou City night. After a moment he smirked, *"You know Ichigo is going to come after you, don't you Tsumugu? In fact, I think you're counting on it. You want to*

*see how the little boy Masaki talked so much about grew up. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."*

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## **Kamui Tales #2 - A Kurosaki Day Out**

"Dad! Dad!"

Isshin put his book down and saw Yuzu running over to him. With Ichigo at Honnouji Academy doing who knows what, Yuzu and Karin had been sadder than usual. So he decided to take them to a water park in a neighboring town. Sure, it was out of the safety and protection of Karakura Town, but he was there so there should be no problems.

"Yes, Yuzu?" While Isshin was sitting on one of the chairs surrounding the pool, he didn't feel like actually going in.

"I made a new friend!" Yuzu beamed happily, "She's so fun and exciting! Wait right here! I'll go get her for you!"

Isshin pondered what his daughter just said. Yuzu having a new friend wasn't a big deal; she made friends all the time. Even Kon wasn't immune to Yuzu's charms and he wasn't even a person. As he saw Yuzu chatting happily with a very familiar looking girl, whose back was turned to him, Isshin started coughed dramatically. When Yuzu pointed to him and the girl turned around to look, Isshin nearly fell out of his chair.

"Oh, damn it."

"Dad, I'd like you to meet Nui Harime!" Yuzu announced with her arm around Nui's shoulders, "She's super nice and really fun!"

"Hello, Mr. Kurosaki!" Nui said in the same tone as Yuzu, as fake as it was, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Yes, well, it's nice to meet you," Isshin reached for his wallet and gave Yuzu twenty dollars, "Why don't you go to the snack bar and get something for us to eat, Yuzu."

As Yuzu happily took the money and left, Isshin turned on Nui, "What are you doing here?"

"You act like my whole life revolves around you," Nui turned her head and puffed out her cheeks, "I do have other things to do besides annoying you. Today is my yearly vacation day. Work has been so hard lately that I needed some time to myself. So why don't we just pretend like we didn't see each other. Is that alright with you, you old goat?"

Isshin narrowed his eyes before he shook hands with Nui over the temporary truce. He would never trust her as far as he could throw her, and he could throw her very far indeed, but for the sake of Yuzu and Karin's fun, he was willing to let it go for now.

Later that night, back in Karakura Town, Isshin nearly pulled his hair out in frustration as Yuzu put a picture of her, Karin and Nui on the mantle in the living room. As much as he wanted to simply throw the picture out, Isshin knew that he wouldn't be able to get away with it. Yuzu had the senses of a hawk when it came to her things disappearing. As he glared at the picture, Isshin couldn't believe how much of a pain in the ass Nui was without even trying.

# Won't Get Fooled Again

*Before I get into Chapter 15, I would like to point out that I'm still surprised at the popularity of this story. In my browsing of the interweb, I found links to my story across many different sites, which spurs me on to continue writing. So thank you to everyone that reviews and spreads the word of my story.*

*So onto the actual chapter. This is the second half of Episode 5, which really means it ends at the same time as Episode 5 ends. The events within the chapter are so different from canon that some of you might not even recognize it. Of course Tsumugu will fight Ryuko since it wouldn't be Kill la Kill without that happening, but the details of the fight as well as how it goes down is different. Three words: Plastic Explosive Pincushion.*

**Note:** *I am greatly interested in someone making a picture of Ichigo wearing Mugetsu. If anyone wants to do this, please PM me so we can work it out.*

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## Chapter 15 - Won't Get Fooled Again

Under Satsuki Kiryuin's harsh rule, all students attending Honnouji Academy had a strict curfew of 10:00 PM, barring exigent circumstances. Any student found wandering the campus without a reasonable excuse would find themselves at the mercy of the Disciplinary Committee before being handed over to Ira Gamagori, who would go down on the student harder than usual due to having just been woken up. For the most part, every One-Star student and over obeyed the curfew without any fuss or complaints, but Ichigo Kurosaki didn't know about the curfew and wouldn't have cared even if he had.

The good thing about living in an almost empty dorm was that there weren't that many people around to witness anything. Nui Harime's visit on No-Late Day was a prime example of how this was a good thing. Ichigo had no doubts in his mind that if anyone were to have walked in on them, Nui would have easily and without hesitation killed the interloper in order, as she put it, to keep her secret. Ichigo didn't know why she was obsessed with him. Quite frankly it both scared and pissed him off.

Due to the lack of students both willing and able to stay in the dorms, the rooftop made an excellent place to speak without being overheard by spies or nosy people.

"Gah!"

"Hmm..." Mako raised a finger to her lips and tilted her head to the side, "I lost track. How many times was that?"

"Thirty one," Shinjiro Nagita answered without hesitation as he quickly added a tally mark to his writing pad. Much like Mako, he was sitting on the edge of the roof with a sandwich in his hands, "Ryuko's determination to persevere in the face of an unbeatable opponent is truly awe inspiring."

Ichigo frowned from where he was standing, "Yeah, but she's never going to land a hit if she just keeps charging in like that."

Skidding to a stop along the concrete roof, completely unharmed due to Senketsu acting as her skin, Ryuko grumbled angrily and picked herself off the ground. Brushing some dust off her Kamui, she glared at Ururu, who was still standing in the same spot as when the spar began.

" ***She's really strong, Ryuko,***" Senketsu's eye narrowed as he tried to come up with a strategy, but every plan the Kamui thought of was shot down by Ururu's lightning-fast reaction time and speed.

"Way to state the obvious," Ryuko wiped a trail of spit off her lips and stared at Ururu. When she had agreed to this spar in order to hone her skills and increase her abilities, she thought it would be simple. In her mind, Ururu only managed to kick Sanageyama's ass because he hadn't activated his Three-Star Goku Uniform. But after activating Life Fiber Synchronization and still not landing a single hit, Ryuko was beginning to wonder just how strong Ururu was, "There's no way you can be this strong."

"I wasn't always this strong," Ururu said softly, her hands clasped together in front of her, "I trained long and hard to get to where I am today."

"Huh," Ryuko grinned cockily as she digested that piece of information. If someone like Ururu, who hated fighting, could be trained to be this strong, then there was no doubt in her mind that she could do the same, "That's good to know. Ready for the next round?"

Ururu nodded her head, "Of course, but might I suggest trying to kill me? You won't be able to, but it would give you the strength and speed to maybe land a hit on me."

What Ururu just told her took Ryuko aback, "Kill you?"

"Yes," For the first time in the spar Ururu adopted a fighting stance. Bumping her gloved hands together softly, she added, "You should get ready, Ryuko. Here I come."

Ryuko nodded and brought her Scissor Blade up into a defensive position, but as much as she thought she was ready, she really wasn't. One moment she was standing almost twenty feet away from Ururu and the next she was sent flying into the air as Ururu's heel connected with her chin.

Winching in pain as specks of blood hovered in the air around her, Ryuko looked down at the roof out of one half-opened eye, "Damn it. I couldn't even see her move."



***" I didn't even sense her. She's really tough."***

"I know!" Ryuko shouted as she spun around in the air before landing on the roof in a crouch. Just as her heel clicked against the surface of the roof, she was forced to quickly jump backwards when Ururu sprinted towards her.

Barely dodging the first punch, Ryuko was caught off guard when Ururu abruptly switched tactics and swept her leg across the ground. Tossed back into the air, Ryuko was stunned when Ururu thrust her palm into her exposed stomach. Even with Senketsu's steel-like skin, the power behind the blow was like she wasn't even wearing a Kamui. Thrown back along the roof, Ryuko rolled to a stop and immediately noticed her Scissor Blade was no longer in her hands. Twisting her head around, she saw the weapon held firmly in Ururu's hand.

Ururu gazed at the peculiar weapon in her left hand with something akin to wonder and interest. Something about it felt familiar, but that wasn't possible. Turning to a flabbergasted Ryuko, she said, "Your grip was too light. I was able to disarm you with hardly any effort."

"This is terrible!" Mako's arms were raised in front of her body and her eyes were on the verge of tears. Her best friend was equipped with her Sunday best and yet was unable to put up a fight! Gathering her courage, she stood up and shouted, "Come on Ryuko! Where's your fighting spirit? There's no way you should be getting thrown around like my old doll!"

"It is rather strange," Shinjiro flipped through his notepad. Frowning as he recalled something he wrote days ago, he turned to Ichigo, "Ryuko should be stronger than this. Didn't you say she was equal to Satsuki in strength?"

"Just about," Ichigo answered briefly, "She's holding back."

"Ryuko?" Shinjiro asked before wincing when Ryuko was thrown back and her Scissor Blade taken away.

"No. Ururu," Ichigo stated neutrally, "She's probably fighting at about a quarter of her strength. If Ururu wasn't holding back, she would have killed Ryuko when the fight started."

While Mako gasped at that revelation and cheered on Ryuko even more, Shinjiro seemed to become pensive, but Ichigo chalked his less cheery mood to his current state. Some time during No-Late Day, Shinjiro had been ambushed by the Disciplinary Committee and had the crap beat out of him. While most of his wounds had been superficial and needed nothing more than bandages and gauze, Shinjiro was forced to cover his left eye with an eye patch for the foreseeable future.

"Ururu's that strong?" The familiar awe was back in his voice, which showed Ichigo that Shinjiro was back to his old self, "That's incredible! She could be our secret weapon to expose Lady Satsuki's tyranny once and for all!"

"What's with you and taking down Satsuki?" Ichigo arched an eyebrow. There was something odd about how Shinjiro always wanted to go after Satsuki, "Can't you - "

"Look at the color changing!"

Ichigo and Shinjiro turned towards Mako, who had shouted the exclamation, before turning towards Ururu. While they were both stunned by what they saw, it was Ichigo who voiced what was on both of their minds, "It's turning purple?"

They were not the only ones to notice. Both Ryuko, whose eyes were wide as saucers and her lips trembling, and Ururu, who viewed it with a mixture of detached interest and confusion, had noticed it as well. Holding the Scissor Blade out in front of her petite body, Ururu watched as the red color of the blade started bleeding away only to be replaced by a shade of dark purple. In only a few seconds there wasn't any trace of red left on it. It was now a purple Scissor Blade.

"How strange..." Ururu held the blade up to her eyes and stared deeply at it. She had no idea why it had changed color, but nothing seemed to have been changed besides its cosmetic appearance, "Why did it turn purple?"

"You..." Ryuko's body was trembling and her head was tilted down, hiding her eyes beneath thick shadows. Clenching her fists angrily to the point where she should have drawn blood, she glared at Ururu and seethed, "Just who are you anyway?"

With almost wild abandon Ryuko raced along the roof, the vents on her back only helping to increase her speed. As she closed the distance between Ururu and herself, Ryuko cocked a fist back and aimed for her target's face. She could tell by the look in Ururu's eyes that she hadn't expected Ryuko to just come charging at her. That did not, however, stop Ururu from leaning to the side and allowing the punch to go sailing harmlessly past less than an inch from her nose. Nor did it stop her from stabbing the now purple Scissor Blade into the roof, rearing her arm back and driving her fist deep into Ryuko's solar plexus.

"Gah!" Ryuko spit out globs of blood as Ururu punched her with nearly half of her strength. Collapsing onto the ground with only a single shaking arm preventing her face from hitting it, Ryuko gasped for breath and looked up into Ururu's passive face, "Why?"

"Huh?" Ururu blinked owlshly in confusion.

"Why..." Ryuko took a moment to catch her breath, "... why did you kill my dad?"

Ururu stared at the fallen Ryuko before crouching down next to her. Staring level into Ryuko's eyes, she tilted her head to the side and said, "But I didn't kill your dad. I don't even know who he is."

"What?" Ryuko managed to regain some control over her body as the pain in her stomach abated, "But my Scissor Blade. Why did it turn purple when you held it?"

Ururu briefly looked at the skewered weapon, "I don't know, but I'm really sorry for any confusion and anger I may have caused you. Please forgive me!"

A faint blush of embarrassment adorned Ryuko's cheeks as Ururu apologized to her profusely. She was about to apologize when Senketsu spoke to her, ***"That was dangerous of you, Ryuko."***

Ryuko stared at Senketsu's only working eye and saw that it was narrowed in anger, "What do you mean, Senketsu?"

***" When you got angry just now, your blood began boiling hotter and hotter,"*** Her Kamui paused for a moment to let his words sink in before continuing, ***"If it had continued for much longer, I would not have been able to control my taste for your blood. You need to be careful in the future. You mustn't let your anger take control of you or it will not end well for either of us."***

"You're right," Ryuko sighed dejectedly, "It's just that I - "

"Ryuko!"

Ryuko didn't have much warning before Mako latched onto her neck, spun around once and tackled her to the ground. As she tried to get Mako's hands away from her neck so that she was able to breath, Mako tightened her grip even more, "Don't die on me, Ryuko! I can't afford to go searching for a new best friend this time of the year. It's too much of a hassle!"

"Mako... can't... breath..." Ryuko comically gasped for breath as her face started turning blue. Her relief came when Ichigo grabbed Mako by the back of her collar and pulled her off of the nearly dead Ryuko.

"Easy Mako," Ichigo let Mako down gently before offering a hand to Ryuko, "Are you alright?"

Instead of taking his hand, Ryuko deactivated Senketsu and sat cross-legged on the ground with her arms folded in front of her

chest. With a pout of anger on her face, she asked, "How well do you know Ururu?"

"Ururu?" Ichigo looked at said girl and watched as she played keep away with Mako and the purple Scissor Blade that she still hadn't given back to Ryuko. Scratching his head, he answered, "Well... she worked for Kisuke for a while. I think she's his daughter or something. I never saw her outside of his shop or school."

"So she can't be the one who killed my dad. Then why did my Scissor Blade change colors when she held it?"

"Hell if I know," Ichigo shrugged and extended his hand towards Ururu, who immediately gave the Scissor Blade back. Strangely enough, as soon as his hand closed around the handle, the purple bled away and was replaced by the same dark shade of blue that Tournesol shone with. Giving it an experimental swing, he said, "Perhaps it just changes color if someone else holds it."

Flipping the blade around in his grip, Ichigo handed it back to Ryuko, who took it and watched the blue fade away to red almost immediately. Staring at the blade with a mixture of suspicion and betrayal for several long moments, she sighed and grumbled, "I guess I went a little crazy back there. God, I feel like such an idiot for blaming Ururu for what happened to my dad!"

Ichigo paused and looked to the side and away from Ryuko, "You never said what happened to your dad."

"That's because there isn't much to say," Ryuko admitted sadly, her gaze locked firmly on the ground in front of her, "Dad called me back home to talk about something. When I got back, I found him lying against the wall with this blade sticking out of his stomach. I tried to save him, damn it I tried, but I caught a glimpse of a woman with the other half of this weapon fleeing. That's all I know."

"Hmm..."

Ryuko noticed Ichigo's lack of response and looked up. Seeing him staring into the distance, she asked, "What is it?"

Ichigo watched Mako say something bombastically to Shinjiro, who replied just as enthusiastically, before replying, "I have an idea who the woman is."

"What?" Ryuko shot to her feet, "Who is it?"

Ichigo shook his head, "It's just a suspicion, but I'm pretty sure it's her. Everything just adds up too perfectly to be anything else."

Ryuko huffed angrily, "Can I at least know her name?"

"Yeah," Ichigo yawned and started to head back to his room. It was getting late and he was certain that Tsumugu would be coming back tomorrow to finish what he started with Ryuko, "Her name is Nui Harime."

"Nui Harime..." Ryuko let the name roll off her tongue. It was certainly a name she wouldn't forget anytime soon, "Hey, are you going to help me tomorrow against that guy?"

Ichigo looked at Ryuko, "You want me to?"

"Yes. No. Maybe. I don't know!" Ryuko grumbled and kicked her foot against the roof, "I want to know what that guy has against Senketsu, but he has so many damn tricks up his sleeves. For all I know, he's tinkering right this moment and making new traps and weapons to throw me off guard. He already managed to catch me off guard once already. What's to stop him from doing it a second time when I'm not expecting it?"

That was a good point. Ichigo could see that while Ryuko would have preferred to fight her own battles, she was willing to ask for his help, "I'll do what I can, but if he's as smart as you say he is, he's going to wait until we're separated before attacking."

"Thanks," A smile graced Ryuko's face as she followed Ichigo back into the building. Perhaps tomorrow wouldn't be as bad as she thought.

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A frown graced Satsuki Kiryuin's face.

Satsuki liked to believe she could predict events in advance. With human nature being what it was, it was simply a matter of determining how a person usually reacts in order to figure out the best course of action in limiting their power and influence. Sometimes it's their pride, knowledge, honor, or simply adoration, but people have weaknesses. Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi were no different.

Sipping her tea before continuing to read the latest report on Ryuko, Satsuki felt that reading it was a waste a time. She already knew the motivations behind Ryuko's actions, due in no small part to causing them herself. All she needed to do to provoke Ryuko into making irrational choices it to subtly mention the death of her father. It was almost too easy. Ichigo Kurosaki, on the other hand, was more complicated and difficult to read. Satsuki had tried to speak with him on multiple occasions, only succeeding in a couple, but what she was about to deduce wasn't enough to predict how Ichigo would react to future stimuli. He was honorable and law-abiding, but at the same time was willing to break rules in order to do what is right. If she was any other person, Satsuki would have applauded Ichigo, but right now he was a major obstacle to her plans.

*"What is the best course of action for reining in Ichigo?" Satsuki leaned back and gently closed her eyes, "He is no doubt suspicious of my motives and will not listen to anything I say without a grain of salt. Perhaps I can use that suspicion to my advantage. By mixing together enough truths and lies, I should be able to trick him into doing what I want."*

"Lady Satsuki," Houka Inumuta's voice carried across the room, reminding Satsuki that she wasn't alone, "I have the information you requested about the intruder who took out the Gardening Club this morning."

"I see," Satsuki would think more on dealing with Ichigo once the discussion was finished. She was finding, to her irritation, that her thoughts continued to circulate around Ichigo more than she would have preferred, "What did you find?"

Inumuta pressed a key and immediately a picture of Tsumugu was prominently displayed on the large screen taking up most of the wall next to Satsuki. Staring at the picture, her face illuminated by the green and black glow, she glanced over the various statistics before focusing solely on the pictures of his encounter with Ryuko and Ichigo earlier that day

"Information surrounding this man is surprisingly limited," As a computer expert majoring in data infiltration and gathering, Inumuta took pride in his ability to find out almost anything about anyone. His several failed attempts to find so much as the name of this man irked him to no end, "But the data I was able to gather suggests that he is a member of the Anti-Uniform paramilitary, Nudist Beach, that has been plaguing us over the last three years."

"Nudist Beach?" Ira Gamagori towered over his fellow Elite Fours as he stared at the screen with a mixture of disdain and contemplation, "That same group that's been dismantling several of Lady Satsuki associated academies?"

"The one and the same," Inumuta adjusted his glasses before continuing, "While that group has been working against Lady Satsuki, this man has personally taken out nine academies and schools in the last year alone."

"Nine?" Uzu Sanageyama uncrossed his legs and sat up on the edge of the couch, "Why haven't we caught this man yet?"



"He's smart," Inumuta explained, "Upon arrival at an academy, he immediately heads towards the Student Council and takes them out. Once the Student Council Lady Satsuki put into power is dismantled..."

"... We lose control over the academy and its students," Gamagori finished gruffly. Upon successfully taking over an academy, Lady Satsuki allows a Student Council of her choosing to run the school in her absence. To prevent any potential uprisings, each member of the council is given a Goku Uniform for their role in helping her expand her power. With this man taking out the councils, large swatches of Japan had broken away and joined up with the three remaining academies in the Kansai Region. Frowning deeply, he looked at Inumuta and asked, "How is this man accomplishing this? He doesn't seem to be wearing any Life Fiber-infused clothing."

"I was getting to that," Inumuta annoyingly admonished before typing a few more keys, "As I was about to say, this is the man's primary weapon."

Inumuta slid his fingers across the screen of his laptop and immediately the picture of Tsumugu vanished and was replaced by several of his Sewing Machine Gun. With another swipe, several high-resolution images of the needles used as ammunition as well as a basic schematic of the weapon appeared.

"How barbaric," Nonon Jakuzure quipped playfully as she looked at the weapon, "Using such a crude weapon against Lady Satsuki is just stupid. It's a wonder he even managed to take down a single associated academy in the first place."

"The needles he uses are composed of a special alloy that possesses the ability to sever the link between a human and a Life Fiber," Inumuta explained, annoyed at Nonon's interruption of his explanation, "Hmm? This is strange. It says that the alloy in the needles is the sole intellectual property of Revocs."

"How does a man working for an Anti-Uniform group gain access to classified materials?" Gamagori asked casually, "Could there be a traitor at Revocs assisting these Nudists?"

"I doubt that" Satsuki answered calmly, a cold tone to her voice, "My mother would not tolerate dissension of any kind in her company. If an employee so much as harbors thoughts of espionage, they disappear. Inumuta, pull up the list of robberies, both successful and attempted, against Revocs over the last twenty years."

"Electronic records only go back eighteen years, but I'll try," Inumuta typed rapidly against his keyboard, his fingers little more than blurs of motion. After more than a minute passed in silence without a hint of progress from the former hacker, he managed to find something useful, "I've managed to compile a list of internal Revocs memos. Of the hundreds of memos, only one, dating back fourteen years, references a missing shipment of classified materials. It's not concrete, but I do believe it is what you're looking for."

"It does not matter how he came into possession of the alloy," Satsuki concluded.

"Allow us to confront him directly," Sanageyama offered energetically, "The Goku Uniforms you gave to the other academies were no stronger than Two-Star. There is no way that he can take down all four of us."

"An excellent suggestion, but a pointless one," Satsuki turned her head and waited for Soroi to refill her cup of tea before continuing, "This man's target is Matoi, not me."

"Why would he be after Matoi?" Gamagori asked.

Satsuki spoke as calmly as ever, "His goal is her Kamui. Since his intentions do not involve me, this skirmish is simply a struggle between a sandpiper and a clam. Jumping in and getting involved will only dirty our hands. We will leave him alone and allow Matoi to fight her own battles."

"What about Strawberry?" Jakuzure asked suspiciously.

"You needn't worry about him," Satsuki sighed cockily as she sipped her tea, "Ichigo won't be a problem."

"Do you want me to take care of him?" Sanageyama asked, willingly offering his services to Satsuki. He was still smarting over his defeat to Ururu a few days ago. If getting his ass kicked by a little girl wasn't enough, he failed to get his revenge on Ichigo during No-Late Day. Somehow even without his Kamui, Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi escaped from him with barely a scratch.

"Your willingness is appreciated, " Satsuki condoned, "But unnecessary. It is likely that the clash between Matoi and this man will spread throughout Honnouji Academy. I need you to gather the Athletic Club Captains and be ready to capture this man as soon as the fight is over. Whether he defeats Matoi or vice versa, he will be exhausted both physically and mentally. It will be a prime opportunity to capture a member of Nudist Beach and determine their goals and plans."

"Strawberry is going to be a problem," Jakuzure quipped haughtily, "It'll be just like a prince saving a princess. But in this case the princess is an ugly troll with no sense of fashion."

"Ichigo is the kind of person to step in and help those close to him," Satsuki put the now empty cup of tea down and steeped her fingers, "Getting him away from Matoi for the duration of the fight is going to be a problem."

"Let me deal with Strawberry," Jakuzure chuckled coldly, "He needs to learn his place. What better way is there than to be crushed under my feet?"

"What a peculiar reaction," Inumuta noticed with a bit of sarcasm in his voice, "If I didn't know any better, I would think you were obsessed with Ichigo Kurosaki."

"Quiet doggy," Jakuzure growled menacingly, the mouth of the monkey skull on her hat opening and closing alongside her own, "It is true that the transfer student was the one to wreck my Biology Club, but Strawberry has taken out several other clubs. I'm not going to sit back and let him keep doing that. It is up to the Non-Athletic Committee to take care of its own problems. That is, of course, if Lady Satsuki permits me to do so."

"You may," Satsuki answered after a second, "But you must know that Ichigo's abilities far exceed anything you have witnessed so far. I have seen how he's defeated the Club Captains. It is nothing compared to the strength he used to fight and defeat me. If you wish to fight him, I will not stop you, but you can guess the price of failure. Either you come back to me with his Kamui in hand or you will be demoted down to a No-Star. I am giving you a single chance to reconsider your choice, Jakuzure."

"You don't need to be worried about me, Lady Satsuki," Nonon Jakuzure smirked and brushed imaginary dust off her shoulders, "I'm not going to underestimate Strawberry one bit. If he was strong enough to fight you fairly, it would be quite rude to not go all out myself."

Satsuki smiled minutely at Nonon's determination, "Very well then. If you are so determined on fighting Ichigo, then you have my permission to do so. However, you must know that you would be at a disadvantage to Ichigo's speed and strength."

"That is where I come in," Iori's voice spoke up from the shadows. Stepping forward and briefly acknowledging the Elite Four, he turned to Satsuki and continued, "I have done what you asked of me, Lady Satsuki. After several hours of going through the combat data involving the Symphony Regalia, I believe I have ironed out most flaws and mistakes. Jakuzure, please come with me. I need to test fit the Symphony Regalia Mark II."

A wide grin spread across Nonon's face as she stood up and followed Iori. With the power afforded to her by her new and

improved Goku Uniform, she was going to make Ichigo pay for the humiliation he inflicted on her. That was for certain.

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Ryuko strummed her fingers against her desk as she barely paid attention to Aikuro's rambling about the Iran-Contra Affair. As much as she liked to learn about history, there was something wrong with Aikuro if he was able to make her zone out as much as she was. There was no way this man was a member of whatever organization Nudist Beach is, which she still thinks is bullshit Aikuro made up to mess with her. Suppressing a yawn and scribbling down a few more notes, she looked at her hand and frowned when she noticed it was shaking.

*"Is it because I'm nervous about fighting that man again?"*

She would be lying if she said that Tsumugu didn't frighten her. The way the man knew how to disable her attempt to activate Senketsu meant that he must have experience fighting Life Fibers. Did he know about Senketsu and Kamui because he fought them before? How did he know Ichigo's mother? Thoughts like those plagued her mind and it only helped to increase the annoyance she was feeling.

***"Your blood has had a bad taste to it all morning, Ryuko."***

"Huh?" Ryuko glanced down at Senketsu, "What are you talking about?"

***"All the nervousness you're feeling is making your blood taste really sour,"*** Senketsu hummed and his eye blinked once before adding, ***"Or perhaps its all the lemons you've been eating lately. Switch to less sour fruit."***

"Why do you care what I eat?" Ryuko mumbled and tried to focus back on Aikuro's dull lecture. It took Ryuko a moment to put the

pieces together, but when she finally did, she stared back down at Senketsu and hissed quietly, "Wait a second, you can tell how my blood tastes?"

***" As your Kamui, I have the ability to immediately detect any changes in your physiology. This includes your cholesterol, blood sugar level, weight and even your BMI."***

Ryuko bit back a hiss of pain as her knee involuntarily jerked up and into her desk. Rubbing her luckily un-bruised knee, she growled at her Kamui, "Keep your nose out of stuff like that! It's private for a reason, damn it."

***" It is private, but as your Kamui I have a vested interest in your health and welfare,"*** Senketsu ignored Ryuko's complaints in order to continue giving his sagely advice. He knew that no matter what she said, she would soon realize everything he did was for her best interests, ***"Speaking of food, you should cut back on those croquettes. You need to eat a more balanced diet, like Ichigo."***

"Don't bring Ichigo into this!" Ryuko tried to keep her voice down to barely a whisper. She was in the middle of class, not outside where nobody would notice her talking to Senketsu. She got enough funny looks as it is. She didn't want people to think she heard voices that weren't there, "And wipe that smug expression off your face."

***" You should know by know that I am incapable of having any expression on my face... because I do not have a face!"***

Ryuko grabbed Senketsu's collar and pulled hard, "Why you son of a  
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Her curse was cut short when the class bell rang, signifying that she didn't need to put up with any more of Senketsu's so-called advice. Quickly grabbing her bag, she made her way out of the classroom and found Ichigo waiting for her in the hallway.

"Hey Ichigo," Ryuko hooked her hands behind her neck, "What are you doing here?"

Ichigo pointed his thumb over his shoulder, "Mako wouldn't stop bothering me until I told her where your class was."

"Ryuko!"

Ryuko stepped to the side as Mako came diving through the air, causing her to go rolling along the ground before flipping into the air and impacting face-first against the nearby wall. As Mako comically peeled off the wall and fell to the ground, she quickly picked herself back up and shook the dust out of her hair, "Why didn't you catch me, Ryuko?"

"Huh?" Ryuko raised an eyebrow, "Was I supposed to?"

"Of course you were!" Mako pumped a fist dramatically, "You were supposed to catch me midair so that I wouldn't get hurt."

"I'll remember that next time," Ryuko sarcastically rolled her eyes and turned to Ichigo, "Hey, where's Ururu?"

"She's thinking about joining a club," Ichigo shook his head. He remembered Ururu expressing a want to join one of the many clubs at Honnouji Academy. Her argument was that there were many different and interesting things to do at the school and she was interested in joining one of the Non-Athletic Clubs. When Ichigo asked her which one, Ururu had paused, tilted her head to the side and said that she didn't know yet, but she would let him know as soon as she did.

"Oh. I was going to apologize for what happened last night," Ryuko turned away in embarrassment. Even though Ururu had been the one to apologize for causing her to snap like that, Ryuko knew it was just because the girl felt the need to please everyone. If apologizing for something she didn't do would help to calm everyone down, then

Ururu would do it. Sighing wistfully, she asked, "Have you seen any sign of that guy?"

"No, and that's what bothers me," Ichigo looked out the line of windows along the wall of the hall and down into the courtyard below. At the height they were standing and with all the students milling about outside, it was hard to tell if one of them was that man. Shaking his head, he turned back to Ryuko, "But I doubt he'll just show up in the middle of the day. I don't think Satsuki was too pleased with what he did yesterday."

"Perhaps she'll take care of him for us," Ryuko laughed and added, "But if she thinks I'm going to thank her, she can rot in hell."

**" Ichigo."**

Ichigo and Ryuko stopped as Mugetsu spoke up, "What is it."

**" Something's not right,"** Mugetsu's voice sounded slightly worried. As her multicolored eyes narrowed in thought, they quickly opened and turned to the right, **"Get down!"**

Ichigo didn't even think twice. Grabbing Mako and Ryuko, he dove to the ground as the windows exploded inwards, coating the entire hallway in shards of glass and metal while injuring the dozens of students around them. Coughing and getting back to his feet, Ichigo looked around for the source of the attack and soon found out what, or rather who, it was.

"Aw. I missed." From her position hovering just outside the hole in Honnouji Academy's wall, Nonon Jakuzure raised a hand suggestively to her lips as she gazed down at her target. In a deceptively sweet voice that promised sugar and rainbows, she added with a cocky grin, "I'll just have to try harder to hit you with my next salvo."

Unlike her previous bulky and unwieldy Goku Uniform, Nonon's new Symphony Regalia was designed specifically for high speed combat.



Her entire body, save for her head, was encased in a pink flight suit with six red buttons going down her chest. Her drum major's hat, the same one with the skull of a monkey, now looked like an actual skull. Her forearms and lower legs were enveloped by white armor similar to Mugetsu's but resembling pieces of instruments. When she noticed Ichigo staring at her new uniform, Nonon struck a pose and adjusted her lower thrusters to bring her a little closer.

"Do you like my new uniform, Strawberry? It was made specifically to kill you."

"What the hell do you have against Ichigo, Snake?" Ryuko shook her fist at Nonon while calling her the nickname Ichigo said pissed the pink haired girl off.

"Keep out of this, Transfer Student!" Nonon hissed at Ryuko while the woofers extending from her shoulders temporarily glowed with an ominous pink, "Unless you want to die as well, I suggest you stay out of this. Lady Satsuki has ordered me not to deal with you today, so consider yourself lucky."

"Like hell I'm going to stand back," Ryuko reached for the pin on her glove. She wasn't about to allow Ichigo to fight against an opponent like Nonon, but before she could pull it out and give Senketsu the donation of blood he needed to transform, Ichigo's voice stopped her.

"She's right, Ryuko," Ichigo reached for Tournesol on his back with his left hand while his right hand moved towards the spaulder on his left shoulder, "Leave this to me. Take Mako somewhere safe. I don't trust Jakuzure to not hit her during our fight."

"You finally used my name," Nonon smirked and leaned back midair, "Does that mean you respect my power now?"

"Hell no!" Ichigo vehemently denied, causing Nonon to flounder around in the air from the surprise, "If anything, I respect you even

less now! Attacking innocent students just for a shot at hitting me?  
How low are you?"

Nonon bit her lip at the insult to her honor. How dare Ichigo say she had no honor when it was Lady Satsuki's orders that she take him out! He had no idea what he was talking about, "Bold words, Strawberry, but I'm going to make you eat them."

"Come and try!" Ichigo slammed his hand down on the spaulder and was immediately enveloped in light and blue stars as Mugetsu transformed around his body, "Life Fiber Initial Release: Kamui Mugetsu!"

Stepping out of the smoke that formed from his transformation, Ichigo dispersed it with a swing of his blade and turned towards Nonon, "Let's do this, but not here. I don't want any innocent people to get hurt."

Before Nonon could give an answer, Ichigo leapt out the hole she made in the wall and fell towards the ground below. Scrambling to recover the initiative, she spun around and flew down after him, "It doesn't matter where we fight, because I'm going to wipe the floor with you!"

As Nonon's angry voice faded into the distance, Ryuko ran towards the hole and gripped the jagged edges with her hand. Her eyes fervently looked everywhere, but she couldn't see any sign of where Ichigo went. Cursing under her breath, she was about to turn away when a large explosion appeared in the building next door. Focusing on the rising plume of smoke, she could just barely make out a figure that looked a lot like Ichigo racing across a rooftop with Nonon chasing after him relentlessly.

"Mako, go find Ururu and stay close to her," Ryuko had no doubts that Ururu would protect Mako. Stepping onto the edge of the hole, she prepared to activate Senketsu to follow Ichigo, whether he wanted her help or not, but frowned when she didn't hear Mako say anything, "Hey Mako, I said - "

Ryuko stopped when she saw Mako's needle-filled body falling stiffly to the ground. Realizing who was coming, she quickly pulled the pin out of her glove, transforming Senketsu, and drew her red Scissor Blade just as Tsumugu fired a barrage of needles at her from his Sewing Machines Gun.

"Your skill has improved remarkably since our encounter yesterday," Tsumugu complimented as he stepped out of the shadows, "So let me give you two pieces of useful information. One. Do not think that our fight yesterday was any indication of my skill set. Two. I am giving you a single chance to hand over your Kamui with a fight. If you fail to do so, I will have no choice but to rip it off your body."

***" Be careful, Ryuko. This man seems to know a lot about how to counter me.***

"You worry too much, Senketsu. So just sit back and let me do the fighting. " Turning towards a frowning Tsumugu, she pointed her Scissor Blade at him and said, "You really think I'm just going to hand over Senketsu? You're going to have to take him over my dead body!"

Tsumugu closed his eyes and took a deep breath, "So be it."

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Ichigo was not having a good day.

Moving a large chunk of concrete blocking his path out of the way, he hopped down and accidentally landed on the unconscious body of a member of the Men's Basketball Club.

"Are you having fun yet, Strawberry?" Nonon hovered gently out of the hole she created in the roof. With her hands placed on her hips, she added, "Because I'm having a lot of fun kicking your butt."

"Shut up," Ichigo rolled his eyes at the fake sweetness in Nonon's voice. He was starting to get rather pissed off with the way she was talking to him and treating him. It was almost as if this fight was a game to her which, he had to admit, it was one he was losing. Since she could fly through the air, Nonon had a distinct advantage over him. While his speed and power were great enough that he could jump high enough in the air to hit her, she had proven herself able to reflexively dodge his attacks.

"Don't get angry at me because you suck," Nonon grinned and stuck her tongue out, "But don't feel too bad, Strawberry. There is no way you can defeat my Symphony Regalia Mark II. It was upgraded and improved all in order to defeat you."

"Improved?" Ichigo spit on the ground and stretched his right shoulder. Swinging Tournesol was taking a toll on his body. It had been a while since he used a blade and his body was suffering because of it, "So that means your first Goku Uniform wasn't good enough to fight me?"

"It was more than good enough!" Nonon swung her fist down at Ichigo angrily, which due to her diminutive size, wasn't as threatening as she wanted it to be, "It was all you and your stupid speed! My Symphony Regalia Grave's power was more than enough to defeat you, but you're just too damn fast! Luckily, Lady Satsuki was grateful enough to upgrade my Goku Uniform to its current form. Now I have all the power of Grave with the speed to catch you!"

Nonon punctuated her words by firing another stream of musical notes at Ichigo. Deflecting the abnormal metallic ammo with Tournesol, blue sparks jumping off the blade with every note blocked, Ichigo tried to think of a way to defeat Nonon. Trying to attack her had already proven to be ineffective. She knew how strong and fast he was, so she always made sure to fly just far enough away to avoid his attacks.

"Aw, screw this!" Ichigo twisted his body just enough to the side that the barrage of notes passed right above his skin. With his body still

in motion, he sprinted towards Nonon before pushing off the ground towards her with enough power to dent the concrete below.

"How many times are you going to try the same old thing?" Nonon laughed as she prepared to move out of the way, "It's really sad to see - "

She stopped midsentence as her pink eyes widened in shock at the blue blade approaching her neck. Instinctively adjusting her thrusters to fire upwards, she leaned back at the same time and watched as Tournesol missed hitting her but managed to leave a long gash on her helmet. Flying away higher into the sky even as Ichigo landed back on the ground, Nonon raised a trembling hand to her head and ran her finger across the gash in her Symphony Regalia that could have easily been her throat.

*" Strawberry was really trying to kill me."*

For the first time in the fight, Nonon realized that Ichigo wasn't kidding around. As much as she and the other Elite Four bragged about killing anyone who dared to stand up to or fight against Lady Satsuki, she had yet to actually do the deed. She usually left such tasks to Gamagori or Lady Satsuki. Swallowing nervously as she noticed Ichigo staring at her, she gathered her nerves and thought, *"There is no reason to be scared. Lady Satsuki believes in me, so there is no way I can lose! Strawberry is just trying to psyche me out. Like a pampered asshole that got a full scholarship to Honnouji Academy could have ever fought in a real battle. His fight against Lady Satsuki was nothing more than a fluke!"*

"Nice try Strawberry," Nonon growled, "But don't think I'll fall for your bluff!"

Back on the ground, Ichigo stared up at the hovering Nonon and let out an annoyed huff, "Damn it, I was close. Hey Mugetsu, you have any ideas on what to do?"

" **Oh?**" Mugetsu's eyes swiveled around and gazed up at him, **"What makes you think I know how to beat her. I'm just as stumped as you are."**

Ichigo rolled his eyes, "There has to be something I can do. Can't you fly or something?"

" **Don't you think I would fly if I could?**" Mugetsu asked sarcastically before her eyes widened and then narrowed, **"I have an idea, but I'm going to need a minute to figure it out."**

"I don't think I have a minute," Ichigo saw the woofers on Nonon's back charging up with pink light. Clenching Tournesol's hilt in both hands, he prepared himself for what was coming.

"Try to dodge this!" Nonon's body was forced back as two heart-shaped beams of sound exploded out from her woofers, "Symphony Regalia: Grave Assault!"

"The hell?" Ichigo swung Tournesol up and managed to block one of the beams, but he wasn't prepared for the second beam to blow right through his defenses and hit him square in the chest. As his body was forced backward across the ground, he tried desperately to stop the attack right until it detonated around him.

From where she was floating, Nonon smirked as she observed the rising clouds of smoke and dust. There was no way that Ichigo could have survived that attack without taking at least some damage. Hovering closer to the ground, she began combing through the debris. She needed to find Ichigo's unconscious body so that she could tear his Kamui off of him. Seeing his naked body afterwards was simply a bonus.

"Where is that damn Strawberry?" she growled after nearly a minute. She couldn't find a trace of Ichigo or his Kamui, which meant she either blew him to pieces, which was really bad, or she missed, which was even worse. Gritting her teeth and spitting, she decided to smoke Ichigo out, "So you want to hide like a coward, huh? Fine

then. Let's see how you deal with this. Symphony Regalia: Moderato Assault!"

The twin woofers on Nonon's back split into four sections each as a pink and purple light began to grow in intensity from within. As the light continued to grow brighter to the point where the immediate area was bathed in shades of pink, Nonon raised a finger into the air and laughed, "Dodge this!"

In a concussive blast accentuated by expanding shockwaves from the woofers, eight miniature heart-shaped beams spiraled through the air and hit the rubble and debris with enough energy to explode the concrete and send cracks radiating outwards from the point of impact.

"Too easy..." Nonon sighed and shrugged her shoulders. It seemed that Strawberry was all talk and no action. After that little display of speed yesterday, she thought he would put up more of a fight than this. Lady Satsuki had warned her about his power, but Nonon hadn't seen anything to suggest he was as strong as Satsuki said he was. Wait a second... if he wasn't as strong as she thought, did that mean Satsuki wasn't as well? Nonon quickly shook her head to stop herself from thinking of such thoughts. Satsuki was the greatest person in the world! Such thoughts were highly insulting to her best friend and leader!

"Oh well," Nonon hovered closer to the ground and began looking for Ichigo. Even if he was hiding, there was no way in hell that he managed to avoid her Moderato Assault.

"Huh?" Nonon stared at several small rocks that seemed to be vibrating and moving on their own. Leaning in to take a closer look, she was nearly blasted out of the air as something shot out from the ground and into the air above her.

"What the hell was that?"

She stared upwards and growled. Hovering in the air over her was Ichigo, but his appearance was different. While Mugetsu usually resembled armor, her new appearance was much more metallic and sleek. Ichigo's feet and lower legs had each transformed into jet engines that expelled enough force to keep him hovering lazily in the air. Mugetsu's eyes, which normally jutted up over his shoulders, extended backwards and out to the side and took the form of jet wings. Lastly, while Ichigo's face was usually uncovered by Mugetsu's transformed state, parts of her white armor now wrapped across his nose and down his cheeks.

"Mugetsu Gufū," Ichigo smirked at the stunned Nonon, "What was it you were saying about the skies being your kingdom?"

Nonon didn't say anything as her expression darkened considerably. Gritting her teeth together, her body tensed up before she rocketed towards Ichigo while shouting, "You orange haired bastard! The sky is my world! I'm going to kick your ass for mocking me!"

The venom in Nonon's voice surprised Ichigo, but it didn't slow him down much. As she quickly closed the distance between them, Ichigo twisted his body around and flew away from her, his body moving awkwardly as he grew used to flight.

"Die, Strawberry!" Nonon shouted and aimed her lower thrusters at Ichigo before releasing a swarm of missiles.

Maneuvering around a missile, Ichigo tsked, "What the hell is her problem?"

" ***It's something you'll never understand, Ichigo,***" Due to the new position of Mugetsu's eyes, Ichigo wasn't able to make eye contact, but that didn't stop him from responding.

"And you do?"

" ***Of course,***" Mugetsu answered matter-of-factly, "***I am well aware of the female mind and I can tell you that your opponent never***



***fought someone able to fly. Your use of Gufū has insulted her."***

"What do you expect me to do? Just give up and allow her to hit me?" Leaning back and avoiding having his head blown off by a recorder-shaped missile, Ichigo decided to go on the offensive. Stabbing Tournesol into the missile's casing, he let out a shout as he spun around and, with no small amount of effort, threw the missile back at Nonon.

"Like hell that's going to work!" Nonon had a wild look in her eyes as she deftly avoided her returned missile and countered with another heart-shaped stream of sound, "You're going to pay for that you bastard!"

***"Do you have a plan?"*** Mugetsu's voice was full of sarcasm, ***"Because I think that just made things worse."***

"Oh great," Ichigo sighed as he quickly twisted around before flying higher into the sky. This was going to take longer than he thought. He only hoped Ryuko didn't run into that man until he was done with Nonon.

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Ryuko really hated her bad timing.

"Damn that paranoid bastard."

Stabbing her Scissor Blade into the wall, she leapt over the line of trap mines and landed in the relative safety of the hall. The sheer amount of destruction and nude students to her left indicated which way Tsumugu had gone, but Ryuko wasn't stupid enough to follow him. She had already fallen into three spool grenade traps, a pin bomb and something involving laser tripwires. She wasn't too keen on walking headfirst into yet another trap. Pulling out the last few

remaining needles from her body, she heard Senketsu let out a sigh of relief upon their removal.

**" Thank you, Ryuko," Senketsu sighed gratefully, "There was something special about those needles. You need to try and not get hit by any more of them."**

"Yeah, yeah," Ryuko crouched down and stared at the bound and gagged Club Captain struggling on the floor in front of her. There was something strange about his gag, but it took her a few seconds to realize what it was. When she did, Ryuko's eyes widened and she turned around and began running away as fast as possible. In the bound and stripped Kusatao Uwabami's mouth were over a dozen spool grenades, all of which were connected to a timer that had a few seconds remaining on it.

"God damn that mohawk bastard!"

While she was unharmed by the explosions, the force managed to throw her body forward, sending her tumbling through the halls before skidding face first against the ground. With her face on the ground and ass sticking up in the air, Ryuko grumbled curses and threats at Tsumugu, wherever he was, before planting her hands on the ground and picking herself back up.

As she stood up, Ryuko noticed a shadow growing against the wall to her right. Turning and looking out the window, she saw Tsumugu rappelling down Honnouji Academy before he crashed feet first through the window. Blocking his kick by crossing her arms, she found herself surprisingly thrown backwards against the door to the bathroom behind her with enough force to dent the steel door. Angrily and humiliated at his constant traps, Ryuko pushed back and managed to force Tsumugu back.

"Hmm," Tsumugu grunted as he landed and examined Ryuko. This was becoming a difficult fight. He had expected his jamming rounds to take a larger effect on the Kamui, but it didn't seem to be affected at all by his specialized ammunition. That just goes to show how

powerful and dangerous Kamui are. Subtly reaching behind his back to his emergency weapon, Tsumugu stalled for time, "I thought my jamming rounds would have disabled your Kamui by now. Impressive."

"Like I care about anything you say!" Ryuko pointed her Scissor Blade at Tsumugu angrily. She was tired of playing games with this man and she had a lot of questions to ask him, "I'm going to kick your ass and then find out why you're after Senketsu!"

'Is that so? Well then, let me tell you two useful pieces of information."

"Screw that!" Ryuko raced forward, cutting off Tsumugu's speech and swung her Scissor Blade through the air. Twisting around the strike, Tsumugu pressed his palm against the small of Ryuko's back before leaping away and running into a room. Hearing a faint beeping sound, Ryuko looked over her shoulder and a plastic explosive pincushion stuck to her back with nearly three-dozen jamming rounds stuck inside.

"What the - "

The bomb went off before Ryuko could finish. As the explosion blew the windows for the entire hallway outwards, Ryuko flew through the air before hitting the wall harshly on the far side of the building.

"Damn that guy," Ryuko began to weakly pull herself free, only for Senketsu's voice to stop her.

**" I'm sorry Ryuko, but I'm at my limit. You're going to have to continue on your own."**

In a flash of stars and light, Senketsu transformed back to his normal uniform appearance, eliciting a shout of 'Senketsu!' from Ryuko. Before she could say anything else, Tsumugu came barreling towards her and pinned her body against the wall with his foot.

"One. I do not like to be interrupted," Tsumugu continued from where Ryuko so rudely interrupted him before. Pointing his Sewing Machine Gun at her, he flicked his wrist to the side, indicating what he wanted her to do, "Two. Killing you would be a pointless waste of life. You have put up an admirable fight, but all you need to do is simply give up your Kamui and I won't have to hurt you any further."

Ryuko spit out a glob of blood and glared up at Tsumugu, "Fuck you."

Tsumugu was unperturbed by Ryuko's gaze, "With the power of your Kamui sealed, you are completely helpless. Now, take off your clothes. Don't make me ask twice."

"I'm not scared of you, pervert," Ryuko kept Tsumugu staring at her face as her hand crept along the ground towards one of the needles that had fallen out when Senketsu was forced out of his transformed state, "I bet any minute now Ichigo or Ururu is going to arrive and kick your ass."

A boot to her stomach forced Ryuko to cough harshly before Tsumugu smacked her in the side of the face with his Sewing Machine Gun, "Unlikely. Ichigo Kurosaki is currently fighting against one of Satsuki Kiryuin's top lieutenants. He currently has the advantage, but he won't be able to come help you until long after I've destroyed your Kamui. As for Ururu, I have no idea who she is nor do I care. Your Kamui is a threat to the world and I will make sure it never becomes a danger to anyone. Now take off your clothes."

"You... bastard..." Ryuko managed to choke out.

"Defiant to the end?" Tsumugu reached into the pocket on his military vest and pulled out a cigarette. Lighting and taking a long drag from it, he said, "Let me tell you two final pieces of useful information. One. There is a woman who thinks a lot like you. She too believes that human and clothing can live side by side in peace. Even though she was betrayed by clothing, she still clings to her ideals, but she has never been the same since almost getting

devoured by clothing. She hears voices in her head and is much more distant. Two. The path you have chosen is identical to hers. If you continue to foolishly believe your Kamui is your friend, you will die. I do not want to see you die. So I will ask you politely one last time, please take off your Kamui. There is no need for you to die a pointless and cruel death at the hands of clothing."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ryuko's fingers closed around the needle before she leaned forward and stabbed it in Tsumugu's leg, "But I won't let you take Senketsu!"

"Impressive," Tsumugu stared at the needle jammed in his thigh and, in one swift movement, pulled it out accompanied by a small spray of blood, "But useless. I am human and therefore immune to the effects of the jamming rounds."

" ***Get out of here Ryuko,***" Senketsu's voice was weak and it sounded like he was doing all he could to stay awake, ***"It's me he's after, so get out of here. I'll hold him off so you can get away!"***

Senketsu's form almost seemed to bubble before he exploded off Ryuko's body and floated in front of her with his arms held out protectively. Tsumugu saw this as the Kamui's attempt to escape and fired several rounds into him, pinning Senketsu to the floor. Loading a special round into his Sewing Machine Gun, Tsumugu was about to finish Senketsu off when a quiet voice spoke up behind him.

"Please do not fire that bullet," Ururu calmly advised with her hand pressed right against Tsumugu's back, stunning the man since he hadn't sensed her presence until she talked. Turning his head around to face her, he stared into her deep blue eyes as she finished, "If you do, I'll be forced to kill you. You'll be dead before the bullet even leaves the chamber."

Despite the amount of power he could feel wafting off Ururu and the death threat, Tsumugu kept his cool, "This is none of your concern. Step back and allow me to finish my task."

Ururu tilted her head to the side, a gesture Tsumugu had seen only on one other person before, and answered, "Ryuko is my friend. I cannot allow you to hurt my friend any more. If you continue to do so, I will be forced to stop you."

"That's right!" Mako Mankanshoku slid in between Ryuko and Tsumugu while the latter was distracted and picked Senketsu off the ground. Holding the Kamui tenderly to her chest, forcing him to develop a luminous blush across where his face would be, she announced, "This uniform is the only piece of clothing Ryuko has and look how beat up and torn it is! I've tried getting Ryuko to wear some of my old clothing, but she is too big around the chest for it to fit, which is a shame! Do you have any idea how it feels to only have a single set of clothing?"

"I do not," Tsumugu answered bluntly, his eyes leaving Ururu just long enough to ask, "And who are you exactly?"

"I am Mako Mankanshoku," The last name caused Tsumugu's eyes to widen nearly imperceptibly, "Did you know that Ryuko loves this uniform more than anything else in the whole wide world? In fact, the only thing she might care about more is Ichigo, but you can't tell him that because it's a super secret for the moment!" While Mako raised a finger to her lips in the universal sign of keeping a secret, Ryuko began sputtering uncontrollably, "She's always whispering to it when she thinks no one is looking. And she's not the only one. Sometimes I catch Ichigo and Ryuko holding one-sided conversations with their uniforms. It creeps my whole family out when he comes to visit! Taking their clothes is the same thing as taking away a dear friend! This uniform is Ryuko's friend, so please mister, leave Ryuko alone!"

There was one part of Mako's rant that caught Tsumugu's attention. Lowering his Sewing Machine Gun, he took a step closer to her and asked, "What did you say about whispering?"

"Oh?" Mako blinked owlishly before answering, "That's right! Ichigo and Ryuko talk to their school uniforms almost as if they can hear a voice or something. Pretty creepy right?"

Tsumugu didn't bother to respond to Mako. Holstering his Sewing Machine Gun, which caused Ururu to lower her arm, he stepped towards Ryuko and asked, "Your Kamui speaks to you?"

Even in her battered and bruised state, Ryuko nodded and answered, "Y-Yes."

"I see..." Tsumugu grunted and thought back over the last decade. If Ryuko Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki could speak to their Kamui, then couldn't that mean they aren't the only ones? Tsumugu shook his head to clear his mind and put his hands in his pockets, "I can see that I will not be able to pry your Kamui away from you, Matoi, not with that girl here." He pointed over his shoulder at Ururu, "So I will retreat for now, but don't get complacent. I will come back for your Kamui one day. You can count on that. Until then..."

With a flick of his wrist, Tsumugu let a smoke grenade fall out of his hand. It bounced off the floor once before exploding into a cloud of pink and blue smoke that soon cleared to reveal Tsumugu was gone. Ryuko didn't have long to wonder about what just happened before she began falling unconscious; the last thing she heard was Mako calling out for her.

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"I suppose congratulations are in order." Tsumugu glanced at Aikuro before allowing the man to light his cigarette, "Does this mean we're even now?"

Tsumugu shook his head, "That isn't enough."

"It's more than enough," Aikuro leaned back and stared at the sky, "Besides, you know that I prefer girls to be in debt to me."

"That's true," Tsumugu smiled softly before his expression hardened, "There's something I think you should know."

Aikuro looked at his friend as Tsumugu continued, "When I managed to corner Matoi, she didn't back down. Not even once. She was more than willing to die along with her Kamui than allow me to destroy it. When I looked her in the eye, I couldn't help but see Kinue in her place."

"Kinue, huh?" Aikuro ran a hand through his hair. Kinue had been gone for a while now on a secret mission for Nudist Beach to destroy several Revocs factories and buildings in Europe, "Stop talking as if she's dead. You know she's going to be upset when she finds out you said that."

"Who's going to tell her? You?" Tsumugu scoffed when he saw Aikuro's innocent expression on his face, "Let me tell you two useful pieces of information. One. I'm going to give Matoi a single chance to prove me wrong about her Kamui. But if things start coming apart at the seams, you can be sure I'll return to rip it off her body. Two. If anything happens to Masaki's son under your watch, I'll make you regret it."

"No need to get so angry," Aikuro dismissed Tsumugu's threat with a wave of his hand, "If that ever happens, you're going to have to get in line because Isshin's going to get first dibs on me. When he gets angry, Isshin scares me more than Ragyo Kiryuin and the Grand Couturier put together."

What Aikuro said reminded Tsumugu of something he saw earlier, "I saw a girl hanging around Matoi."

"Ah, are you talking about Mako Mankanshoku?"

"No," Tsumugu shook his head, "Another girl. Her name is Ururu, but there is something frighteningly familiar about her. She was able to sneak up on me without being detected. The only way I knew she was there was because she announced her presence. Who is she?"

"I don't know," Aikuro paused pensively as he thought about the latest transfer student, "She just showed up a few days ago as a



transfer student from Karakura Town."

Tsumugu's eyes widened, "Isshin's place? What is he up to?"

"Beats me," Aikuro shrugged his shoulders, "That man has more secrets that you and I could count, but I'm sure he had a reason for it. He always seems to know what he's doing."

Tsumugu grunted before revving the engine on his motorcycle and taking off into the distance. He needed to get back to Osaka and report in on what he discovered at Honnouji Academy. Even though headquarters didn't technically endorse his mission, Tsumugu was certain they would forgive him due to what he discovered at Honnouji Academy. The fact that Ichigo Kurosaki had a Kamui was a helpful surprise. Nudist Beach couldn't afford to be taken off guard when the Life Fibers made their move.

As he drove down the highway, Tsumugu reached for his cell phone and dialed a number with a single hand. Raising it to his ear, he waited until the ringing stopped and a tired voice answered before speaking, "Yeah. It's me. I have something interesting to tell you."

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### **Kamui Tales #3: A Twenty Year Old Question**

"Hmm..."

"What's on your mind, Isshin?" Ragyo Kiryuin asked bemused.

Isshin Kurosaki folded his arms and pursed his lips. The question that was on the tip of his tongue was one he had been wondering about for almost twenty years now. He really wanted to ask, but at the same time he liked the sense of wonder and surprise at what the answer might be. If he asked the question and the answer didn't

satisfy him, he would feel extremely let down. Still, he *really* wanted to know the answer.

"Ever since I first met you, I've wondered something," Isshin leaned back and crossed his legs, "Why does your hair glow with the colors of the rainbow?"

"Oh that," Ragyo didn't seem overly surprised by the question. Sitting back as a grin spread across her face, she chuckled and said, "You're not the first one to ask, but you'll be the first one to survive asking. Do you know why?"

Isshin chuckled nervously, "Because I'm a lovable oaf?"

"Not exactly," Ragyo snapped her fingers and Nui Harime appeared at Isshin's side with several bottles of Life Fiber infused hair dye in her hands.

"You're not going to die because the Director wants you to have rainbow colored hair as well!" Nui said chirpily as she attempted to tie up Isshin. When the man dodged her attack, she frowned, "Hold still please!"

"Stay away from me!" Isshin made a break for the nearest window of Ragyo's office. He knew he could survive a fall from such a height and even if he couldn't, dying as himself was better than the alternative. As his body crashed through the glass and he began falling, Isshin felt a hand grab him by the back of his shirt.

"You weren't planning on leaving me, were you Isshin?" Ragyo had a mock look of disappointment on her face. As she towed him back into her office, Isshin's screams of pain and embarrassment could be heard all across the city.

# Behind Blue Eyes

*Here's chapter 16 everybody! This story is still going strong and I have yet to hit any type of writer's block, which means that a new chapter should always come out in between 7 to 10 days after the last one. So Chapter 16 and the beginning of Episode 6. I took some liberties with the source material as well as what's happening because, let's face it, you wouldn't read my story if all you wanted was a literary rehashing of Kill la Kill, right?*

*Anyway, this chapter is a little bit shorter than the last few. If I tried to add more to it, I would just end up cutting into the fight scene and I really don't want to do that. I'm also still looking for someone to draw a picture of Ichigo wearing Mugetsu and, hopefully, kicking ass.*

*Thanks to all those that reviewed my last chapter and let's get started with the story!*

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## Chapter 16 - Behind Blue Eyes

If she ever allowed anyone to ask, Ragyo Kiryuin would say that the sole regret in her life had been allowing Isshin Shiba to be swayed by that harpy of a woman, Masaki Kurosaki. Ragyo had tried everything in her power to sway Isshin's heart, but no matter what she did or said, Isshin's resolve hadn't wavered. When she heard the news that Isshin had gone and married Masaki, Ragyo recalled feeling the closest thing to sadness that she could comprehend before she immediately killed the lowly secretary who had dared to tell her the bad news. She had actually planned on killing her for a while, but Ragyo thought she should kill the woman under the flair of dramatics.

Ragyo stared at the still image of Ichigo confronting Satsuki on top of Honnouji Academy. Her daughter was so naïve as to think she didn't have hidden cameras throughout the academy. Seeing Isshin's son confronting her daughter gave Ragyo pause to consider that perhaps some good had come out of losing Isshin to Masaki.

La vie est drôle.

*"Only a man like Isshin could have fathered such a child,"* Ragyo's hand began drifting across her chest before slipping under the top of her dress. Ragyo had been ecstatic when she heard the news of Masaki's murder. To keep up public appearance she had shown up at the funeral with a fake expression of pity and sadness, but in reality she couldn't have been happier. She was sure Isshin saw through her disguised emotions, but in a room full of people, as well as his children, there was nothing he could do about her, *"If only Isshin was vulnerable to my Mental Refitting, but then he wouldn't be the only man worthy of my affection and adoration."*

"Simply wonderful, isn't he Hououmaru?"

Standing on the opposite side of her desk, Rei Hououmaru nodded stoically, "Indeed he is. To think the son of Isshin could control a Kamui's immense power and bloodlust without being overtaken. He is truly worthy of your attention."

"Yes, he is," Ragyo drawled out seductively as she leaned forward, the rainbow undertone in her white hair bathing the office in a cacophony of colors in the process. As she gazed possessively at the screen showing Ichigo's fight against Nonon Jakuzure, her face twisted into a sadistic, but pleased, smile as she witnessed Ichigo nearly behead his opponent, "Ichigo fights with intent to kill, unlike that daughter of mine. Satsuki might think she is able to make me dance to her tune, but a daughter cannot hide anything from her mother. I'll play along for the moment and allow her to string me along. That will only make the eventual destruction of her plans much more enjoyable."

"You are a scamp, Ma'am," Rei answered with her usual expression of adoration.

With a snap of her fingers, the video shifted to Ichigo's aerial battle against Nonon, "Such an exquisite Kamui. Unlike my daughter, Ichigo is able to force his Kamui to shift configurations. This could only mean my experiments all those years ago were a success."

Rei looked at the Director in confusion, "I was under the assumption that the experiments had always been a success. Wasn't that why you had Ichigo Kurosaki transferred to Honnouji Academy?"

Ragyo's silvery eyes briefly shifted towards her assistant before she chuckled, "I was gladly admit that I wasn't completely certain about how well Ichigo took to my experiments. Usually I would have known right away, but with a man like Isshin as his father, Ichigo was hidden from my sight until only a few months ago. You know as well as I do that if Isshin wanted, he could have hidden Ichigo from my sight forever."

Rei was well acquainted with Isshin. While her boss had married Souichiou, who was a brilliant and charismatic man in his own right, Ragyo's heart had always lusted for Isshin. When he had rejected her advances and married Masaki, to say Ragyo hadn't taken it well would have been an understatement. Still, there were several things about Isshin that Rei did not know and that she would never try to find out. Even she wouldn't be immune from Ragyo's wrath if she asked questions she had no right to know the answers to.

One question plagued Rei's mind, "If I may ask, how did you come across the information suggesting Ichigo had been a success?"

Ragyo smirked at her secretary's question. When she had detected the sudden activation of Life Fibers within Karakura Town, to say that she had been curious wouldn't have covered what she truly felt. She knew instinctively that Isshin's presence within the city prevented Revocs or Life Fibers from getting a foothold. The activation of such a dense amount of Life Fibers could mean only one thing.

"It was instinctual, my dear," Ragyo answered mysteriously. When she had informed Nui about Ichigo, the Grand Couturier had immediately offered to go and introduce herself to her 'cousin,' as she called him. Ragyo had asked Nui to hold off on doing such a thing, at least for the time being. As much as she wanted to bring Ichigo into the fold and under her wing, Ragyo knew Isshin would completely demolish Nui if she so much as attempted to touch Ichigo. The last time Nui fought Isshin, she had only survived because Isshin was soft and had gone easy on her.

"I knew you were thinking about me!"

From where she was sitting on the frame of a nearby open window, Nui Harime smiled cutely. With the wind blowing her large blonde pigtails to and from haphazardly and her chin resting on her open palm, she looked to be the epitome of cuteness and innocence. Happily closing her one good eye, she added, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

"Ah, Good afternoon Grand Couturier," Rei said respectfully accompanied by a small nod of her head, "The meeting started ten minutes ago."

"I'm sorry for being so late!" Nui hopped off the window and gently floated to the ground accompanied by a small and cute grunt. After quickly making sure her attire was still prim and proper, she skipped over towards Rei and Ragyo, "But the traffic was simply terrible today. I had to kill at least five people just to leave Honnou City. Hmm... or was it six? Witnesses are so troublesome!"

Ragyo smiled in smug satisfaction despite Nui admitting to murdering at least half a dozen innocent people. Someone with a weak mind would consider Nui a monster, but Ragyo did not care for such trivial things as morals. Humans were simply pigs bred with the singular purpose of becoming food and sustenance for Life Fibers. Leaning her head to the side, she sighed deeply and asked, "Have you been enjoying your time at Honnouji Academy?"

"Oh, most definitely," Nui was glad Ragyo wanted to talk about her time at Honnouji. It was her mission after all, "There's so much I want to tell you, but you probably already know most of it! Nothing can get by you, Director!"

"How true," Ragyo's smile softened as she admitted, "But one thing that still eludes me is what Isshin's son named his Kamui."

"Oh! That's an easy question!" Nui hopped onto the side of Ragyo's desk and leaned forward, "His Kamui is pretty neat and high class. I would even dare to say that Kisuke Urahara could have been my equal in design! But I'm sure you don't want to hear me talk about my feelings. Ichigo's name for his Kamui is Mugetsu."

"Mugetsu... Moonless Sky..." Shivers of pleasure traveled down Ragyo's spine from the symbolism of the Kamui's name. It pleased her that not only did Ichigo possess a high quality Kamui on par with Junketsu, but he even named it something equally elegant. Composing herself for the moment, she steeped her fingers together and pondered, "Ichigo is such an interesting young boy. Isshin has raised him well I see. Perhaps I should have Satsuki try and court him? The product of such a union would be phenomenal."

Nui's face adopted a pensive expression as she tried to visualize the children Satsuki and Ichigo would produce. With a smile breaking out across her face as she imagine someone with Ichigo's hair color, Satsuki demeanor, and their combined body, she answered, "Yes, but something like that would never happen! It's really hard keeping up this charade. I really want to formally introduce myself to Ichigo, but since he's so close to Ryuko, I can't risk him telling her about me and ruining the big surprise I have planned for her. Every single facet of her death has to be just right or it will end up being a disappointment!"

"Oh, my dear Nui, you needn't worry about Ichigo," Ragyo ran a hand across Nui's cheek, "We will bring Ichigo into the fold soon enough. We can't rush things at such a delicate stage. Now, is there

anything interesting going on at Honnouji besides my daughter's eventual coup d'état?"

"Satsuki thinks she's so smart, but nothing gets by you Director!" Nui's face lit up as she remembered something important, "But there was something really super interesting I wanted to tell you. Using my amazing skills at disguise, I ingratiated myself as Ichigo's friend. He really is worthy of wearing his Kamui. Anyway, I managed to take this picture when he wasn't looking!"

Reaching into her dress, Nui searched around for the photograph she had taken during Ryuko's spar against Ururu. She really didn't care what happened to Ryuko. Nui knew deep within her heart that no matter how much Ryuko trained, she would never reach the level of someone like herself. It made Nui's heart quiver at the prospect of seeing the hopeless look on Ryuko's face when she realizes all her training amounted to nothing.

"It's of this girl that Ichigo seems to know. I think Isshin sent her to Honnouji," Nui informed Ragyo as she handed the CEO the picture. When she didn't get any type of response, Nui blinked and brought a finger to her lips, "Is it interesting? I thought it was interesting, Director?"

Nui had been expecting a reaction from Ragyo, but she could never have imagined the Kiryuin matriarch's face twisting in anger. As her hand crumpled the picture into dust, Rei began backing up slowly away from her boss. She had seen what happened the last time Ragyo was truly angry and knew it was dangerous for anyone other than a Life Fiber hybrid from remaining nearby.

As Ragyo slammed her fist through her metal desk, causing metal splinters and shrapnel to fly through the air with one piece barely cutting her cheek, Rei knew she had chosen the right course of action, "Please control yourself, Ma'am. That desk was customized to your rich and exquisite tastes. It will be quite expensive to replace."



Ragyo looked at her perfectly normal hand, courtesy of the Life Fibers in her body, "Even after all these years you still managed to pull one over on me, Isshin! To think that it was you that did this to me. I don't know whether to skin you alive and bathe your body in salt or make love to you for doing such a despicable act."

"Director?" Nui stared with rare worry, at least for her, at the behavior of the person closest to being a mother figure.

Ragyo glanced at Nui and just as quickly as it came, the anger washed off her face, "It seems, my dear Nui, that Isshin has been keeping a deep and dark secret from the two of us. Do you know what happens to those that hide things from us?"

"Of course!" Nui answered cheerfully, "We kill them slowly and painfully!"

"Yes, but not this time," Ragyo let her hand slide sensually across her inner thigh. The fact that Isshin managed to pull the wool over her eyes for so many years excited her more than she had felt in years, "Satsuki is holding Parent Student Day in three weeks. When you go back to Honnouji Academy, please make sure that Ichigo invites Isshin. I have many interesting things to talk about with that man..."

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Aikuro Mikisugi should have guessed Ryuko Matoi would immediately come to him for answers after Tsumugu appeared and proceeded to beat her to within an inch of her life. It was something the Nudist Beach veteran expected to happen, but when Ryuko showed up backed by Ichigo, Aikuro knew there was no way out for him.

"L-Let's not do anything you'll regret in the morning," Aikuro tried to subtly move towards the door to his apartment. His single hope of

escaping what he dreaded happening was dashed as Ichigo slammed his hand against the wall in front of him, blocking his path out and making an already irate Ryuko even angrier. Raising his arms and clapping his hands together in prayer, he begged Ryuko for forgiveness, "Please just calm down and think about what you're doing! Murdering a teacher is still a federal crime in Japan!"

Ryuko's scowl intensified and in one swift motion she pulled out her red Scissor Blade and stabbed it into the wall next to Aikuro's head. As the extremely dense Life Fiber weapon easily and neatly severed more than a few strands of Aikuro's blue hair, Ryuko raised her leg and kicked her teacher in the stomach, "Screw mercy! I have some questions for you and you are going to answer each and every one of them. If you don't..."

Noticing Ryuko's fingers twitching violently, Aikuro turned towards his only hope of making it out of the situation with his manhood intact, "Ichigo! Please knock some sense into Ryuko before she does something irreversible!"

Ichigo looked at Aikuro and scoffed, "Screw you. I'm not helping you out of this mess."

While Ichigo wanted answers from Aikuro about who the man was that attacked them, his mind was thinking about his battle against Nonon. Even though his body sported quite a few cuts and bruises from his battle against Nonon, Ichigo could say he had come out of the fight relatively unscathed compared to Nonon. Before he sensed something wrong with Ryuko and went to go help her, Ichigo managed to sever one of Nonon's recorder thrusters, causing said girl to spiral out of control and slam face first into one of Honnouji's massive walls. After making sure Nonon was unconscious, as well as cutting off her woofers for good measure, Ichigo headed towards where Ryuko was as quickly as possible.

When Ichigo frowned and stepped in between Ryuko and Aikuro, said teacher thought his luck was about to change. His mood was

quickly shattered when Ichigo grabbed him by his shirt and picked him off the ground.

"I have one question for you," Ichigo shook Aikuro's body before asking, "How did that guy know my mom?"

"H-How should I know the answer to something like that!" Aikuro was beginning to visibly sweat. It was too early to bring Ichigo and Ryuko into the fold. He still didn't know if Ryuko would help them and Isshin would kill him for getting Ichigo involved.

"Keep playing dumb after seeing this, you perverted bastard!" Ryuko held up a photograph and pointed to two figures in the background dramatically with her finger, "See! Right here in the corner is you and that Mohawk bastard drinking and having a great time!"

Aikuro adjusted his glasses as he looked at the picture, "I don't know who that handsome blue haired man is."

That was the wrong answer for him to say. Dropping Aikuro on the ground, Ichigo groaned and turned away, "He's all yours, Ryuko. Just make sure to not kill him."

Ryuko grinned savagely and cracked her knuckles, "With pleasure..."

"Wait a second!" Aikuro raised his hands placating, "Yes! That's me, but where did you get this photograph?"

"After that Mohawk bastard attacked and nearly killed me, I had Mako's creepy little brother track him down," Ryuko pulled out her Scissor Blade from the wall and sat down on the end of it. Crossing her arms and huffing indignantly, she continued, "I don't know how that brat did it, but he managed to find pictures of someone that looked like that Mohawk guy. If he knows you, it makes sense why he would bring me to you shitty little place."

Slamming her foot on the ground, Ryuko shouted, "That bastard almost killed me you lazy and perverted son of a bitch! Tell me what your damn deal is before I neuter you!"

The atmosphere quickly shifted as Aikuro sighed and flipped his hair back. Letting out a sensual breathe, he smirked at Ryuko, "Why are you so angry, Ryuko? Because of that man's actions, the bond between you and Senketsu has grown stronger than ever. If you are curious about that man's name, you may call him Tsumugu Kinagase."

When Aikuro began to unbutton his shirt, there was a whirling sound as Tournesol embedded itself in the wall next to him. With his hand held out and scowl on his face, Ichigo cracked his knuckles menacingly, "What did I say the last time you tried stripping in front of me, you bastard?"

"Oh, how I wish it was just Ryuko here," Aikuro sighed dreamily. It was always better stripping down in front of woman. At least they appreciated the work of art that was his nude body. Focusing his attention back on Ryuko, he continued from where he left off, "As to how I know him, it is because he and I belong to the same organization. Despite all that, you have to admit that your struggle against Tsumugu's vast arsenal of tactics and weapons have finally made you and Senketsu true partners!"

"Don't try to change the subject!" Ryuko hated knowing that Aikuro was right. She had seen Ichigo and Mugetsu talk and fight. Ichigo never seemed to order Mugetsu around or belittle her. The same could not be said about her treatment of Senketsu. As much as he acting and behaved like a true living thing, she had treated him as nothing more than clothing that gave her the power to fight Satsuki Kiryuin. It had taken Senketsu attempting to sacrificing his life to save hers that Ryuko realized how selfish she had been.

"The game has changed now that Satsuki Kiryuin has a Kamui of her own." Without any prompt, Aikuro's shirt became unbuttoned and two purple lights emanating from his nipples filled the room. Smirking

at the fact that Ichigo couldn't blame him for his shirt popping open, Aikuro mentally thanked himself for inventing the self-popping shirt for an occasion just like this, "If both you and Ichigo were to fight Satsuki Kiryuin together, the odds of winning would be nearly one hundred percent, but Satsuki is a crafty and cunning woman. The power of her Elite Four is no laughing matter."

"Ha!" Ryuko laughed haughtily, "They only have a Three-Star Goku Uniform! What can they possibly do to stand up to Senketsu's power?"

"No, he's right," Ichigo's denial caused a confused look to appear on Ryuko's face, "Their power is comparable to our own. Nonon Jakuzure was able to out maneuver me until Mugetsu was able to come up with something to counter her flight. I'm sure Satsuki's other three goons have equally powerful surprises."

"Now you see why I allowed Tsumugu to attack you!" Aikuro leaned forward until he was inches away from Ryuko, "It was all necessary so that you would possess the necessary strength to stand up to Satsuki Kiryuin!"

Ryuko grimaced at Aikuro invading her personal space before she swung her Scissor Blade around and smacked the handle against his cheek, "That's complete crap and you know it! That's just the excuse you came up with to justify your so-called friend nearly killing me! Why would your friend attack me if you need Senketsu to take down the Kiryuin? What the hell are Life Fibers and what was so important about my dad's research that he was killed? Answer me damn it!"

"Letting your blood boil like that is going to be the death of you, Ryuko," Aikuro gently pushed the Scissor Blade off his face and walked towards his window. Throwing it open and allowing a stiff breeze to blow through the room, he turned around and threw his arms out, "You may both have Kamui, but until I'm sufficiently convinced that you can be trusted with such dangerous knowledge,

you will have to remain in the dark. Just be content in the knowledge that I have both of your best interests in mind."

"So you know Tsumugu?" Aikuro nodded at Ichigo's question, "Then explain how he knows my mom."

Aikuro let out a long breath, "That's a doozy of a question. To be honest, I don't know how Tsumugu knows your mom. He isn't mister personality. I swear, the only person able to get a straight answer out of him is his sister."

If Aikuro thought that would satisfy Ichigo, he was rudely awakened when Ichigo grabbed his tie and began to choke him, "I'm not an idiot! How does Tsumugu know my mother? If you don't say anything, I think I'll call my dad. I'm sure he'll be real happy to find out that a perverted bastard like you was intimately familiar with his wife."

Ichigo and Ryuko took pleasure from the nervous stuttering coming from Aikuro, but were quickly confused when he muttered, "... Nudist Beach..."

Ryuko looked at Ichigo, "What did he just say?"

"No clue."

Freeing himself from Ichigo's grasp, Aikuro said more boldly, "We are Nudist Beach."

Ryuko rubbed her temple in exasperation, "Is he fucking nuts or something?"

"The name of my organization that you were so curious to find out," Aikuro was nearly shouting as he finished, "Its' name is NUDIST BEACH!"

There was stunned silence in the room before Ichigo and Ryuko exchanged a glance and turned to leave. They had no intention of

staying in the same room as someone like Aikuro, especially when he was making up stuff like that.

"H-Hey!" Aikuro paused in his dramatic reveal of his organization when he saw his audience leaving, "Where are you going?"

"Away from you," Ryuko called over her shoulder as she left, "It was stupid to try and get a straight answer from you. I'll play along for now and get stronger, but eventually I'm going to want answers."

"But it is the name of my organization," Aikuro whispered dejectedly. Noticing Ichigo about to leave, he said the one thing he knew would keep him around a bit longer, "You shouldn't pry into how Tsumugu knew Masaki."

Ichigo froze and turned around, "How - "

"Perhaps I should rephrase. It would be in your best interest to not ask such questions right now. There are those out there that wouldn't take too kindly to your line of questioning. Mugetsu might give you a tremendous amount of power, but remember that there is always someone stronger. If you are truly curious about your mother, I highly suggest you wait a while. Good things come to those who wait after all."

Ichigo said nothing as he left, finally leaving Aikuro alone. Grabbing his shirt off the floor, he smirked smugly as he redressed himself, "That wasn't the way I wanted it to go down, but it all worked out in the end."

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Without batting an eye in concern, Satsuki Kiryuin looked at the prostrating Nonon Jakuzure, "What do you have to say in defense of your failure today, Jakuzure?"

With her arms, torso and face covered in bandages from her battle against Ichigo, Nonon refused to look Satsuki in the eye. Wearing nothing more than a pink zip-up jersey and red shorts, Nonon apologized, "I'm sorry for letting you down, Lady Satsuki."

"Do not fret, Jakuzure," Satsuki smirked, "Despite the outcome of the fight, your performance today was admirable."

"What?" Nonon asked in shocked.

"While I was suitably impressed with your desire to fight Ichigo Kurosaki, I must confess that the chance of your victory were slim to none." In one elegant motion, Satsuki stood up and walked towards the large windows that took up an entire wall of the room. Staring out into the moon-filled night sky, she clasped her hands behind her back before turning her gaze to Nonon, "Defeating Ichigo would have allowed us an opportunity to study a Kamui extensively, but the true goal of the fight was two-fold. It was to not only investigate the limits of Ichigo's power more extensively, but to also work out any flaws in your Mark II Goku Uniform. In your failure, you have succeeded Jakuzure."

Satsuki would never admit to anyone, let alone a close associate, the anger that had built up in her heart when she witnessed Ichigo's Kamui transform into a flight form. Jakuzure informed her that Ichigo referred to the flight form as Mugetsu Gufū. Satsuki's fist clenched slightly as she saw Ichigo pull ahead of her yet again. How was he able to not only wear a Kamui over ninety percent of his body, but also force it to change into a new form? Even now, after more than week of training her body and mind to withstand the stress Junketsu places, Satsuki was but a single misstep away from her Kamui devouring her. She still remembered the fear when she lost control over Junketsu during her clash against Ichigo. She never wanted to feel that feeling again. Not if she could help it.

"As we speak, Iori is running tests and diagnostics on your Symphony Regalia. It shouldn't take more than two weeks for your uniform to be fully repaired and the Life Fibers re-stitched. Iori has



also informed me that your Symphony Regalia will be further improved to Mark III," Satsuki's comment gave Nonon a large sense of relief. When Gamagori had appeared after her less than successful fight, she had immediately growled at him and asked what he wanted. As the large blonde haired teen towered over her smaller frame, his body cast in a dark shadow and his eyes two pinpricks of yellow light, Gamagori had held his hand out and politely asked Nonon to find somewhere to change out of her Three Star Goku Uniform. The sheer amount of politeness and courtesy from the normally strict and bombastic Gamagori had caused her mind to experience a temporary paradox that had only been alleviated when Gamagori grabbed her and began carrying her away.

"I can't wait to get my uniform back," Nonon was still smarting from the way that Ichigo had beaten her. The skies were her domain, damn it! When she fought him again, she wasn't going to let her anger get the better of her. Ichigo was going to suffer tremendously for the insult he gave her, "Strawberry is going to pay dearly for this insult!"

An idea entered Satsuki's mind as she listened to Nonon's revenge ranting. The risk of failing was quite high, but if it worked... the odds weren't in her favor, but the rewards might just be worth it.

"What we have here is a prime opportunity, Jakuzure," Satsuki's words stunned Nonon into silence. She had heard a tone similar to that in the past and it could only mean Lady Satsuki had come up with a plan.

"What is it, Lady Satsuki?"

Satsuki turned back to the moon-lit sky, her face bathed in shades of dark white and grey, before explaining, "One of the written rules here at Honnouji Academy is that if someone is stripped of their Goku Uniform, they are immediately demoted down to No Star ranking."

"B-But I wasn't stripped!" Nonon protested worriedly, "Strawberry doesn't have a Scissor Blade or anything!"

"Just because Ichigo left before finishing you off isn't the point," Satsuki pointed out condescendingly, "His blade is similar to my Bakuzan. Both are as capable of severing Life Fibers as Mato's Scissor Blade. However, you are missing the point, Jakuzure. Wouldn't you say the entire academy believes that you were defeated and stripped of your uniform?"

Nonon's mind worked for only a few seconds before she began to understand what Satsuki was thinking. With a cocky grin on her face, she smirked and replied, "I sure would say that."

A small smile appeared on Satsuki's face, "I'm glad you understand. Starting tomorrow you are to be a No Star student. Gamagori, Inumuta and Sanageyama will be informed tonight of what's happened, so you need not worry about them."

"Pfft," Nonon made a spitting sound in disgust, "Like I would care about what frog, dog and monkey say about me. If they say anything bad to me, I'll show them just how much I can kick their asses without a Goku Uniform!"

"Very good," Satsuki's demeanor quickly shifted back to her normal self, "Jakuzure! Tomorrow, you will begin your assignment, entitled Operation Zero Stars! Your goal is to get close to Ichigo Kurosaki and his associates under the banner of revenge against me. You have permission to say and do anything to get into Ichigo's good graces. This is not limited to fighting against Club Captains and anyone associated with them! Find out any secrets Ichigo may have concerning his Kamui and bring them to me! The time scale of your mission is three weeks, which is when Parent Student Day begins! Do you have any questions?"

"Not one," Nonon grinned happily as she grabbed the standard No Star uniform from Soroi Mitsuzou's outstretched arms, "You can count on me, Lady Satsuki! I'll have Strawberry wrapped around my little finger in a week! First things first, I'm going to need a customized uniform. There is no way I'm going to wear anything this atrocious for a single minute."

Satsuki watched coldly as Nonon left her presence. As soon as the doors closed shut behind Nonon, Satsuki let out a tired sigh. Groaning from the pent up effort of wearing Junketsu, Satsuki looked at the struggling Kamui, held safely behind two inches of bullet-proof glass and several sewing needles, and grimaced.

"You should try to not overexert yourself, Milady," Soroi politely scolded Satsuki's recently rash behavior as he poured her a cup of tea.

"How does he do it?" Satsuki stared at the vicious Junketsu and sighed, "And it's not just Ichigo, but also Matoi. Both of them are able to not only use the full power of their Kamui, but also wear them as normal clothing without the risk of death. It is not a question of willpower, for my heart and mind are leagues above either of them. What am I missing?"

"Milady, if I may be so blunt as to ask a question. Have you considered asking young Ichigo?"

"If only I could, Soroi," Satsuki rested her cheek on her hand and smiled faintly, "But Ichigo and I are on opposite sides of a raging river. If I were to ask him for help, he would easily see it as a sign of weakness and capitalize upon it immediately. That is where Jakuzure's mission comes into play. She will play the betrayed underling, viciously demoted and demeaned by the heartless and cold Student Council President. She will gain Ichigo's trust and friendship and, when the moment is right, find out his secret pertaining to his control over Mugetsu's power."

"I don't fully understand," Soroi admitted as he bowed respectfully, "But I trust in your judgment, Milady."

Satsuki leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, "How long did the thought persist that you managed to sneak up behind me, Sanageyama?"

"Barely a flicker in my mind," Sanageyama grinned, "I couldn't help but overhear your plans for Jakuzure. Very bold and cunning, just what I expect from you, Lady Satsuki. Do you want me to be the one to publicly kick her out of the Elite Four? It would make your plan all the more convincing after all."

"And it has nothing to do with a personal vendetta?" Satsuki asked inquisitively, "While Jakuzure is no longer a member of the Elite Four in the eyes of the student body; she is still your equal in both power and respect. Do not forget that."

"Of course I didn't forget that," Sanageyama stuck his hands into the pockets of his Blade Regalia and stared outside, "You and I both know that if I truly wanted to humiliate Jakuzure beyond what is needed for your plan to succeed, you would have stabbed me with that teacup."

"That is where you are wrong, Sanageyama." To Sanageyama's bewilderment, Satsuki raised her hand and Soroi quickly walked over to her side. Placing the teacup she was holding onto the tray in Soroi's hands and grabbing another one, Satsuki saw the look on Sanageyama's face and said, "That is my favorite teacup. Attacking you with it would have not been worth the effort. Now, what is it that you wanted, Sanageyama?"

"I want your permission to fight Matoi."

There was a slight cracking sound as Satsuki's fingers tightened around her teacup, "Should I even deign to answer your question with a response?"

Sanageyama whistled under his breath, "I know, I know. With what you have planned for Jakuzure, it would be rather bad if two members of the Elite Four were to fall."

"So you don't believe you can win?"

"Of course I will win," Sanageyama grinned before schooling his face, "You know perfectly well how I get around someone powerful. Matoi's been just a big of a problem, perhaps even more so, than Ichigo Kurosaki. Wouldn't you agree, Lady Satsuki?"

"Indeed she has." Satsuki knew that while Ichigo was the more powerful of the two, Matoi was the one causing the most trouble. While Ichigo was content with just lying back and letting his opponents come to him, an excellent strategy by the way, Matoi sought out and demolished her Club Captains nearly too fast for new ones to be inducted. Satsuki had always prided quality over quantity, but for what she had planned for Matoi, quantity would have to do for the moment, "If I recall, the last time you felt this way was three years ago."

"My bamboo sword is itching for a real challenge," Sanageyama's hand subconsciously drifted to his weapon strapped to his back. He was truly looking forward to fighting Ichigo blade to blade, but Matoi was just a big a challenge, "I want to see how Matoi's skills stand up to the stage you provided me. Once I defeat Matoi, I will know that my power is great enough to take on Ichigo Kurosaki."

"Hmm..." Satsuki sipped her tea calmly before answering verbally, "I do not need to remind you of the price of failure. Unlike Jakuzure, your desire to battle Matoi is not part of my plans. If you lose against her..."

"No need to worry," Sanageyama pointed to his eyes and finished, "With these eyes of mine I cannot possibly lose to the likes of Matoi."

"I see," Satsuki didn't even give a hint as to what she was planning to do. In one swift motion, she stood up and kicked her chair backwards towards Sanageyama, who easily ducked underneath the impromptu projectile. As his eyes caught the hint of movement behind him, he turned and pulled out his bamboo sword as Satsuki tried to pierce his neck with the shattered handle of her teacup.

"Like I said," Sanageyama's grin intensified as Satsuki's strength caused his arms to quiver slightly, "With my eyes I cannot lose."

"Nicely blocked," Satsuki stood up and calmly walked away from Sanageyama, "At your current skill, I will admit that my middle-school self wouldn't have been able to beat you. You may do what you wish, but take heed of the consequences of failure, Sanageyama, for I am not lenient against those who go against my wishes."

"Thanks," Sanageyama took a few steps before suddenly stopping, a frown marring his face, "That boy you spoke of that night, Shinjiro I think his name was, you never told me what was so dangerous about him."

Sitting back down and with an look of annoyance on her face, Satsuki smirked, "I never did. Why do you ask?"

"Because I saw him the night after that Nudist Beach guy showed up," Sanageyama scratched the back of his neck as he vividly remembered what he saw, "But I don't think he's the really dangerous one."

Satsuki arched a single eyebrow, "What do you mean, Sanageyama?"

Sanageyama folded his arms, "I saw Matoi sparring with that Ururu girl, the same girl that managed to toss me around like I weighed nothing, on the roof of Ichigo's dorm. Matoi was getting her ass thrown around, but the really interesting thing is when Ururu disarmed and proceeded to pummel Matoi. That red Scissor Blade she always has appeared to turn purple in Ururu's hands. I'm not saying Shinjiro isn't as dangerous as you think, but Ururu seems to a strange connection to Matoi."

If Sanageyama could have seen Satsuki's face, he would have been surprised at the wavering expression of fear adorning it. Quickly suppressing her emotions, she calmly and stoically answered, "I see."

Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'll have Inumuta look into this."

Unable to see just how disturbed Satsuki was from what he saw, Sanageyama left to go prepare for his battle against Matoi. Jakuzure's loss against Ichigo Kurosaki opened his eyes, literally and figuratively, to the prospect of losing. His eyes may be able to see everything, but if Ichigo's Kamui could adapt to Jakuzure's flying, who was to say that Matoi's couldn't do the same to him? He needed to think about what he was going to do to avoid being humiliated like his compatriot.

As soon as Sanageyama left, Satsuki leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs, "That was quite rude of me, Soroi."

"It is not a problem, Milady," Soroi placed the shattered ceramic remains on the tray and stepped back, "As long as it wasn't your favorite cup I am more than happy to replace it."

Feeling a wave of exhaustion wash over her, Satsuki closed her eyes and sighed, "Make a fresh pot for me."

"As you wish." Before Soroi could begin his assigned task, the nearby phone began ringing. Usually someone calling past midnight warranted a dismissal of their call, but the people who knew Satsuki's private number wouldn't dare call without an important reason. Putting down the tea tray, Soroi picked up the phone and politely answered, "Good evening. This is the Honnouji Academy Student Council President's Office. How may I be of service?"

There was a slight pause in the line before Soroi seemed to stutter, "Y-Yes, Ma'am. One moment." Wheeling the table with the antique, but expensive, phone over to Satsuki, Soroi covered the receiver with his hand and whispered, "It's your mother, Mistress Ragyo."

"Thank you, Soroi," Grabbing the phone, Satsuki leaned back and composed herself, "This is Satsuki."

From the other end of the line, a smug Ragyo asked, "What's this rumor about you putting on your wedding dress?"

"I'm not surprised you found out, mother," Satsuki glanced out into the night sky in the direction Revocs headquarters was located, "But I'm sure you already know everything about my taking of Junketsu."

"Indeed I do." From where she was standing in her office, Ragyo stared at a picture of Satsuki in Junketsu. It was such a shame that her daughter wasn't able to force the Kamui to accept her as a true wielder. It was just another in a long line of failures, "Tell me, Satsuki, how was your wedding dress?"

"Exquisite," Satsuki didn't dare to think this was the reason her mother called. Ragyo was many things, but purposeless wasn't one of them, "Why did you call, mother?"

"Straight to the point," Ragyo twirled around and held her hand out as Hououmaru handed her a file, "I require your presence at Revocs. There are things we need to discuss and I want to see just how well your body is suited for Junketsu..."

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For perhaps the first time in a week Ichigo was enjoying a quiet breakfast. Without any strange and psychotic girls sneaking in to watch him sleep or Gamagori to try and piss him off even more than usual, Ichigo found the peace and quiet a rare blessing. So when there was a loud knocking on his door, Ichigo slammed his head against the table in annoyance. He just had to jinx everything by thinking about it. Groaning and standing up, he shambled towards the door. Whoever was on the other side better have a damn good reason for knocking.

It was to his surprise that upon opening the door he was greeted by a scowling Ryuko.



"Why are you here, Ryuko? It's eight in the morning."

"Here," Ryuko shoved the bamboo sword she was hold into Ichigo's arms and walked past him into his room. Sensing an aura of annoyance as well as eagerness coming off Ryuko, he looked at the weapon in his hands and noticed some writing scrawled on it.

**Attention, Ryuko Matoi of Second Year, Class K.**

**I will be waiting for you after school in the Kendo Club dojo for our long overdue match**

**~ Uzu Sanageyama ~**

"Sanageyama is calling you to fight him?" Ichigo turned the bamboo sword over in his hands, thinking that perhaps there was another part of the message that he was missing. Seeing that there was nothing else written on it, he turned and walked back into his room.

"I found that thing stabbed right outside Mako's house this morning," Ryuko grumbled and plopped down on his couch. Crossing her arms in front of her chest, she scoffed angrily, "Damn bastard is calling me a chicken!"

Ichigo's face fell flat, "I don't think that's what's going on..."

"Satsuki Kiryuin must be a sore loser!" Ryuko grinned smugly as she waved off Ichigo's concern, "After you kicked Snake's ass yesterday, Satsuki must be too scared to send another of her goons after you. That's fine with me though. It's just one less person I have to defeat to find out why Satsuki killed my dad."

Ichigo stopped listening to Ryuko about halfway through, his mind thinking about the message on the bamboo sword. The message was too personal to be something Satsuki would do. Nonon had basically ambushed them yesterday in order to defeat him. From what he knew of Satsuki, that was something she would sanction.

Sanageyama's message was basically giving Ryuko the time and place for their fight. He was missing something important.

"This doesn't seem like something Satsuki would do," Ichigo placed the bamboo sword against the wall and sat down in a chair, "Satsuki's policy in this place is to demote anyone that loses to us. Why would she risk losing two of her Elite four two days in a row? Whatever Sanageyama is thinking, I'm damn well sure it isn't with Satsuki's approval."

"You think this guy has a grudge against me or something?" Ryuko pondered her question for a few seconds before a look of realization washed over her face, "Hey, wait a second! Why isn't he going after you? I haven't said five words to the guy while it was your friend that swung him around like a rag doll!"

"Don't try to pin this on me," Ichigo replied sarcastically, "That was all Ururu, and if you knew her as well as I do, then trying to pick a fight with her is a terrible idea. Perhaps Sanageyama just knows he can't beat me and decided to go after someone easier."

"Are you calling me a wimp?" Ryuko stood up dramatically and rolled up her sleeves, "Because the way I hear it, you weren't able to land a hit on Snake until Mugetsu transformed and saved your ass! By the way, how did you get her to transform and fly?"

" ***It was necessary to win,***" Mugetsu answered. Swiveling her eyes to stare at Ryuko, she explained further, "***It was insulting to think that a Goku Uniform comprised of 30% Life Fibers could do something that I, a Kamui, could not. When Ichigo asked me if I could fly, how could I say no? The mere thought of that pink haired brat doing something that I couldn't sickened me.***"

Ryuko leaned in and stared right back at Mugetsu, "So how did you do it exactly?"

" ***Why don't you ask Senketsu?***" Mugetsu growled irritably.

When Ryuko looked at Senketsu's one eye, the Kamui did his best attempt at a shrug, ***"I do not know how Mugetsu was able to transform. Perhaps in the heat of battle the knowledge of transforming into a different mode will come to me, but for the time being you should focus on increasing your own strength. The upcoming battles will be extremely dangerous."***

***" You're completely useless,"*** Mugetsu spat and would have pointed a sleeve at Senketsu if Ichigo wasn't currently wearing her, ***"It is insulting to think that you, a fellow Kamui, is unable to visualize new forms outside of battle. Why, when Ichigo was asleep last night I thought up two new transformations for our next battle!"***

***" Why don't you go and sew your lapels closed?"*** Senketsu emphasized his question by pulling the top half of his body off of Ryuko, leaving her bare-chested apart from her bra, in order to wave his sleeve menacingly at Mugetsu, ***"Ryuko and I are a team! I don't need to hear such nonsense coming from someone like you, who can't even keep her own creases folded properly!"***

***" WHAT?!"*** Infuriated at Senketsu's insult, Mugetsu pulled herself off of Ichigo and began wrestling on the ground with Senketsu. Ichigo, now wearing nothing more than boxers, stared at the fighting school uniforms incredulously.

"The hell is going on?" Ichigo couldn't believe what he was seeing. Turning to ask Ryuko if she had any idea as to what was going on, he quickly turned his head upon seeing her in nothing but a bra and panties. Ryuko, noticing Ichigo's averted gaze, quickly blushed and attempted to cover herself.

It took the combined efforts of Ichigo and Ryuko nearly five minutes to pry the two Kamui apart. With both of them dressed once more, but with their respective Kamui glaring at each other, Ichigo was about to ask what Ryuko planned to do about Sanageyama when there was another knock at the door. Walking over, a little annoyed

at the intrusion, Ichigo opened the door and immediately got a fist to his face as a result.

"Ichigo!" Ryuko watched Ichigo go flying backwards before gritting her teeth and glaring at his assailant. Standing in the doorway, with actual steam seeming to be wafting off her fist, was Nonon Jakuzure, but something was different about her. Instead of wearing her Three Star Goku Uniform, she wore the standard No Star Uniform, but accessorized to fit with her so-called cute and girlish persona. Adjusting her white beret with the black skull emblazoned on it, she stepped inside Ichigo's room and slammed the door closed.

"That was for yesterday, Strawberry!"

"What the hell's your problem?" Ryuko reached for the pin on her glove to fight Nonon, but was confused when the girl simply ignored her and began eating Ichigo's breakfast.

"Close your mouth before you let the flies in, Transfer Student," Nonon grumbled mid-bite, "As much as I hate it to say it, I'm here to help you fight Lady Satsuki. Ugh, simply saying those words makes me feel sick. You got any mouthwash, Strawberry?"

Rubbing his sore nose, Ichigo stared at Nonon, who had made herself at home, and asked, "What the hell are you doing in my room, Snake?"

Nonon narrowed her eyes and scoffed, "Apparently you haven't heard the news, Strawberry. After our fight yesterday, Lady Satsuki decided I was a failure for losing against you. She not only stripped me of my Goku Uniform, but permanently demoted me to a stupid No Star like the Transfer Student! How could Lady Satsuki do that to me, her closest friend and the one who's been by her side the longest? I thought I knew what her every thought was and she not only demotes me, but orders me to never speak or look at her again? My life sucks almost as much as yours."

"So why are you in my room eating my damn breakfast?"

"Because Strawberry," Nonon waved her spoon at Ichigo, "You and the Transfer Student are the only two in Honnouji Academy willing to fight against Lady Satsuki! I don't care about your motives or whatever the hell your reasons are. I simply want to stand over Lady Satsuki, grab her by the front of her uniform, and demand to know why she's treating me like this! You got that?"

Ichigo glanced over at Ryuko, who shrugged her shoulders disinterestedly, and asked, "Do I have a choice in the matter?"

"No," Nonon answered bluntly, "Because no matter what you say, I'm going to follow the two of you around until I get answers. It looks like you're stuck with me, Strawberry."

"Well, have fun with your new friend Ichigo," Ryuko waved goodbye as she walked out of the room, "I need to get ready for my fight against Sanageyama later on."

"You're fighting Monkey?" Nonon rolled her eyes and scoffed, "While seeing you unconscious and bleeding on the floor would make me happy, defeating Monkey will bring me one step closer to Lady Satsuki. Here's a hint and hopefully that stupid brain of yours can understand it - Sanageyama's eyes see everything. Got it? Well, if you didn't too bad. I'm not repeating myself."

Ichigo rubbed the bridge of his nose in an attempt to stave off a headache, "This is revenge for yesterday, isn't it?"

"Damn straight it is, Strawberry. Now get me some more cereal."

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Uzu Sanageyama could feel his blood boiling in his veins. With a cocky grin on his face, he strutted towards the center of the Kendo Club dojo and patiently waited for Ryuko to arrive.

When he had sent Matoi a personalized invitation to fight him, Sanageyama knew she wouldn't refuse. If she was anything like him, she would relish the chance to fight someone strong. That was not mentioning the fact that Matoi needed to go through him if Lady Satsuki would even dare to dream of giving her the time of day. While Satsuki had warned him his desire for battling strong opponents would lead to his downfall, Sanageyama saw it as taking the initiative.

Feeling his fingers trembling in excitement, Sanageyama clenched his fist as he remembered the last time he had felt this way. It had been nearly three years ago to the day when he led a force of nearly 500 people against Satsuki, only to lose horribly and decisively. It was comforting to know that there were two new players that could make him feel excited about fighting again. While Sanageyama craved fighting strong opponents, he was smarter than his wild demeanor suggested.

As much as he wanted to, Sanageyama knew fighting Ichigo Kurosaki at his current level was suicidal. Ichigo had not only fought Lady Satsuki, but actually managed to beat her. While he craved his fight with Matoi, Ichigo was Sanageyama's ultimate challenge. If he could best the boy that captured Lady Satsuki's attention, then he knew he was strong enough to finally take on Satsuki.

A quick shifting of the shadows at the top of the bleachers to his left failed to escape Sanageyama's attention. Turning his head, he grinned when he noticed Ichigo walk in, accompanied by an irate Nonon and that creepy little girl that had so bested him with ease the other day. Noticing the extremely subtle clenching of Nonon's facial features, Sanageyama knew it was time to make the first move in Nonon gaining Ichigo's trust.

"So, you've come to see the show Ichigo," Sanageyama's loud boasting was enough to cause the quiet murmuring that permeated the dojo to cease. As the multitudes of No and One Star students turned towards a now scowling Ichigo, Ichigo tucked his hands in his pockets, "Have you come to see Matoi get crushed to pieces?"

Ichigo simply stared at Sanageyama for several seconds before responding sarcastically, "I've seen your Blade Regalia, remember? If Ryuko's as strong as I know she is, there's no way she can lose."

"Humph," Sanageyama snorted derisively, "I'll admit that you were smart enough to figure out how to fight my Blade Regalia, but even you must admit that Matoi isn't even close to your level of intelligence! There's no way she can beat me!"

"And you brought along a failure," Sanageyama's gaze shifted past a curious Ururu to focus on an irate Nonon, "How does it feel to lose everything, including Lady Satsuki's respect, Jakuzure?"

"Bite me, Wild Monkey!" Nonon spat back angrily.

"It's your own fault for losing to Ichigo and now you follow him around like a lost dog. How poetic."

"Go to hell!" Nonon twisted around and grabbed Ichigo by the front of Mugetsu, "I don't care what you and that Transfer Student agreed on! Go down there and kick that Monkey's ass right now!"

***"I don't like anyone but you touching me, Ichigo,"*** Mugetsu began growling angrily at Nonon, which was ironic since Ichigo was the only one that could hear her, ***"Tell her to let go of me before I decide to bite her hands off."***

"There's no need for such language from a failure like you," Sanageyama's grinned widened as he turned around, "So you've finally come, Matoi. Tell me, are you as excited for this fight as I am?"

Ryuko strutted towards Sanageyama through the parting crowd with a grin of her own. Giving a waving Mako a confident thumbs up, she smirked at Sanageyama, "I was called out personally by you. It would be rude for me to not show up."

"I like your spirit!" Sanageyama shouted exuberantly, "Let's get down to business!" Throwing his hands out to the side, Sanageyama was enveloped by a flash of light that originated from the three stars on his collar. As the wind picked up before abruptly dying back down, Ryuko heard him say, "Three Star Goku Uniform: Blade Regalia!"

As the light surrounding Sanageyama faded away, Ichigo muttered, "Ryuko is going to have some trouble with him."

"What the hell does that mean, Strawberry?" Nonon squeaked.

Ichigo rolled his eyes while ignoring Nonon's irritation, "I've fought Sanageyama's Blade Regalia the day Satsuki tried to kill Ryuko. His speed and power may be almost fast enough to catch me, but his biggest advantage are his eyes. If you don't know how to block his sight, Sanageyama can always evade and counter your attacks."

"I knew all that already! I worked alongside him for a while!" Nonon spat on the ground in annoyance. Folding her arms and looking away, she grumbled, "You said the Transfer Student has a chance to win. I may be on your side, but I know the Monkey's power more than you. There is no way that bitch down there has a shot at winning."

"Didn't you say the same thing to me yesterday?" Ichigo's question was quickly, and violently, answered with a swift kick to the shin, courtesy of a pissed off Nonon.

"Bite me, Strawberry!"

Back down on the dojo, Ryuko lowered her hand from in front of her eyes as Sanageyama finished transforming. She had been expecting his Goku Uniform to change, but not to the extent that it did. Unlike Jakuzure yesterday, Sanageyama was covered in a large green suit of armor that more than resembled a standard kendo suit, which fit in with his entire theme.



"This is the power of my Blade Regalia!" Sanageyama roared as a shinai extended from inside his wrist and was firmly grasped in his armored gauntlet. Pointing the weapon at Ryuko, he shouted, "Your Kamui isn't the only thing that can transform! Change into your Kamui, Matoi, so that we can fight!"

"You don't need to say it twice!" Ryuko had an excited look on her face as she reached for the pin on her glove, "I'll do the same! Life Fiber Synchronize: Kamui Senketsu!"

As Senketsu expanded around her body before collapsing back into his transformed state, Ryuko decided to rush in and finish Sanageyama off as quickly as possible. Darting out of the lightshow that always seemed to accompany her transformation, she drew her Scissor Blade and effortlessly sliced through Sanageyama's Blade Regalia vertically.

"That wasn't so tough," Ryuko stated victoriously before noticing something off about her defeated opponent. Sanageyama's body seemed to be frozen in place before the two halves dissipated into thin air, "What?"

"Too slow!"

Ryuko gasped in pain as Sanageyama's shinai was slammed into her back, catapulting her through the air and into a nearby column accompanied by a large explosion.

"Damn," Ryuko wiped the small trace of blood oozing from the corner of her mouth and pushed with both against the column with both of her heels before rocketing back towards the waiting Sanageyama. With her Scissor Blade held out to the side, she shouted angrily as she tried, and failed to hit her opponent, who seemed to be always supernaturally dodging her attacks.

"I told you..." the left hand of Sanageyama's Blade Regalia slammed into Ryuko's stomach before a shinai extended out of it and propelled her into the roof above. Before she could fall back to the

ground, he reared his hand back and punched her across the dojo, "... it's useless. I can see all your moves! There is nothing you can do that I cannot predict and avoid. Only two people have ever managed to avoid my attacks and you, Matoi, are nowhere near their levels! Now stand back up and finish this fight!"

"I'm really getting annoyed at his constant blabbering," An exhausted, but otherwise relatively unharmed, Ryuko pushed herself back onto her feet and glanced briefly at Senketsu, "You have anything, Senketsu?"

" *Hmm...*" Senketsu thought for a moment before replying, "*Perhaps, but it's going to be risky, Ryuko. I'm not even sure if it will work.*"

Ryuko smiled warmly at her Kamui, "Hey, we're partners. I trust you. Now let's do this Senketsu!"

As Ryuko prepared herself for the second round against Sanageyama, up in the stands Ichigo noticed someone missing. Looking around in confusion, he asked, "Hey, where did Ururu go?"

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## **Kamui Tales #4 - Mysterious Relations**

Ururu, Ryuko and Mako were gathered around Ichigo, who was busy staring at a picture held firmly in his hand.

"He does look eerily similar to her," Ryuko mused as she scratched her chin, "They both look like they have a stick up their asses."

"But that's super impossible!" Mako argued valiantly, "If they were related, then surely she would have told someone by now!"

"I don't know Mako," Ururu said softly as she gazed upon the picture, "He does look a lot like Satsuki. Perhaps he can be her father."

"Did I hear someone mention Lady Satsuki's parentage?"

Ryuko looked up as Gamagori appeared out of nowhere just to tower over them "Take a look at this picture," Ryuko gave the giant of a student the picture, "Tell me he doesn't look like Satsuki."

"I'll be the judge of that," Gamagori stared at the picture, his eyes narrowing in concentration before he nodded, "There does seem to be a familial resemblance, but just to be sure... INUMUTA!"

From behind Gamagori stepped out Inumuta, "What's so important that you deafened half the academy?"

Without even considering the question, Gamagori handed over the picture, "I need you to verify the authenticity of this picture."

"If you say so," Inumuta looked at the picture and held a handheld device to it. After several moments of silence followed by a series of quick beeps, Inumuta looked at the results on the device, "Oh my..."

Ichigo, Gamagori and Ryuko looked over Inumuta shoulder as he announced the results, "According to my computer, this man has a 95% probability of being Satsuki's father!"

"Did I hear someone dare to mention my father?"

"Lady Satsuki!" Gamagori handed the picture over to her, "Ichigo Kurosaki was in possession of this photograph of your father!"

Satsuki thought it was a joke until she saw the picture. Starting up at her with an expression that she had only seen on herself was Byakuya Kuchiki. As Satsuki gazed at the picture, she began to think that perhaps this man was her father after all. The resemblance was too uncanny to be otherwise.

To everyone's surprise, Satsuki turned around and began walking away. Ichigo would later think it was a trick of the wind, but he could have sworn he heard Satsuki muttering 'you must be my father' under her breath, *"Great. This is just what I need. I just hope that Satsuki never actually meets Byakuya."*

# Walk on the Wild Side

*Here is Chapter 17. It didn't take me that long to write this chapter, which is surprising considering it is longer than my previous chapter. In this chapter I wrap up the first Sanageyama fight in Episode 6, but unfortunately I wasn't able to actually finish the episode. That's okay though, since I have a bunch of my other plot threads beginning to come together. People and things I mentioned in previous chapters begin to make an appearance as well as a surprising guest of honor. Try to enjoy this chapter as much as you can and don't forget to read and review .*

*I passed 100,000 views! I have reached the five-figure milestone in less than two months! Hurray for me!*

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## Chapter 17 - Walk on the Wild Side

Ururu Tsumugiyu greatly disliked unnecessary violence. She was of the belief that one should only fight when given no other options or if your friends or loved ones were in danger of getting hurt or killed. Fights like the one between Ryuko Matoi and Uzu Sanageyama disinterested her. She hadn't known what Ichigo was dragging her to when he asked her to tag along. She assumed it had something to do with all the fuss and rumors spreading throughout Honnouji Academy about a big showdown between the Elite Four and the new transfer student. As soon as she realized it was a fight over something trivial, she had quickly slipped away to wander the now mostly empty halls of Honnouji Academy. It was during her travels that she managed to somehow find her way onto the large outer walls surrounding the academy.

The area was unchanged ever since Tsumugu defeated Kusanosuke Yaguruma of the Gardening Club. Standing on the edge of the flower bed, she straightened out her No Star uniform and knelt down to look at the beautiful flowers. With the autumn cold beginning to seep into the nights, the flowers were giving one last hurrah before dying off for the winter, only to come back in the spring.

Reaching down to pick one of the many Sopheria flowers that the Gardening Club had spent a lot of money growing in the fertile flower beds, Ururu's fingers had just closed around a stem when she felt a familiar presence land behind her. Without showing any emotions, she stood back up and turned around to face a smiling Nui Harime.

"Hi!" Nui chirped cheerfully.

Ururu stared emotionlessly at the Grand Couturier, "What do you want?"

"Don't be such a wet blanket." Nui puffed her cheeks out as she pouted cutely. Skipping closer to Ururu, she leaned in and tilted her head to the side, "It's super impressive that you were able to sense my presence as soon as I arrived. A normal human would never be able to do something that extraordinary. You really are quite special."

Instead of answering Nui, Ururu raced forward with her feet kicking up small ripples of dust as she went. With her fist arcing through the air, she attempted to punch Nui in the face only for her attack to be blocked, albeit with a great amount of effort on Nui's part.

"You really are super strong," Nui complemented as a bead of sweat dripped down her cheek. It had been forever since she had fought someone able to actually make her fight. Usually those the Director sent her to kill were unable to put up too much of a fight. Although, now that she thought about it, both Kisuke Urahara and Ryuken Ishida put up enough of a fight to actually make her work for a win. How exciting! As her pink boots were forced back along the ground, Nui smiled and with a quick application of power, stopped her retreat immediately.

As her sapphire eye stared into Ururu's twin blue ones, Nui smile grew even wider. Now that she was up close and personal with Ururu, she could truly feel what the Director told her earlier! Nui would have smacked herself in the forehead if she had the time about how obvious it was now that she thought about. When Ururu didn't say anything, Nui tilted her head to the side, her blonde pigtails bouncing along the way, "Aren't you going to say anything? Having a one sided conversation is really boring. I'm not that into monologuing! That's so cliché!"

"You are a threat," Ururu's voice was quiet, but Nui could feel the power laced in the words. A childish giggle escaped her throat upon hearing it.

"How so?" She asked rhetorically.

"You are a threat to Ichigo and Ryuko," Ururu was beginning to enter her Extermination Mode as the words left her mouth. Already she could feel her restraints and morals disappearing as the overarching goal of defeating Nui Harime replaced everything else. Ever since No Late Day, Ururu had felt something both off and strangely familiar radiating off of Nui, but she still couldn't place where the feeling originated from. Despite Nui's cheerful and peppy demeanor, years of living and training under Urahara Kisuke had gotten Ururu accustomed to those that hid their true feelings and motives. Every single cell in Ururu's mind was telling her that Nui was extremely dangerous. She was an enemy and enemies must be eliminated before they hurt those close to her, "Threats must be eliminated."

"Threats must be eliminated? Could you get any less emotional?" Nui asked sarcastically as she quickly leaned back and under Ururu's attempt to grasp her neck. With a smile on her face, she avoided Ururu's following kick to the abdomen, but failed to take into account Ururu's analytical mind as Ururu appeared to pivot in midair and slammed her heel into Nui's cheek.

"Gah!"

Nui felt actual pain as she bounced across the top of the wall and skidded to a stop. The pain wasn't that bad, perhaps the equivalent of getting a rubber band smacked against her skin, and it didn't come from the nearly half dozen face plants she did before coming to a stop. Those didn't hurt her at all. No, the extremely small amount of pain she was feeling came from Ururu's kick.

Elegantly getting to her feet, Nui pulled a pocket mirror out from within one of her pigtails and examined her cheek. The skin where Ururu's heel had hit her was slightly bruised, but she could see the Life Fibers already healing the damage. What was strange was how slowly she was healing. Such a wound, if she had ever sustained one that actually caused her pain, should have healed while she bounced along the ground. Well, Nui concluded with less than normal care, that's food for thought. Perhaps later on when she had the time, she would sit down and really think about what this all meant.

"That was a nice kick! But aren't you curious about why I'm here or something?" Nui honestly complemented the still stoic Ururu. Her opponent's lack of responses was really starting to tick Nui off. She loved to talk to her opponents during her fights. It made the usually dull and boring battles much more fun! Without Ururu saying anything back to her, she might as well be talking to herself for all anyone cared, and Nui didn't want people to think she was crazy or anything.

"No," Ururu was curious about why Nui seemed to be able to take one of her kicks to the face with almost no damage. Bringing her arms up, she prepared for a lengthy and, most likely, grievous fight.

"Aw, phooey," Nui playfully kicked the ground, "You really need to learn to relax and have fun! I didn't come here to hurt Ichigo or any of your so-called friends! So why don't you just relax and stop thinking about how you're going to choke the life out of me, because I can tell you it won't work."



Ururu's gaze shifted towards the dojo when she felt a spike of power radiate out from within. Deciding that she couldn't afford to waste time dealing with Nui, Ururu turned to leave only to find the Grand Couturier blocking her path.

"Leaving so soon?" Nui seemed almost sad that Ururu was ignoring her. It was almost as if Ururu didn't care that she was willing to spend the time talking with her, "I haven't even gotten to the part where I say you and I are a lot alike."

Ururu saw the calculating looking behind Nui's eye, but there was something else as well. Buried underneath all the manipulation and sadism in Nui's mind was something eerily familiar, "What do you mean?"

"If I say anything, it will spoil all the fun!" Nui pouted and stiffly took a few steps away from Ururu before turning around with a smile back on her face, "Just know that if you ever want to hear the whole story, I'll be just a single call away."

Stepping towards the edge of the wall, Nui stood half off the edge, her blonde hair whipping in the breeze. With a wide smile on her face, she waved to Ururu as she leaned backwards, "Until next time! Bye Bye, Amu!"

Ururu wasn't about to let Nui just leave, not after what she just said. Racing forward at speeds that would make Sanageyama jealous, she reached the Grand Couturier in less than a second. Just as her fingers were about to close upon Nui's pink dress, the Grand Couturier gave Ururu a mischievous smile and pushed off the wall and just barely evading Ururu's extending grasp.

As Nui's body fell out of her sight, Ururu let her arm fall listlessly to her side. Ururu knew it was useless to try and chase after Nui at this point. She could already feel the Grand Couturier's presence vanishing into the distance at an appreciable speed. While she was sure she could track Nui down if need be, Ururu was uncertain about any tricks Nui might possess.

" *What did she come here for?*" Ururu softly contemplated the ulterior motive for Nui's visit. As she sensed a large release of power from where Ryuko was fighting Sanageyama, she began to make her way back to the dojo.

" *And why did she call me Amu?*"

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There was a whirlwind of swinging blades and sparks as Ryuko's red Scissor Blade clashed with the giant shinai that Sanageyama's Blade Regalia created for him. Knees buckling as she raised her weapon horizontally over her head, Ryuko broke out in a sweat as she felt the ground beneath her feet crack and dent from the sheer amount of force Sanageyama was pushing with. Thinking quickly, she adjusted her grip on her Scissor Blade and grabbed Sanageyama's shinai with her left hand, her fingers digging into the metal before Sanageyama could have a chance to pull it back.

"Let's see how well you do without a weapon!"

Steam shot out from the exhaust vents on her shoulders and back as Ryuko hefted Sanageyama's Blade Regalia into the air. While Sanageyama managed to quite easily right himself and landed safely back on the ground, the same could not be said for his shinai. Held firmly in Ryuko's hands, she held it in the air for a moment before slicing it cleanly in half with her Scissor Blade.

"Now it's going to be fun!" Ryuko shouted excitedly as she raced across the dojo, her speed augmented by Senketsu's power, and stabbed her Scissor Blade straight through Sanageyama's chest. Her elation at finally hitting her opponent was squashed when Sanageyama's form rippled and disappeared, indicating that she had hit nothing more than another damn afterimage.

As Ryuko stumbled forward from the lack of resistance, she heard an annoyingly familiar voice whisper from right behind her, "Fun for whom?"

Her head barely turned around before a shinai slammed into her cheek and whipped her body around through the air. While the world was still spinning around her, Ryuko felt another shinai slam into the small of her back before a third slapped her in the back of her neck and catapulted her body clear across the dojo.

"Oww..." Ryuko moaned in a small amount of pain. Rubbing her sore back, she pushed herself onto her one knee and glanced around at her opponent. If there was one thing about Sanageyama that she could consider a compliment, it was that he was honorable at least. While he would do everything he could to beat her, he wouldn't attack her when she couldn't fight back. Wiping a trail of spit from the corner of her mouth, Ryuko grumbled, "Damn it, how the hell is this guy so freaking fast. Those afterimages are really starting to piss me off."

**" I don't know,"** Senketsu seemed to be just as confused about their lack of success as Ryuko. It was highly strange that Ryuko, whose power and speed rivaled that of Satsuki Kiryuin, should be unable to even land a hit on one of her underlings, **"Perhaps there is something else at play here. Do you remember what that girl said to you this morning?"**

"Something about his eyes, right?" Ryuko hadn't been paying attention to what Jakuzure had told her. At the time she was still more concerned with why one of Satsuki's Elite Four was trying to hang out with Ichigo. Even with the so-called sob story Jakuzure told them, Ryuko didn't trust the former Three-Star at all. There was no way she wasn't planning something against them.

Stabbing her Scissor Blade into the wooden floor of the dojo, Ryuko felt something approaching and quickly leapt back as Sanageyama came crashing down, his shinai slamming into the ground with a reverberating echo.

"Hitting an opponent when they're down?" Ryuko grinned savagely as she continued moving backwards while sidestepping all of Sanageyama's attacks. She was just beginning to get a sense for his speed and movements. It was only a matter of time before her reflexes and timing managed to allow her to avoid all of Sanageyama's attacks.

"This isn't a practice spar!" Sanageyama retorted enthusiastically and proudly as his form wavered and vanished from in front of her. Gritting her teeth as she knew what was about to happen, Ryuko spun around and brought her Scissor Blade up to block the incoming shinai to her back. There was a clashing of sparks as her blade made contact with the shinai before Sanageyama vanished as quickly as he appeared. Ryuko gasped as Sanageyama's speed increased before there was a sense of radiating pain from her stomach before her body folded around the shinai and exploded across the dojo.

"You grew lax!" Sanageyama pointed his shinai at the smoking crater in the wall where Ryuko's body had crashed, "You assumed my speed was a constant and that I couldn't push myself further! A true warrior does not go all out from the very beginning. That is a lesson I learned from Lady Satsuki!"

"Shut the hell up!"

In a large explosion, Ryuko burst out of the rubble her impact had created and dashed back across the dojo towards Sanageyama. She was starting to get pissed off at Sanageyama's constant lecturing. As her Scissor Blade screamed through the air around Sanageyama's Blade Regalia, a small smirk developed on Ryuko's face as she saw her weapon getting closer and closer with every strike.

Ryuko was not the only one to notice this. From inside his Blade Regalia, Sanageyama's eyes widened in surprise as he saw Ryuko's attacks growing more and more accurate, *"This is insane! My eyes should be able to let me predict and counter her every move, but her*

*speed and reaction time is increasing with every second! By the time I figure out the perfect counter to one move, she's already started a second move! If I don't do something soon, I might actually lose!"*

Swinging his arm back, there was a sound like a rifle going off as Sanageyama's shinai shot forward and hit Ryuko's Scissor Blade, doing no damage but forcing her away from him.

"I was wrong about you!" Sanageyama held his shinai horizontally in front of his eyes, "You are truly skilled to be able to avoid my base attacks. Prepare to face my true power! The warm up ends here, Matoi! Secret Technique: Higi Tengantsu!"

Ryuko watched as jets of steam began emitting from Sanageyama's Blade Regalia as several sections on his back, chest and arms opened up and exposed bright purple eyes that seemed to constantly swivel around and take in the world around him, "Behold Higi Tengantsu! As long as I possess my eyes, there is nothing you can do, Matoi! Your speed and reflexes may be enough to overcome my base power, but with my true power unleashed, I will always be able to anticipate and counter each and every move you make. You cannot win, Matoi!"

"Say what?" Sanageyama might have called it his secret technique or whatever, but to Ryuko it was the equivalent to cheating. Just when she was getting the timing down with her strikes, this bastard comes along and pulls this secret move out of his ass. How was she supposed to win if his eyes could see everything she did? As she thought that, Ryuko's eyes widened as an idea came to her, "I think I know how to beat him, Senketsu."

**" It better not involve you cutting off parts of me to blind him,"** Senketsu responded dryly.

"What? No!" Ryuko was appalled by the mere suggestion of hurting Senketsu. She wanted to rub Sanageyama's smug face into the dirt more than anything, but not if it meant hurting her friends. Senketsu was more than just a Kamui for her to wear, he was her friend and

she would do anything to protect her. Shaking her head, she said, "Do you remember how Ichigo said Mugetsu transformed?"

Senketsu's single eye widened in interest, *"I'm listening..."*

In a room overlooking the dojo, Inumuta and Gamagori were watching the fight earnestly. With Jakuzure publicly kicked out of the Elite Four and Sanageyama challenging Matoi to an unsanctioned fight, they were effectively down to half strength. That did not mean, however, that they were in danger of being overrun by students who thought they were good enough to serve Lady Satsuki. Even with potentially two of their members defeated, the combined power of their Three-Star Goku Uniforms was enough to destroy each and every One and Two-Star Goku Uniform in Honnouji Academy.

"For every motion a human being makes, whether it is simply breathing to walking, there is a preemptive preparatory motion," Inumuta explained condescendingly to Gamagori. The fight was interesting, to say the least. Due to Ichigo Kurosaki's interference in Satsuki's fight against Ryuko, they had yet to see her full strength in a true fight. Win or lose, Sanageyama's eagerness to fight would gather valuable data for Satsuki's plans.

"It doesn't matter whether the motion comes from the movements of the eyes, muscles or hair," Inumuta adjusted his glasses as he watched Sanageyama pummel Ryuko into the ground. It was quite pathetic to see someone able to withstand the immense power of a Kamui being beaten so easily, "Sanageyama was truly the worst opponent for Ryuko Matoi to fight. Her entire strategy involves using her speed and power to overwhelm an opponent, but Sanageyama is able to instantly read all the subtle motions of the human body and preempt any move she makes. That's what his Tengantsu is capable of, and with his Blade Regalia amplifying his natural ability, she doesn't stand a chance. It's quite tragic really."

Gamagori grunted deeply in his throat as he frowned upon seeing Ryuko apparently losing. There was no way that such a worthy opponent for Lady Satsuki should be losing to someone like

Sanageyama so thoroughly. Could this be why Satsuki thought the fight was not worth being watched? But if that was the case, then why would she ask for constant reports on Matoi's progress?

"Lady Satsuki is risking a lot on this plan," Gamagori spoke to Inumuta of his dissatisfaction with the plan to ingratiate Jakuzure within Ichigo Kurosaki's inner circle. It was not that he doubted the success of the plan, but rather the clashing personalities between Ichigo and Nonon. From his limited interactions with Ichigo, he was able to tell he was a headstrong youth who won't take any insult lying down. With the sarcastic wit that Gamagori had come to expect from Nonon, he knew it was only a matter of time before she said something that would annoy Ichigo.

"I trust her judgment," Inumuta answered calmly, "Don't tell me you doubt her?"

"Of course I don't!" Gamagori shouted and turned away when there was a loud explosion as Ryuko's body collided with the wall.

"God damn it!" Ryuko pushed away from the pillar and rolled to the side as Sanageyama's shinai came shooting through the air. Rolling back onto her feet, she managed to bring her Scissor Blade up in time to block the multitude of strikes from her opponent, "This guy is good. He's not giving me any option but deflecting his strikes!"

***" Just wait a little longer, Ryuko. I'm almost ready."***

"That's easy for you to say," Ryuko said sarcastically, "You're not the one fighting!"

"I'm impressed by your tenacity!" Sanageyama stopped attacked and drifted away from Ryuko. Pushing his fingers into the cylinders on his back, Ryuko could feel the grin on his face as he announced, "But let's see how well you handle this! Shinsoku-Senbonzuki!"

"Oh..." A cat-like grin spread across Nonon's face upon seeing one of Sanageyama's ultimate motives. Leaning against the railing in

front of her, she snorted derisively, "It looks like Monkey is going all out. Transfer Student doesn't even have a chance anymore."

"That's not true!" Mako Mankanshoku slid up next to Nonon, startling the girl with her abrupt appearance. Clapping her hands together in prayer, Mako leaned close to Nonon and continued, "Ryuko will most definitely win! I am sure of it! Just because she is at a disadvantage against someone as powerful as Sanageyama doesn't mean she will lose. She has the heart and drive to persevere and win! That is the Ryuko I believe in!"

Ichigo and Nonon stared silently at Mako, who somehow appeared to be illuminated in a spotlight, before Nonon asked dryly, "Who the hell are you?"

"I am Mako Mankanshoku!"

"Wait, you're that Underachiever that always hangs out around the Transfer Student," A mischievous grin appeared on Nonon's face before she waved Mako off, "I can't afford to lose any more brain cells talking to you. So why don't you go away and pretend to be friends with someone else."

Mako opened her mouth to protest indignantly, but was cut off when Ichigo said, "Just ignore her, Mako. Snake here is a sore loser."

Nonon tried to kick Ichigo in the shins again, but Ichigo managed to sense the attack coming and avoided it, "The name's Jakuzure, Strawberry!"

The barrage came at her faster than Ryuko expected. As her body was pummeled over and over again by the spinning shinai, she cursed and wondered where the hell all this speed was coming from.

"You might be wondering why everything you use is useless against me!" Sanageyama shouted excitedly as he continued to attack Ryuko, "Thanks to my Tengantsu, I've memorized all of your blocking moves and devised perfect counters and guard breaks for each and



every one of them. Your Scissor Blade that can destroy a Goku Uniform is little more than a normal sword if it can't hit its target!"

After several long seconds of hitting Ryuko repeatedly, Sanageyama decided to disengage Shinsoku-Senbonzuki. It would be a great dishonor to Matoi if she was defeated in such a manner. He wanted to beat her to prove he was strong, but doing so in such a manner proved nothing. As the ten shinai attached to his fingers whirled to a stop, he gazed down at Ryuko's smoking body and mockingly asked, "Is that all you got, Matoi? Where is the fight you promised me?"

"Shut up you bastard!" Ryuko spat as she staggered back to her feet using her Scissor Blade as a crutch. Taking in deep and ragged breathes, she looked into Senketsu's eye, "You ready yet?"

Senketsu gave Ryuko the Kamui equivalent of a nod, ***"Yes. I'm ready whenever you are. A lot is riding on this move working. I hope you know what you're doing, Ryuko."***

"It's not like I have much of a choice," she whispered back, "With those damn eyes of his, I can't do anything without Sanageyama seeing right through it. This is the only shot I have at kicking his ass."

***"I understand. Just be careful, Ryuko."***

Ryuko gave Senketsu a quick nod before scowling and turned to a patiently waiting Sanageyama, "What are you waiting for, you green haired prick? This fight isn't over yet."

"That's right, Matoi!" Sanageyama shouted gleefully, "Show me your determination and strength!"

Sanageyama flew towards Ryuko with all the speed he could muster. The shinai on his fingers spinning back up to full speed, Sanageyama was prepared for Ryuko to fight him, but when she simply closed her eyes and held her hands out to her sides, a look of confusion grew on his face.

*"What is she doing?"* Sanageyama skidded to a halt. His Tengantsu was trying to predict what Matoi might be doing, but each and every time it came up blank. Whatever it was, it didn't involve the use of her muscles or movements. Shaking his head, Sanageyama decided that it didn't matter. Matoi was standing on her feet facing him. If she wanted to be defeated with her eyes closed, then who was he to judge? Running forward, he shouted, "This is the end, Matoi!"

Ryuko centered her mind and focused on ignoring all distractions. As she felt Senketsu's power flow through her body, building up as it went, she thought back to what Jakuzure's Goku Uniform was like. She had wondered why Senketsu was limited to simply physical attacks when the Elite Four and other students appeared to have more varied forms of attacks. It was only when Ichigo and Mugetsu were able to transform into Mugetsu Gufū that Ryuko knew there was no way she couldn't do the same.

As a faint red aura began surrounding her body, causing the red lines on Senketsu's armor to light up, Ryuko opened her eyes and declared, "This is it! Senketsu Senkou!"

Everyone in the dojo watched in wonder and amazement as Ryuko held her Scissor Blade parallel to the ground in front of her face while her body seemed to shine with a reflective metallic sheen. As her thigh high, heeled boots began to resemble actual metal armor, the rest of Senketsu appeared to bulk up slightly with his eyes narrowly and jutting upwards into the air. Flexing her right hand, a wide grin spread across Ryuko's face as her Scissor Blade began to shift as well. Starting from where she was gripping the handle, glowing black and red jagged lines raced up the blade.

"Senketsu Senkou?" Sanageyama didn't know Matoi's Kamui could transform! He had heard from Lady Satsuki that Ichigo's could, but nothing about Matoi's, "What is this? How did you transform?"

"There is nothing a Goku Uniform can do that Senketsu cannot!" Ryuko shouted while pointing her Scissor Blade at Sanageyama. Taking a single step forward, Sanageyama found to his shock that

Ryuko's speed had increased at least two-fold, but it still wasn't fast enough to overcome the predicting abilities of his Tengantsu.

"This is perfect, Matoi!" Sanageyama saw that Ryuko would be attack his left arm at the wrist in an attempt to sever his hand. Moving back and out of range, he added, "But your new form isn't - "

There was a loud crash as Sanageyama's Blade Regalia was suddenly missing its left hand. While it wasn't actually his own, and thus he could feel no pain from the missing appendage, Sanageyama was still in shock.

"H-How?" He sputtered and turned to a bored looking Ryuko, "My Tengantsu should have seen that attack coming! What did you do?"

"Tch," Ryuko shouldered her glowing red Scissor Blade and scoffed, "You think I'm just going to tell you how I cut off your hand? This isn't a manga, you know. I'm not going to explain my powers so you can find a weakness!"

Sanageyama's eyes easily picked out the swinging motion from Ryuko's Scissor Blade and dodged to the left, but found once against to his consternation she had managed to hit him. Tracing his right hand over the large gash cutting diagonally across the front of his Blade Regalia, he growled, "What manner of attack is this? I didn't see anything, but you still hit me!"

"Like I'd tell you anything!" Ryuko held her Scissor Blade out to her side and willed it to transform into its Decapitation Mode, but as a result of being in Senketsu Senkou, the blade kept the black and red jagged lines and continued to glow with the same red aura, "Sen-I-Soshitsu!"

Despite knowing how the attack would come due to his Tengatsu, Sanageyama realized the actual attack would be nothing like that. Bringing all his shinai in front of his body, his gambit paid off as an invisible force cleaved its way through his right hand and into his

Blade Regalia. It was only because of his intuition that his Goku Uniform wasn't destroyed altogether.

"Where are you looking?" Sanageyama's eyes widened as he heard Ryuko's voice coming from above him. Staring up at her falling figure, his Tengantsu was telling him how he would be hit but without any way to block it, he was done for.

"Sen-I-Soshitsu!"

With a loud scream, Sanageyama's Blade Regalia was quickly cut into myriads of pieces. Landing back on the ground in a crouch, Ryuko had a stern expression on her face as the Banshi in the Blade Regalia was absorbed into Senketsu.

"It looks like Monkey lost," Nonon announced lazily. Huffing and spinning on her feet, she shrugged her shoulders at Ichigo, "Well, it looks like my work is done here, Strawberry. I'll see you around whenever the hell I feel like it."

Ichigo turned his head to follow her, "What do you mean 'your work is done?' You didn't do anything."

"Of course I did," Nonon retorted angrily, "I told the Transfer Student about Sanageyama's eyes, didn't I? How else do you think an idiot like her could have defeated a member of the Elite Four?"

Seeing that he was going to get nowhere with Nonon, Ichigo groaned and turned back to the finished fight. Noticing the Banshi being absorbed into Senketsu, he muttered to Mugetsu, "Isn't that similar to what happened after my fight against the Archery Club President?"

**"Yes, but at the same time no,"** Mugetsu replied after a moment of thinking, **"Senketsu is absorbing the Banshi into himself to increase his overall power. While I am capable of using the same basic ability, the Banshi are instead absorbed into your blade, increasing its sharpness and cutting power. If you were**

***to absorb enough Life Fibers with your sword, eventually its strength would be enough to sheer through Satsuki Kiryuin's Bakuzan."***

"Way to go, Ryuko!" Mako waved cheerfully before leaping out of the crowd and enveloping Ryuko in a full-body hug, "That's one down and two to go! And that mysterious attack you used! I don't know what you did, but you won, Ryuko! Yay!"

"T-This isn't finished, Matoi!"

Ryuko turned around and saw a fully nude Sanageyama staggering to his feet, a single wooden shinai clasped firmly in his right hand. With his breath ragged and body seemingly covered in cuts and bruises, it didn't take a genius to realize that he wasn't in any condition to continue fighting.

"Nope," Ryuko declared dryly as she shouldered her Scissor Blade, "There's nothing you can do to me in your current state."

"Are you taking pity on me?" Sanageyama shouted in return. He may have lost his Blade Regalia, but he was a warrior, damn it! Just because he only had the single shinai, that didn't mean he was going to just give up and die! Taking a shaky step towards Ryuko, he waved his shinai at her and declared, "I can still fight!"

Before he, or Ryuko, could say or do anything, several spiked whips sprang through the air and lashed Sanageyama across his body. "Don't be pathetic, Sanageyama!" Gamagori's boisterous voice shouted from above, "You have disgraced the Elite Four enough already! Don't spread your shame to the rest of us!"

Sanageyama collapsed to his knees, his fists slamming against the ground, as he realized he had lost everything he came to Honnouji Academy for. Holding back the tears of shame and regret that threatened to come out, he knelt there as everyone who came to watch his fight filtered out of the dojo to return to their respective lives. He didn't know how long he was sitting there for, but when he

saw a familiar pair of feet stop near him, he looked up and saw Ichigo standing alone next to him.

"Have you come to gloat, Ichigo?" Sanageyama sneered.

With his hands in his pockets, Ichigo asked, "Why did you want to fight Ryuko?"

"Tsk," Sanageyama stood back to his feet and turned away from Ichigo. With his hair shadowing his eyes, he said, "It's not something someone like you would understand. Three years ago, before I met Lady Satsuki, I was the leader of the Northern Kanto Gang Alliance. I had over five hundred students under my control when I received a direct challenge from Satsuki. It was just her and the other three Elite Four at the time. I thought I was going to win, but in one single shout Satsuki defeated every one of my men. It didn't take long for her to defeat me as well. Until I fought Lady Satsuki, I never met someone I couldn't beat. She challenged me to better myself and improve my skills. That's why I challenged Mato! She was the third person to make my blood itch for a fight!"

The choice of words intrigued Ichigo, "Third?"

Sanageyama spit on the ground, clearing his mouth of blood in the process, "You are the second, Ichigo! You are the only person to have actually beaten Lady Satsuki. My goal is to eventually do the same, but to do that I need to improve myself! Fighting Mato! was but the first step. I thought if I could beat her, I would be nearly ready to fight you! And if I could beat you - "

" - you would be able to beat Satsuki." Ichigo sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. Sanageyama was a lot like Ikkaku and Kenpachi. All of them looked for a fight against the strongest opponents they could find. However, unlike the members of the Eleventh Division, Sanageyama seemed quite a bit saner. Looking upwards, Ichigo let out a deep breath, "You were too focused on your eyes."

By the perplexed expression on Sanageyama's face, it was clear he wasn't expecting Ichigo to say that, "When we fought I was able to move quickly enough to avoid your attacks. I don't know what Ryuko did, but you couldn't see her attacks, could you?"

"Why are you telling me this? We're enemies."

"Why shouldn't I?"

Ichigo had been asked that question before, but the answer never changed. Sanageyama may work for Satsuki, but he was honorable to say the least. He could have taken on Ryuko in many different ways, but he didn't.

Sanageyama chuckled as Ichigo's words and their meaning sunk in before evolving into full blown laughter. Grabbing the side of his face with his hand, Sanageyama said, "I can't believe it was that simple. To think that it was my own Tengantsu that led to my defeat, how pathetic."

Taking a few steps away from Ichigo, Sanageyama stopped and turned back around, "Thank you, Ichigo."

"For what?"

"From what you said, I know what I need to do to improve myself," Sanageyama clenched a fist angrily, "While all this time I thought I was improving my skills and getting stronger, I was really stagnating! I let my pride in my Tengantsu prevent me from getting stronger."

Ichigo stood silently as Sanageyama finally left the dojo to head to parts unknown. Looking pensively at the floor, he knelt down and picked up Sanageyama's dropped shinai, "Hey Mugetsu."

His Kamui blinked and looked at him, **"Yes?"**

Ichigo looked at the shinai before turning to leave, "I have the feeling I just screwed something up."

***"I get that feeling all the time, but I just ignore it."***

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Iori leaned back and let out a stifled yawn as he finished compiling the data on the latest improvements to Satsuki's Goku Uniforms. He knew the urgency of her request to increase their power as quickly, and safely, as possible, but he wasn't a miracle worker. All the time the Sewing Club spent on the prototype Five-Star Goku Uniform turned out to be an enormous waste of time due to the volunteer subject being unable to withstand the will of the Life Fibers. Rubbing his eyes beneath his glasses, Iori was grateful Inumuta had been there to unstitch the prototype uniform. Things could have gotten messy otherwise.

Reading the data scrolling down the screen in front of him, Iori reached for the cup of coffee, his fourth so far, and frowned when he felt it was empty. He knew pulling daily all-nighters was going to impact his health, but he had a lot of work to do. As he stood to get some more, Iori heard a pressurized hiss as the door to the secure room opened. There was only a handful of people with the requisite access to get in, and none of them had called ahead to signal their arrival.

"Who's there?" Iori subtly moved his hand towards the collar of his Goku Uniform. He may be known as the president of the Sewing Club, but he was no pushover.

"Relax, Iori," A heavily bandaged Sanageyama walked into the room as a burst of thunder echoed outside, "I'm calling in that favor you owe me."

Iori turned sadly away from Sanageyama, "I wish to help you, but I can't. Lady Satsuki has made her wishes clear on the matter. You are no longer a member of the Elite Four and, as such, are forbidden any of the privileges. I'm sorry."



Sanageyama didn't say anything as he looked at the machine working tirelessly on the floor below. Watching the bundles of glowing red Life Fibers being drawn into the machine and spun into preliminary Goku Uniforms, he eventually turned back to Iori, "I grew overconfident in my Tengatsu's ability to predict and counter. I never thought I would face an opponent able to take advantage of that. Who knew Matoi had a brain after all. I wasn't expecting her to find a way to negate my Tengantsu."

"I saw Inumuta's data on the fight," Iori leaned back and folded his arms, "It's incredible to think that Matoi's Kamui was that strong. It is truly fascinating. I only wish I had the time and ability to study a Kamui. The things I could learn from it would accelerate Lady Satsuki's plans by months, if not years."

"I know," Sanageyama sighed sadly and placed his hands in his pockets, "I'm not asking you to stitch me a new Blade Regalia. As much as I wish it, I haven't earned the right to wear one of Lady Satsuki's Goku Uniforms. What I want you to do is much more personal. I need you to stitch my eyes shut."

"What?" Iori nearly choked upon hearing the request. There was no way on Earth that Sanageyama, the same person who prided his eyes seeing everything, would ask him to do that, "You can't be serious. Without your eyes, you cannot use Tengantsu!"

"I know." Sanageyama replied solemnly, "I prided myself on my eyes being able to see the world around me without fail. Due to this, I let the rest of my senses become dull and useless. If I had been willing to train my ears to pick up Matoi's footsteps and my nose to sense changes in the air, I would have been able to continue fighting despite whatever Matoi did."

Iori clenched a fist but said nothing. He truly did owe Sanageyama a huge favor and, if he was following Sanageyama's train of thought, this would be what was needed to get back into Lady Satsuki's good graces.

"Alright," he sighed after a moment, "I'll do what you ask, but it will only be a temporary procedure. If at any time you request me to reverse it, I will be more than glad to do so."

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Ichigo sat in his room with a familiar scowl on his face. The worst had come to pass and there was nothing he could do to stop it. All the power that Mugetsu afforded to him would not even begin to be enough to change the events surrounding him. Perhaps if Aizen still possessed all the power the Hōgyoku gave him, then something could be done, but that was just a pipe dream. The simple matter was that the one thing he had hoped would never happen had, in fact, happened.

His room had become the de facto hangout of his group of friends.

It wasn't just Ryuko who stopped by his room. If it was only her, Ichigo could deal with it. It was the fact that wherever Ryuko went, Mako was close behind to join in on the fun, as she called it. Once Mako came, it was only a matter of time before Shinjiro somehow popped into existence from some hamper-space in his room. Ichigo would never admit it, but it was amusing to watch Shinjiro pop up from behind the counter and scare Ryuko out of whatever chair she was sitting in. There was also Ururu, who stuck by close to his side no matter where he went out of some desire to protect him from his enemies. Last, and certainly the least welcome, was Nonon, who always showed up with a scowl on her face.

"So tell me again why the hell you're all in my room?"

"It's because it's the safest place, Strawberry," Nonon sarcastically answered as she pilfered his cabinets for food. She may be an undercover Three-Star, but that meant she had the budget of a No-Star student. Since she couldn't afford the luxurious, and expensive, foods she was used to, she decided to simply take what she needed

from Ichigo's kitchen. Screw him if he complained about it, "Lady Satsuki has eyes and arms all throughout the One and Two-Star Residential Districts as well as the Slums. The student dorms are the only place she cannot see everything."

"Nonon is right!" Mako said with a nod of her head.

"Who gave you permission to address me so informally?" Nonon deadpanned.

Mako either ignored Nonon's question or simply did not hear it as she continued, "You'd be surprised about the number of spies and informants Lady Satsuki has in the Slums! At least two of our neighbors are spies, but we still invite them over for dinner because that's the Mankanshoku way!"

"That's not something you should be proud of, Mako." Ryuko shook her head at her friend's uncaring attitude. Despite being an airhead, Ryuko found Mako's behavior comforting in Honnouji Academy. Smirking, she turned to Ichigo, "So that's two Elite Four down and two to go, right? You want the next one or should we flip for it?"

Ichigo crossed his arms in front of his body, "I want no part in this! I only took down Jakuzure because she attacked me first. I have no motive or reason for going after Satsuki, no matter how much of a bitch she might be."

"But..." Ryuko turned her gaze away from Ichigo as she recalled the name of the person Ichigo was sure was her father's killer. Nui Harime. Just thinking about that woman caused her blood to boil slightly. As much as she wanted to track down this woman and beat the answers out of her, Ryuko knew she couldn't get angry. Senketsu had warned her about what might happen when her blood began boiling. As much as she wanted revenge, she couldn't risk getting too angry. When, not if, she confronted Nui Harime, she needed to be calm and collected.

"Fine, have it your way!" Ryuko gave up her argument and leaned back on the couch. Letting out a huff, she asked, "You fought Sanageyama's Blade Regalia before, right?"

"Yeah."

Ryuko turned her eyes to Ichigo, "How did you beat him?"

Ichigo gave her a shrug in return, "Sanageyama could predict and avoid all my moves, but once I pushed Mugetsu into increasing my speed and reflexes, there was nothing Sanageyama could do to avoid my strikes. He could see them coming as quickly as ever, but his Blade Regalia was no longer able to adjust to my attacks quickly enough to counter them."

"That brings up another thing," Ryuko folded her arms and sighed, "Mugetsu seems to be faster than Senketsu."

" ***My specialty is speed,***" Mugetsu's feminine voice answered Ryuko, "***Ichigo is already strong enough on his own. By increasing his speed, I allow him the ability to destroy all those that would bring him harm.***"

" ***A real Kamui wouldn't specialize!***" Senketsu had been waiting for this moment for quite some time. Unlike Mugetsu, who seemed to have a firm understanding of what a Kamui meant, Senketsu was still missing large chunks of his memory. It was infuriating to the Kamui to always have Mugetsu contradict him and force him to accept her knowledge since she knew what she was talking about, "***If you were truly a Kamui, you wouldn't focus on just one aspect of Ichigo's abilities. Focusing on improving one aspect can only lead to defeat, just like Ryuko's opponent today! He trained his eyes to their limit so Ryuko and I took them out of the equation!***"

" ***Don't make me tie you in a knot,***" Mugetsu threatened only to receive a whack from Ichigo's hand.

"Behave," he warned, purposely ignoring the hurt look from Mugetsu. Turning to Nonon, who was doing her best to ignore them, he asked, "What can you tell us about Gamagori and the other guy?"

"Bite me, Transfer Student! Information doesn't come cheap," Nonon pouted and turned away from him, "I'm not helping you out anymore without compensation."

"Compensation?" Ryuko was in disbelief at Nonon's request. Who the hell was she to demand something like that from them? Slamming her feet into the floor, she leaned forward and snarled, "What the hell should we compensate you for?"

"Gee," Nonon snarked and rolled her eyes. The sheer audacity of the Transfer Student boggled her mind, "Who was it that gave you the hint to defeat Sanageyama?"

Ryuko pointed to her right, "Ichigo."

"It was me!" Nonon shouted and slammed her leg angrily on the ground. What happened to all the respect she had as a Three-Star? It was bad enough that Ichigo always called her the wrong name, but for the credit she so rightfully deserved to be given away infuriated her, "I'm the one that told you to watch out for his eyes! Don't tell me you forgot!"

"Your hint was really vague," Ryuko explained, subtly enjoying teasing the former member of the Elite Four, "It could have meant anything."

"Fine then!" Nonon stormed out of the room, pushing past a confused Ururu in the process and causing the poor girl to spin dizzily around. Slamming open the door, Nonon turned back one last time, "I'll give you a hint that even you cannot possibly screw up, Transfer Student! Gamagori's Goku Uniform gets stronger the more damage it takes!"

With her piece said, Nonon slammed the door shut. Ryuko and Ichigo looked at each other before Ichigo sighed wistfully.

"This is not going to end well," he muttered. Standing up, his spot quickly taken by a more than happy Mako, he stretched his shoulder to work out a kink, "It looks like the fun is over. You should head home."

"Ah! I almost forgot in all the fun!" Mako pointed to her watch, which still boggled Ichigo's mind, and thrust her wrist in Ryuko's face. Grabbing her friend by Senketsu's lapels, she rushed towards the door, "We have a strict 8:00 PM curfew, Ryuko! If we don't get home before then, mom is going to be really mad with us!"

Kicking open his door, Mako made a break for the elevator, but quickly came back to wave goodbye to Ichigo, a still confused Ryuko held tightly in her grasp, "Goodnight, Ichigo! I'll see you at school tomorrow!"

Waving halfheartedly back at Mako, a bead of sweat rolled down his face upon witnessing the strangeness that was Mako. Noticing a presence next to him, he turned and saw Ururu looking nervously at the ground.

"What's the matter, Ururur?"

Ururu wanted to tell Ichigo about her encounter with Nui Harime, but at the same time she didn't want to worry him excessively. If she could deal with Nui without getting Ichigo involved, Ururu would be happy. Still, Ururu knew from experience that Ichigo would get involved despite her best efforts and decided to simply tell him.

"Ichigo, what does Amu mean?"

"Amu?" Ichigo scratched his head, "Where did you hear that?"

"Nui Harime," Ururu's blunt answer caught Ichigo off-guard and caused him to stumble, "During Ryuko's fight today, I ran into her

outside. She called me Amu, but I don't know why."

"I don't know," Ichigo couldn't even begin to try and understand the craziness that was Nui Harime. It was just better for his sanity to just shrug and say she did it for her own amusement. Ruffling her hair, he gave her a reassuring smile and said, "Nui isn't the sanest person out there. I would just ignore whatever she tells you."

Ururu smiled and clasped her hands together, "Okay. Thanks Ichigo."

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As a crackle of lightning arced across the stormy skies, lighting the interior of the helicopter with shades of white and blue, Satsuki Kiryuin continued to stare out into the storm with a stoic expression etched on her face.

She had heard from Inumuta and Gamagori about Sanageyama's failure to defeat Matoi. While she would have loved to say it was a shock to her, in actuality she had been expecting a result like this. Sanageyama prided himself on the power and perceptive abilities of his Tengatsu. Without his eyes to predict and counter everything around him, he was no stronger than a Two-Star student. What truly intrigued her was the notion that Matoi's Kamui was able to shift into a mode perfectly able to counter Sanageyama's Tengatsu.

*"What is so different about Junketsu that it cannot transform into more useful configurations?"*

Satsuki had asked her mother that very question, with suppressed bile and pride, when she arrived at Revocs. With a smile on her face that Satsuki had come to expect from her mother, Ragyo had traced a finger down the front of Junketsu before stopping near one of its eyes and told her that it was only a matter of time before Junketsu decided to impart upon her the ability to transform further.

She supposed she should be satisfied that her mother was content with allowing her to continue wearing Junketsu. When she informed her mother about Ichigo and Matoi's Kamui and her need to counteract their growing power, Ragyo seemed to have been expecting her to say something like that. Satsuki shouldn't have been surprised. Her mother's information gathering abilities far outstripped those of Inumuta when she really wanted to know something. The presence of two Kamui not created by Revocs easily fell into that rare and unique category.

*"Something bothers me," Satsuki stared down at the growing lights of Honnou City emotionlessly, "Ichigo and Matoi talk to their Kamui almost as if they are able to hear them respond. If that is the case, then why haven't I been able to hear anything coming from Junketsu?"*

Knowing she was alone in the rear compartment of the helicopter, Satsuki decided to humor herself while, at the same time, conducting an experiment. If Kamui could truly talk, then perhaps that is how Ichigo and Matoi were able to access new configurations. Leaning back in the leather chair, Satsuki stared at Junketsu's two eyes, "You are a Kamui. You thrive for battle and, if you are truly a sentient being, you must find the prospect of Senketsu and Mugetsu being able to do things you cannot do simply atrocious. If you are willing to work with me to prove you, Junketsu, are the superior Kamui, give me a response."

When there was a lack of any answer, apart from a nearly unperceivable narrowing of Junketsu's eyes, Satsuki chuckled mirthlessly, "Of course you cannot talk. What was I thinking?"

There was a lurch as the helicopter landed at Honnouji Academy, cutting Satsuki's thoughts about the matter off in the process. As the motor ground to a halt, Satsuki walked towards the door of the helicopter and found Soroi waiting for her with an umbrella.

"I trust Lady Ragyo's mood was pleasant?" Soroi asked respectfully as he gave Satsuki the umbrella.



"I explained to her my motives for taking Junketsu out from its containment," Satsuki answered stoically, "She accepted my reasoning. You needn't worry yourself about my problems, Soroi."

A figure prostrating in the rain in front of her caused Satsuki to pause in her tracks. Recognizing who it was, but sensing something different about him, Satsuki said, "I don't have time for losers, Sanageyama."

"Ichigo Kurosaki was right," Sanageyama mumbled, causing Satsuki to quirk an eyebrow in interest. The topic of what Ichigo may have told Sanageyama interested her, but not nearly as much as what Sanageyama had to tell her, "I was overconfident in my eyesight. I allowed myself to grow dull and lethargic! Please give me another chance to fight Mato!"

"You are pathetic," Satsuki motioned for Soroi to continue inside without her. What she needed to say didn't require his presence, "How will fighting Mato a second time change anything? She has already figured out a counter to your Tengatsu. Attempting to fight her will only lead to the same results. I don't need, nor do I want, subordinates who lack the resolve to improve themselves."

"But I do have resolve!" Sanageyama shouted over the din of the falling rain. Slamming his fists on the roof, he picked his head up and declared, "Here is all the proof you need of my resolve!"

Satsuki turned and gazed upon what Sanageyama sacrificed in order to prove his use to her. To be honest, the thought of self-mutilation sickened her. Those that could not live with their bodies were not worth the air they breathed. Noticing the stitching pattern across Sanageyama's eyes, Satsuki recognized it as Iori's handiwork. That meant what Sanageyama had done wasn't permanent. If it was, Satsuki wouldn't have even dared to consider giving him another chance.

With a pleasant smile gracing her features, not that Sanageyama could see it in his current state, Satsuki said, "Oh? This is the full

extent of your resolve? Perhaps I was too hasty in dismissing you from the Elite Four. I will allow you to face Matoi again, with the full use of your Blade Regalia. Go inform Iori of my decision. Do not fail me again, Sanageyama."

"Thank you, Lady Satsuki!" Sanageyama lowered his head to the ground joyfully. Here was the second chance he needed to prove, not only to Matoi and Ichigo, but to himself as well that he was capable of improving himself. He had relied upon the strength of his eyes for far too long. Now he would learn to use every one of his senses to view the world surrounding him. Even if an opponent could negate a single one of his senses, it wouldn't be enough to stop him.

*"I must thank you, Ichigo, when I get the chance,"* Sanageyama's finger's clenched as he sat on his knees and stared blindly up into the sky, *"For you have allowed me to view the world in its entirety."*

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*"Be careful, Ryuko. There's no telling what Sanageyama has planned."*

Ichigo's words reverberated through Ryuko's mind as she ascended the steps leading towards the arena where Sanageyama asked for the rematch. It was strange that he would challenge her to a rematch on a weekend, but Ryuko chalked it down to simply not wanting to get embarrassed a second time. Stepping over one of the smaller spikes dotting the arena, Ryuko huffed when she saw Sanageyama, shirtless apart from his Goku Uniform, standing still.

"What's the big deal challenging me to a do-over on a Saturday morning?" Ryuko folded her arms and scoffed, "Giving someone who I beat a second chance. That isn't like you at all, Satsuki Kiryuin!"

As she talked, Ryuko's voice increased in volume until she was nearly shouting, all of which was directed at the figure looking down at them from above. Wearing Junketsu and with Bakuzan planted firmly on the ground, Satsuki locked gazes with Ryuko.

"Tell me just how soft I am after this fight, Ryuko Matoi," Satsuki replied calmly, her voice amplified by the speakers until it seemed to be coming from all around the courtyard. She was looking forward to seeing how much Sanageyama's affinity with his Blade Regalia Mark II improved due to sewing his eyes shut. She wanted to see how far he was willing to go to prove himself to her. Fighting against Matoi, an opponent he lost to due to his overconfidence, would go a long way towards restoring his honor and placement in the Elite Four, "I'll even up the stakes, as you so crudely put it. If you manage to beat Sanageyama here and now, I will personally come down and answer every question you might have. No strings attached. No secrets or half-truths. You will find out everything you seek to know."

"That's mighty nice of the great Satsuki Kiryuin!" Ryuko pointed her Scissor Blade towards Satsuki, "But I already got the name of the person who killed my dad! All I need to do is track her down and make her pay for what they did!"

"Oh?" To say that Satsuki was shocked would be accurate. How Matoi managed to discover Nui Harime's identity intrigued her. Perhaps after Sanageyama defeats Matoi she would be able to get some answers, "Is that so? Well now, not everything can be taken at face value. What the eye sees is not always what the mind perceives. Ponder on that while you fight."

"Matoi," Sanageyama's voice was monotone as he addressed his opponent, "Where is Ichigo?"

"Ichigo?" Ryuko pointed behind her, "He's probably sleeping in or something. It is a Saturday morning after all."

"Good," Despite not being able to see his face, Ryuko could tell Sanageyama was smiling, "I wouldn't want him to see this fight."

When I fight him, I want him to be surprised at my progress. Watch closely, Matoi, at what happens when a man is forced to change to preserve everything he cares about!"

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A lone figure approached Honnou City from the southwest. Revving the engine on her motorcycle, the front wheel flying off the ground momentarily as her speed increased, the woman narrowed her eyes as the spiraling city came into view.

"So..." the woman clamped down on the front brakes, allowing her motorcycle to skid to a stop. Turning off the engine, she got off and jumped nearly twenty feet in the air before landing softly on one of the streetlights lining the highway. Wincing when the sun rising over the horizon in the east hit her eyes, the woman reached into her pocket and pulled out a pair of sunglasses, "... It seems Tsumugu was right after all. A lot of things can change in ten years."

Kinue Kinagase stoically continued to stare towards the city, but focused more specifically at Honnouji Academy at the top. Pushing her shoulder-length black hair, tipped red at the end like her brother's, Kinue focused her senses. She could feel the Life Fibers permeating the city, which caused her to wince and rub her temple.

"Oh, shut up."

Due to the circumstances in her past, Kinue had developed the ability to tell where Life Fibers were as well as in what concentration. Her ability is what allowed Nudist Beach to not only evade the soldiers of Revocs for all these years, but also find and destroy the hidden Revocs factories that the public at large didn't know about. This did not mean she particularly liked sensing Life Fibers. It turned out that the higher the concentration of Life Fibers, the more it caused her... companion agitation. And when her companion became agitated, Kinue needed to have as much control over her

emotions as possible to prevent herself from falling into a blind rage. She had been there before. It was not pretty.

"I know you feel them," Kinue answered an unseen and unheard voice. It was strange that after a decade of thinking the voice was her insanity, she was now answering it back. Perhaps she truly was going insane, "I feel them too."

There were Kamui in Honnou City. Three if she was sensing correctly. Tsumugu had told her of two Kamui he had run into, Ichigo Kurosaki's and Ryuko Matoi's. This third one was concerning. She didn't have any data on it, which meant she would be going in blind against it. Unlike her brother, Kinue preferred not to go into a situation half-cocked and hope for the best to happen. She needed to understand everything so that when she did decide to fight, she would most likely win.

"So, Masaki's son has a Kamui," A light smile appeared at the corners of Kinue's mouth, "I don't suppose this is Isshin's doing."

Kinue had the utmost respect for the normally clownish Isshin Kurosaki, but she could understand why her brother hated Life Fibers and Kamui. Subconsciously placing her hand over the center of her chest, Kinue absently traced the black zigzag pattern etched forever on her skin. Isshin's device had saved her from a horrible fate, but she could never be the same woman that could make Tsumugu actually laugh. The risks of losing control and hurting those around her prevented her from showing anything more than light emotions.

A slight narrowing of Kinue's eyes preceded a scoff from the woman, "I did not come here to fight a Kamui. You'll just have to live with it."

Adjusting the jacket and pants she was wearing, Kinue made sure it was covering up the entirety of what was underneath. There were those in Japan, as well as the rest of the world, that would nearly instantly recognize what she truly wore and inform their superiors. Kinue did not need a repeat of what happened in Rome. She was

only thankful that the Grand Couturier hadn't managed to recognize her in the dark of night. It would have been really bad if she had been caught. Kinue had heard rumors of what happened to captured Nudist Beach members. It makes what her fate could have been a simple slap on the wrist.

"Hey! Get down from there!"

Kinue looked down and saw a single student wearing a One-Star Goku Uniform pointing at her. From his customized appearance, Kinue could easily guess he must be a member of the Honnou City Patrol Corps. Tsumugu had joked with her about the effectiveness of the corps and how easy it was for him to evade their patrols. It would seem that her conversation had caused her to be detected.

"I said get down from there! I have some questions for you!"

Without saying a word, Kinue stepped off the streetlight and landed softly on the pavement. Standing up to her nearly six foot stature, courtesy of her companion, Kinue walked forward until she towered over the One-Star student.

"Yes?" The One-Star student was slightly put off the lack of emotion in Kinue's voice. He, like many others, must have assumed she was brusque and prone to emotional outbursts. Perhaps in the past she was, but not anymore, "What is it?"

"Your motorcycle, Ma'am," The student pointed towards her bike, which she had parked across two lanes of empty highway, "It's illegally parked. You need to move it or I'm going to have to give you a ticket."

Ignoring her companion's attempt at persuading her to tear apart the One-Star's uniform and destroy the Life Fibers composing it, Kinue gave the student a condescending smile and simply walked past him, "Of course. My apologies."

Sitting on her bike, Kinue made sure the silver case strapped to the back was still secure before revving the engine and continuing towards Honnou City. As the city loomed overhead, Kinue felt an extreme burst of anger emanating from her companion. There was at least one being whose body was composed of Life Fibers somewhere in the city. She couldn't pinpoint where they were, but she didn't have to guess who it was. Nui Harime.

"The Grand Couturier's presence is going to complicate things," Kinue let out a breath. She knew that if it came down to it, she would have to fight the Grand Couturier. While she had trained and grown stronger ever since that day, Nui Harime was in a league of her own. Power and speed meant nothing if your opponent can simply regenerate from her wounds in the blink of an eye.

"I suppose I have no choice in the matter," Kinue admitting dryly, "I suppose you might just get your fight after all... Danketsu."

There was a slight ruffling of something moving under her jacket as Kinue reached the outskirts of the Slums surrounding Honno City.

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## **Kamui Tales #5 - An Average Morning for Nui Harime**

Humming a song that she had heard on the radio recently, Nui Harime finished adjusting the pink bow in her hair and stepped back away from the full body mirror.

"There we go!" She announced proudly as she twirled around once to make sure everything was prim and proper, "I'm all dressed up and ready to go hang out with Ichigo some more!"

Taking a few steps towards the door to the apartment of the student she killed, Nui skidded to a stop as she remembered something vitally important, "Oh dear! How could I have forgotten to do the

most important part of my morning routine? If the Director was here, she would surely be disappointed in my lack of common sense!"

Reaching up into one of her pigtails, Nui pulled out a folded up piece of paper. Scribbled on the front of the page, in a cute handwriting, were the words, *'THINGS TO DO BEFORE LEAVING IN THE MORNING.'*

"Let's see now..." Nui chewed on the end of a pencil that magically appeared in her hand, "I checked my apartment for bugs placed by those pigs in clothing, set various traps to capture people who are too curious for their own good and I'm still trying to find out more information about those stupid Nudists."

A muffled sound from the closet drew Nui's attention. Happily walking over to it, she opened the door and looked at the bound and gagged Nudist Beach operative she had caught trying to follow her. The man should have known better than to try and spy on her. He should be grateful that she was in a good mood at the time. Usually Nui just killed and dismembered those following her.

"I'm not going to let you go until you tell me everything you know," Nui informed the man cheerfully. As a flash of purple appeared in her right hand, she added, "Actually, I'm not going to let you go at all. If you aren't going to say anything, I'll just have to come back later and try again when I have the time."

Closing the door and humming the song she really liked once again, Nui looked at the nearby clock and realized she was going to be late, "I should get going. If I don't, I'll miss running into Ichigo and that would just be really bad! It's just a shame he hangs out with Ryuko. Getting close to her is going to be super hard without Ichigo getting in the way!"

Tucking the list back into her hair, happy that she didn't forget anything, Nui Harime left to start her day. There was so much fun and excitement at Honnouji Academy now that Ichigo was here. Nui was sure that if Ichigo hadn't come, she wouldn't have thought about



coming here until her plan to kill Ryuko Matoi was all set up and ready to go. But what would she have done in the meantime?

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## **Glossary of Terms**

**Senketsu Senkou** - *Senketsu Flash*

**Danketsu** - *Unity, Unison, Combination*

# Tangled Up in Blue

*Here is the much-awaited Chapter 18. We finally reach the end of Episode 6 and begin the transition to Fight Club, which I'm not going to talk about until next chapter. In this chapter you will finally begin reading the true and unabridged history between Isshin and Ragyo. Things aren't always as they appear. If they were, then this story would be a boring read since you would know what's going to happen before I write it down.*

*On a side note, I finally broke the big 500 review mark. Now all that's left is for me to break 1,000 reviews.*

*I recommend anyone enjoying my story to check out The Swordslinger's Naruto/Kill la Kill crossover: **Kill El Kitsune** . It's already at five chapters and it's a very good read.*

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## Chapter 18 - Tangled Up in Blue

*Tokyo - 22 Years Ago*

*" But I don't want to go!"*

*Masaki Kurosaki let out a tired sigh as Isshin Shiba, hopefully her future husband, gave the adult equivalent of a temper tantrum. Rolling her eyes, she gave Isshin a venomous glare that nearly instantly cowed the former shinigami into submission, "I don't care if you want to go or not! Tokyo Fashion Week starts today and I have two tickets to it! I've been waiting for almost a year to go and you are not going to take this away from me!"*

*Isshin groaned loudly. He loved Masaki with all his heart, but the former shinigami captain could not understand her obsession with*

*clothing. He had seen some of the so-called outfits being paraded up and down the runways by women who were way too thin to be healthy. He didn't think anything that required at least five hours to be put on deserved to be called a dress.*

*"Aw, fine," Isshin solemnly kicked the sidewalk with his foot. If going to this fashion show made Masaki happy, then Isshin decided he could put up with a few boring hours, "How long is this thing anyway?"*

*"Seven hours," Masaki answered happily, causing Isshin to fall to his knees in anguish. Seven hours. He would rather fight a vasto lorde hollow without his zanpakuto than put up with something like that. Noticing a subway station just a few blocks away, Isshin was weighing his options. He could make a break for it and get away from a potentially boring day or put up with something that would probably bore him to death. It turned out that his choice was made for him when Masaki grabbed him by the ear and pulled hard.*

*"Get up, Mister Shiba," Masaki's voice wasn't playing around anymore, "Here's what's going to happen. You are going to go with me to the fashion show and you are going to have a good time. If I hear one bad word out of you during the entire show, you're going to find out how good my aim with a bow is, if you know what I mean."*

*Subtly, and quickly, bringing his knees together, Isshin gulped, "Y-Yes."*

*"Good," Masaki's mood quickly shifted back to normal. Twirling around with her arms outstretched, she began running down the sidewalk, "Come on Isshin! The show starts in only an hour."*

*"I'm coming," Isshin waved nervously at the retreating Masaki. Once he was sure she was out of earshot, he grumbled under his breath, "Like I actually have a choice in the matter."*

*Pulling himself together and tidying up his shirt, ruffled from Masaki's manhandling, Isshin turned and immediately ran face-first into a*

*complete stranger.*

*" I'm sorry!" Isshin quickly reached down to help the woman he had knocked over back onto her feet. Even though it was a complete accident, he nevertheless felt terrible about potentially hurting a woman. He was just that kind of a man, "Are you alright?"*

*" I'm fine," the woman dismissed Isshin's concerns for her health and safety with a wave of her hand. As she stood up to her full statuesque height, Isshin became quite aware of just how stunning of a figure she had. With long black hair that fell down to just below her shoulders and a low cut dress that accentuated her figure tremendously, he was actually considering her to have a better body than his former lieutenant, "But running into a man who is both chivalrous and kind is quite rare in this day and age."*

*" Well, call me old-fashioned," Isshin chuckled heartedly while averting his eyes from her well-developed chest. He didn't need to tell this woman just how close to the mark she actually was. Growing up in one of the Noble Clans of the Soul Society tended to impart etiquette and discipline, "But are you sure you're ok? I did hit you quite hard after all."*

*" Oh?" The woman raised a hand to her mouth and laughed, "Well aren't you a big softy. I assure you that I am quite well, but I find your attitude refreshing to say the least. Tell me, what is the name of such a kind and honorable man?"*

*Isshin smirked and pointed his thumb at his chest, "My name is Isshin Shiba!"*

*" Ragyo Kiryuin," the woman answered in kind, "And if I may be so bold as to ask, where are you off to?"*

*Isshin's mood fell, "I'm going to the fashion show with my girlfriend. I don't really want to go, but going will make her happy."*

*" You must be talking about the Tokyo Fashion Week," Ragyo stated, to which Isshin nodded his head in agreement, "Even though I personally designed and stitched half of the outfits being shown this week, I would never go to watch. It's one thing to create a dress, but an entirely different matter to go watch someone who just can't pull it off. It just sickens me to see such fine clothing debased by those unworthy to wear them."*

*Not pretending to understand half of what Ragyo was going on about since he didn't care much for fashion, Isshin simply nodded and gave Ragyo a respectful two-finger salute, "It's been nice speaking with you Ragyo, but I can hear Masaki calling for me. I don't want to make her mad."*

*Ragyo watched with amusement on her face as Isshin sprinted down the sidewalk, nearly running into several people in the process. Bringing a hand to her cheek, she thought that her unexpected meeting with him, while brief and lacking in any true substance brought some much needed variety to her normally dull and repetitive lifestyle. Nobody said that being the head of Revocs, one of the biggest up and coming fashion and attire companies in the world, would be easy or fun. Ragyo was a woman who craved excitement and pleasure, not hours of sitting in meeting rooms listening to old men in ugly suits talk on and on about stocks or finances.*

*" La vie est drôle."*

*At that moment in time Ragyo decided that perhaps she would go to the Tokyo Fashion Week. While she already had a meeting planned to discuss Revocs expanding into the European market, Ragyo was far more interested in speaking with Isshin again. That man was perhaps the most entertaining person she had ever met.*

*End Flashback*

Isshin was brought of his memories as he sensed something hit, and then explode, against the basic Life Fiber barrier surrounding

Karakura Town. Focusing on where the intruder had come from, he quickly spotted the remains of what appeared to be a white suit burning as it floated to the ground. It appeared that Ragyo wasn't as content with leaving him alone as she professed. Isshin knew it was only a matter of time before she began testing his defenses and strengths. Sending a single COVER to perish against his barrier was worth it in Ragyo's mind if it gained her valuable information that could help her breach his protections in the future.

"But did she have to model them after my old suits?" Isshin scratched his nose, "I knew she was obsessed with me, but come on."

His question would remain unanswered as he felt someone wearing clothing made of Life Fibers penetrate his barrier. Isshin wasn't concerned though. He knew who was coming to see him the second they passed through the barrier. He had already configured it to allow Ichigo to pass through unimpeded and he was just putting the finishing touches on letting through a few more people. Making sure that Yuzu and Karin were out of range, Isshin chuckled.

"You weren't followed, were you?"

Standing behind him in his living room was a figure whose body was completely covered in an intricate white cloak that allowed no one to tell their age, gender or appearance. With the hood pulled down over their face, the figure replied, "Of course not."

"Good, very good," Isshin turned and stared directly at where the figure's eyes would be, "Tell me everything."

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Kinue Kinagase's shoulders tensed as she jumped onto the top of a home in the Slums. She hadn't been in Honnou City for an hour, but she could already taste the Life Fibers permeating every facet of life.

People walked around with clothing made of Life Fibers while students wore and studied in uniforms with enough Life Fibers stitched into the fabric to greatly augment their physical characteristics. Kinue scoffed at Satsuki Kiryuin's Darwinist point of view.

Life Fibers were inherently dangerous, even to those most likely to resist their mental influences. What Satsuki was planning was dangerous not only to her enemies, but to her fellow students. Deciding that it was none of her concern for the moment, Kinue noticed out of the corner of her eye a patrol of One-Star students moving through the streets.

"It seems that Satsuki Kiryuin tried to keep some semblance of order even down here," Kinue mused thoughtfully while concealing her presence even further. After entering Honnou City, she had quickly hidden her motorcycle and chose to travel by less overt methods. She did not doubt that Satsuki's security and information network would eventually detect her presence. Believing as such would simply open her up to a surprise attack or trap. Kinue just needed to remain under the radar long enough to complete what she came to do.

Letting out a calming sigh to release some of her pent-up anxiety, Kinue adjusted the silver case strapped to her back. There were very few weapons in the world that could destroy Life Fibers, and unfortunately hers wasn't one of them. Satsuki Kiryuin had her Bakuzan, Ryuko Matoi had half of a Scissor Blade while the woman who killed Professor Matoi had the other half and, if her brother's report was accurate, Ichigo Kurosaki has a blade as well. Not having one of those rare weapons did not mean Kinue was heading into the hornet's nest.

"Hopefully I won't confront any of the students," Kinue mused outwardly. When she felt her companion object to her pacifist mindset, she decided to simply ignore it. Moving into a slow run, Kinue quickly picked up speed and was soon hopping from roof to roof across the Slums. She wasn't worried about being seen. By the

time a civilian noticed her and informed the authorities, Kinue would have already been long gone from the area. As she was about to jump upwards and into the One-Star Resident District, she felt a concentration of Life Fibers, Two-Stars by the density of it, rapidly approaching her position.

"Great."

Coming to an abrupt stop at the edge of the Slums, Kinue turned around and decided to face her pursuer. The kid following her couldn't have been more than sixteen years ago and yet he wore an expression of arrogance one could only obtain after being given an extraordinary amount of power and yet did not possess the will or self-control necessary to use said power.

"Who are you?" Kinue asked while ignoring the other question coming from her companion.

"That's a strange thing to ask!" The student said arrogantly while smacking his spiked baton into an open palm, "You may call me Junsu. I am the Club Captain of the Lower Honnou City Intruder Counteraction Squad!"

Kinue listened to the kid brag about his power and tried to clear her head, but found the boy's arrogant attitude mixed with Danketsu's urging her to fight him highly irritating. Pressing the clip on the strap holding the case against her back, Kinue stepped forward and adjusted a glove as the case hit the roof with a loud crash.

"There's something important you should know about me, and that is I don't have the time or the patience to hear you brag about stuff that doesn't matter," Kinue couldn't help but have a trace of irritation lace her words. It was appearing that even the short amount of time she had been in Honnou City was enough to start getting Danketsu riled up. Already she could feel it testing her mental barriers and defenses for any signs of weakness that it could easily and lethally exploit. Clamping down on the intrusive presence quickly enough to cause it



to recoil in pain, Kinue reached in one of her pockets, "You don't need to worry, though. I'll end this quickly."

"And what makes you think you have a shot at beating me?" Junsu scoffed and began laughing at what he assumed to be his opponent's bluff. As his Life Fiber baton grew several more spikes and tripled in size, he asked, "Any just how are you going to end it quickly?"

"Like this."

Her arms shot out faster than Junsu could see and his eyes widened when he saw two sewing needles embedded nearly an inch into his baton. Beginning to show a bit of nervousness, he grinned, "Was that supposed to do anything?"

Kinue turned and began walking to pick up her case, "Wait for it."

Junsu only caught it at the very last second, but attached to the ends of the needles were nearly invisible steel wires that began wrapping around his body. As he struggled to free himself, he caught notice of the two pincushion grenades on the other ends of the wire.

Kinue didn't bother to watch as her opponent was caught in the explosion. She could feel the Life Fibers that made up his Goku Uniform being dissipated into the air around her. While her attack was more than enough to destroy the clothing, it was hardly enough to actually kill the Life Fibers. It wasn't like she had a Scissor Blade of her own. If she did, then things maybe would have turned out differently.

"No use dwelling on the past," Kinue looked up at the large and imposing wall meant to separate the Slums from where the One-Stars lived with boredom. Noticing a cable car slowly ascending from somewhere deeper in the Slums, Kinue took a few steps back before taking a running start and leaping nearly two hundred feet to land softly on cable car's roof. Once she made sure she wasn't detected, Kinue sat down and closed her eyes.

"I'm almost there," Kinue muttered, ignoring the rippling around her shoulders from underneath her jacket, "Be quiet, Danketsu."

Kinue hoped her mission to Honnou City was successful. One of the more annoying side effects of being in the presence of so many Life Fibers was that Danketsu tended to get a bit... chatty, and attempting to hold a conversation with something that ordered her to fight anything with Life Fibers was nearly impossible. Staring upwards as Honnouji Academy came into view, Kinue's eyes narrowed as she felt a large burst of energy explode out of the school. Something big was going on and she had a feeling she would find out soon enough.

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Contrary to what Ryuko assumed, Ichigo was not, in fact, sleeping in. Ever since the Winter War ended and he lost his shinigami powers, Ichigo had found it incredibly difficult to sleep in. Chalking it down as an effect of the fighting, Ichigo decided that if he wasn't going to be able to sleep, he would be more productive. That was why he was jogging around Honnou City at eight in the morning. Mugetsu had wanted to come with him, and by come with him Ichigo meant be worn by him, but once Ichigo told his Kamui what he was going to be doing, Mugetsu had quickly backpedaled and decided that sleeping in was a better alternative than getting sweat stains all over her Life Fibers.

Reaching the five mile mark, Ichigo braced a hand against a nearby wall. Only five miles and he was already exhausted. He must be more out of shape than he thought. When he still had his shinigami powers, he could jog ten miles before resting. He needed to get his endurance back up to par if he wanted to survive and win the upcoming battles he would surely face.

Mugetsu may have said that wearing her increases his natural abilities to beyond what a human could ever achieve, but Ichigo was

of a different mind. He was not satisfied with simply being given power on a silver platter. If Mugetsu amplified his natural abilities, then increasing his own strength would make him that much stronger while wearing Mugetsu.

"Damn," Ichigo muttered and raised a hand to his forehead. With the sun rising over Honnouji Academy above, the air was beginning to heat up. He should start heading back to his dorm and take a shower.

Turning around and taking a few more deep breathes, Ichigo began the long jog back. After more than a mile of uneventful silence, he eventually came across a sight that stopped him in his tracks. With a flabbergasted and confused expression on his face, he watched as Mako and Shinjiro rode towards him on a tandem bicycle. Rubbing his eyes and shaking his head, Ichigo tried to convince himself that what he was seeing just wasn't possible. He wasn't seeing Mako and Shinjiro on a bright pink tandem bike and he certainly wasn't seeing both of them wearing matching bright purple and white uniforms.

"Good morning, Ichigo!" Mako shouted excitedly, dashing all hopes that he was simply hallucinating. Coming to a stop next to him, Mako waved happily, "What are you doing so far out here?"

"Running," Ichigo answered tiredly. Raising his arms and folding his hands on top of his head, he asked, "Where did you get the bike?"

"It's Shinjiro's!" Mako answered matter-of-factly.

"Wait," Ichigo tried to grasp what he just heard, "Why the hell does Shinjiro have a pink bike? It seems... kind of girly."

"For so long have I owned this tandem bicycle," Shinjiro pumped his fist as his single uninjured eye shone with a determined light, "Even though I had no one to ride it with, I could not just throw it away! You see, it was a gift from my mother and giving this bike away would be tantamount to breaking her poor heart. It was as if my dream came

true when Mako offered to ride with me. I was so excited that I went out and bought us matching outfits in celebration!"

"I can see that," Ichigo deadpanned and tried his best to not look at his two friends wearing what Mugetsu would probably call a crime against clothing.

"Oh! That reminds me," Mako's eyes widened as she appeared to remember something vital and important, "Ururu was looking for you."

"She was?" Ichigo didn't know what Ururu may have wanted with him. Sure she was somewhat overprotective of him, but with a psychotic girl like Nui Harime somewhere out there doing who knows what, it was better to have someone like Ururu on his side, "What did she want?"

Mako pouted as she strained herself to remember what it was exactly that Ururu said, "She said that your dad called!"

"My old man?" Ichigo hadn't spoken to his dad since the night Mugetsu woke up. He couldn't think of anything that could have caused Isshin to call him, "What did he want?"

"Apparently he wanted Ururu to tell you that he will be coming to Parent Student Day in a couple of weeks," Mako announced proudly.

Ichigo would have collapsed to his knees had he the strength to get back up. He had been sure to not tell his old man about the upcoming Parent Student Day. How the hell had he managed to find out so quickly? It couldn't have been Ururu. As strong and powerful as she was, Ururu was simply not adjusted well enough socially to go around his back like this. There had to be someone else that knew his old man well enough to tell him about Parent Student Day and not draw suspicion. The only question was who it could be.

"Thanks for the heads up," Ichigo muttered dejectedly. His day was shot now. Instead of relaxing and having an enjoyable day, he would

have to consider what he could do to limit the amount of social embarrassment his dad could inflict. When it came down to it, Isshin Kurosaki was a master of both pissing him off and making him the laughingstock of all his friends, "I just need to go back and figure out what to do. Damn. I would so rather fight Nui Harime right now than deal with this bullshit."

"What's a Nui? Is it something you wear?" Mako asked innocently.

"Just the lesser of two insane evils," Ichigo answered bluntly, "It's been great talking to you Mako, but I've got to get back to Honnouji before my dad decides to just pop on in."

"Ok then! See you around, Ichigo!" Mako waved.

"Likewise, Ichigo!" Shinjiro added proudly, "I've taken your words to heart and decided to go about my goal of taking down Satsuki Kiryuin much more subtly and safely! When Mako and I return from our excursion, I would like to talk with you about our future plans!"

"You do that," Ichigo muttered at the two retreating figures. Turning back around, he began the long jog back to Honnouji Academy.

*"What the hell is wrong with this place? I hope Ryuko is having a better morning than me."*

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"Three-Star Goku Uniform: Blade Regalia Mark II!"

In response to Sanageyama transforming into his Blade Regalia, Ryuko drew her Scissor Blade out of the pouch on her hip and mentally commanded it to expand to its normal size. She could tell this Goku Uniform was different than the first one she fought. It looked more streamlined and the colors were a shade or two lighter,

but the most obvious change was the missing shinai containers on his back.

***"Something feels different about him, Ryuko,"*** Senketsu let out a hum of annoyance, ***"I can't explain it, but I'm getting a completely different vibe than your first fight. Don't get cocky."***

"Yeah, I know," Ryuko could feel a change in Sanageyama's aura. While during their first fight he gave off an aura of cockiness and wildness, now all Ryuko could feel from Sanageyama was an overwhelming coldness. It was nearly enough to cause her to freeze up in fear. Steadying her nerves for the fight ahead, she slid her right foot back and reached for her red glove, "Let's not waste time, then."

"Life Fiber Synchronize: Kamui Senketsu!"

Ryuko was surrounded by a familiar burst of power before she decided to quickly add, "Senketsu Senkou!"

As armored heeled boots raced across the arena, Ryuko transformed her Scissor Blade into its Decapitation Mode, the black and red jagged lines glowing softly as she coursed her power through it. Smirking when she saw Sanageyama hadn't noticed her yet, Ryuko leapt into the air and twisted her upper body sideways before releasing an invisible slash towards her opponent. So expectant was she of getting a hit that when Sanageyama shifted his massive body to the side and allowed the attack to sail harmlessly past him that she actually gasped in surprise.

*"How did he dodge Senkou?"*

Ryuko shook her head and growled. It must have been pure luck. Sanageyama must have figured out the trick to her Senkou and thought of a way to avoid the attacks. Racing towards Sanageyama on foot, she slid across the ground and tried to sever one of his hands only for him to step out of the way and nearly crush her body with a counterattack.

"Damn it," Ryuko shook her head to dislodge the debris that had gotten stuck in her hair. There was no way that Sanageyama could have gotten this fast so quickly. Yesterday he couldn't even see her Senkou attacks and now he was avoiding them like it was nothing. Growling, she turned to attack again only to find Sanageyama literally inches away from her face. Eyes widening in shock, she brought her Scissor Blade up just in time to block the massive shinai from crushing her stomach. Skidding backwards along the platform, Ryuko took a few ragged breaths and wondered, "What the hell is going on here? How is he managing to see my Senkou attacks?"

***" Look at his eyes Ryuko."***

Gazing into Sanageyama's Blade Regalia, Ryuko was shocked when she saw Sanageyama's eyes sewn shut, "What happened to his eyes?"

"Are you confused, Matoi?" Satsuki Kiryuin shouted down from her perch. With a backdrop of light illuminating her already overbearing persona, she shouted, "You are facing the resolve of a man who has learned the errors of his way and sacrificed everything to fix them! Know that as you collapse in defeat, Matoi!"

"Damn you, Satsuki Kiryuin." Ryuko cursed and prepared herself for the second round of battle, "Counting me out already?"

"Your reflexes are as sharp as ever, Matoi," Sanageyama's unusually cold voice echoed from within the confines of his Blade Regalia, "But the warm up is over. Get ready. Here I come."

It happened nearly too fast for Ryuko to follow. One moment Sanageyama was standing on the other side of the platform and the next he was nearly upon her with his shinai swinging through the air towards.

"MEN!" With a clashing of blade on shinai, Ryuko managed to block the strike to her head. As she was pushed back, she heard the ground cracking beneath her feet. Sanageyama's strength was

absolutely insane! Not only did his speed increase, but his strength had to be at least twice what it was yesterday. What the hell did he do to himself?

"DOU!" Ryuko spun her Scissor Blade around her wrist and braced her left arm against the blade as the shinai crashed against her ribs. Gritting her teeth from the force of the blow, the gears in Ryuko's mind were spinning rapidly in order to come up with a plan.

"KOTE!"

Ryuko was thankful that she had decided to go all out from the beginning with Senketsu Senkou. It was only due to the enhanced reflexes and speed afforded to her by the transformation that she was able to counter and block all of Sanageyama's strikes. As Sanageyama's shinai aimed for her wrist, Ryuko took the half second gap between attacks to lean backwards and allow the attack to pass harmlessly less than an inch from her body. Planting her palm on the ground, Ryuko flipped through the air and landed on top of one of the multitude of spikes dotting the arena.

"Damn, he's strong," Ryuko said between breaths. It was becoming clear that fighting these Elite Four jerks was no laughing matter. How on Earth did Ichigo defeat Jakuzure in a Mark II of her own when she was having so much trouble with Sanageyama? Was it that he simply fought an easier opponent or did he know some secret to fighting that? Biting her lower lip in irritation, Ryuko huffed and shouted, "How the hell are you fighting like this without your eyes?"

Sanageyama was silent before he asked, "Your irritated and annoyed, aren't you, Matoi?"

"Say what?" Ryuko had no idea where that had come from, but she had no time to think about it. Vaulting to the side, she barely avoided being hit by Sanageyama's shinai as his Blade Regalia crashed through the spike she had been perched upon. Twisting around in midair, she launched another Senkou attack but bit back a curse as Sanageyama jumped over it and landed back on the ground.



"I can hear your breathing as loudly as if you were standing right next to me," Sanageyama continued calmly as he jumped into the air to attack her once more. Cursing profusely, Ryuko spun around and blocked his attack, only to fall victim as Sanageyama feinted and slammed his free hand into her back and propelling her to the ground. As she landed painfully on the ground, Ryuko noticed a shadow falling towards her and quickly rolled to the side to avoid the incoming shinai.

"The smell of your sweat," Sanageyama rushed forward and clashed against Ryuko's Scissor Blade. As sparks shot off the two weapons, Sanageyama's massive size and strength actually began pushing Ryuko backwards, "And your deodorant, I can sense all of it with ease. I can see your thoughts as clearly as if you told me them yourself! I can see the world with far more clarity than I ever could with my eyes, Matoi! It is thanks to Ichigo that I have been gifted with this incredible ability!"

"Ichigo?" Ryuko spat out from between clenched teeth as she tried pushing back against Sanageyama's overwhelming strength. As she felt herself bending backwards, she roared in anger and managed to parry Sanageyama's shinai to the side. Jumping backwards to put some distance between her and her opponent, Ryuko spat on the ground and waved her Scissor Blade at Sanageyama, "What the hell does Ichigo have to do with our fight?"

"It was thanks to Ichigo's words that I came to the realization that I was too reliant on my eyes," Sanageyama answered proudly, "Now with my eyes closed, the rest of the world is open to me! Behold my released power: Shingantsu!"

" *Sanageyama sealed his eyes in order to boost his affinity with his Blade Regalia,*" Satsuki stared stoically down at the battle. She was honestly surprised that Matoi had managed to avoid being hit by Sanageyama so far. She wouldn't go so far as to say it was due to some inherent skill or power that Matoi possessed. Satsuki could see that the only reason Matoi was still on her feet, slightly

exhausted by injured, was because she was able to configure Senketsu into a more speed-oriented form.

*" Senketsu Senkou," Satsuki mused at the name of the Kamui's configuration, "It is no wonder that Sanageyama lost even with the use of his Tengantsu. If he hadn't been so focused on seeing attacks, he would have noticed the subtle sound of the air vibrating or the slight smell of ozone in the atmosphere. Senkou uses Matoi's bioelectrical energy to extend the reach of her Scissor Blade by a considerable distance. Even if Sanageyama could see Matoi's movements, there was no way he could have anticipated the invisible blade as well."*

Now that Sanageyama's eyes were closed off from the world and he possessed Shingantsu, the invisible blades of Senkou were as clear as day to him.

"Men! Dou! Kote! Men! Dou! Kote!"

Ryuko was pushing Senketsu to the limit as she countered each and every one of Sanageyama's called attacks. It was scaring her that even when he called out his attacks, she barely had enough time to actually block them. The simply thought of fighting him without Senkou would have caused her to break out in a nervous sweat if she was not already fighting for her life.

"Your speed is superb, Matoi!" Sanageyama complimented as he continued to attack Ryuko, "But with my Shingantsu, there is nothing you can do to win!"

"Says you!" Ryuko argued back. As she heard Sanageyama shout 'Men!' she prepared to block the strike to her head only to feel an intense pain in her wrists instead. Gasping in pain, she was caught off guard as Sanageyama took advantage of her confusion to attack her relentlessly. With her grip slackened, it was easy for Sanageyama to knock Ryuko's Scissor Blade out of her hands and across the arena.

"What are you going to do, Matoi?" He asked sarcastically as he continued attacking her, "Without your weapon, there is no way for you to turn the tables and win this time.

Ryuko grinned despite the situation, "So you think."

Dodging around one of Sanageyama's attacks, Ryuko held her arm out and flicked her wrist. Instantly a wire connected from her hand to the handle of her Scissor Blade shone in the air. Ever since Ururu so easily disarmed her of the Scissor blade during their spar, Ryuko had been thinking of how she could prevent something like that happening again. After bouncing a few ideas off Senketsu, she came up with the idea of carefully removing one of his Life Fibers, with his permission of course, and attaching the two ends to her wrist and Scissor Blade.

Swinging her arm back across her body, Ryuko smirked as she heard the whistling sound of her Scissor blade spinning through the air growing louder. Holding her arm up above her head, she grabbed her weapon as it passed over her and swung downwards just as Sanageyama attacked with his shinai.

"I was wrong about you, Matoi," Sanageyama said as he struggled to overpower Ryuko.

"Oh?" Ryuko grinned despite the situation as she pushed back, "How so?"

"I thought you would be nothing more than a stepping stone to fighting Ichigo," Sanageyama stepped forward, causing Ryuko to take a step back to prevent him from gaining leverage, "But I was wrong. You are indeed a worthy opponent. Come at me with everything you got Matoi!"

"Aren't you chivalrous?" Ryuko wiped a spot of blood off her cheek. When Sanageyama leapt back and away from her, she spat on the ground and turned to Senketsu, "I need you to pour all my remaining power into one final Senkou strike."

***" You'll be left wide open if it fails," Senketsu said worriedly, "And there is the distinct probability you will faint from blood loss afterwards."***

"Don't sweat it," Ryuko smiled as her body was enveloped in a red aura. Taking a deep breath and placing her left hand on top of her Scissor Blade, Ryuko focused all her energy into her blade, causing the red and black jagged lines to glow more intensely than ever, "Here I come, Sanageyama!"

Racing across the ground, Ryuko shouted as she swung her Scissor Blade down into the ground. Sanageyama, sensing the attack coming with his Shingantsu, attempted to dodge it only to be shocked when it suddenly expanded in front of his Blade Regalia, enveloping him in the blast of invisible energy and causing the arena to explode around them.

*" Oh?" Satsuki raised an eyebrow at Matoi's attack. It was quite ingenious, something she hadn't come to expect from her, to cause the Senkou to expand after swinging her Scissor Blade, "Shingantsu may be able to see the world in its entirety, but even it cannot predict the unpredictable. Matoi purposely did not focus the energy through her Scissor Blade so that when she swung, she herself would not know how the energy would move or flow. And if she didn't know, than there was no possible way for Sanageyama's Shingantsu to predict it either."*

As the smoke from the attack cleared, Sanageyama stumbled forward on barely functional legs. When he had managed to survive the attack with his Goku Uniform intact, large chunks of his armor were missing and several deep gashes were visible along his arms and chest. Reaching up and tearing off his half-destroyed helmet, he took in a deep and ragged breath and grinned.

"Ha... ha..." Sanageyama took one step forward and nearly fell to his knees. Planting his shinai in the ground to keep himself standing up, he chuckled at the irony of the situation, "Ha... ha... Damn it. How was I supposed to predict such an unpredictable attack, Matoi?"

Making my Shingantsu completely useless... you are just full of surprises, aren't you?"

His compliment would go unheard by Ryuko. After putting everything she had left into that Senkou strike, she had collapsed onto the ground, Senketsu already transforming back into his normal form as a school uniform. Seeing Ryuko unable to fight back, Sanageyama stumbled forward and raised his shinai over her head.

"Goodbye Matoi."

As he stabbed downwards, Sanageyama's enhanced hearing picked up the sound of five sharp objects whistling through the air towards his head. Quickly turning around, he raised his shinai and maneuvered it around to block all five projectiles.

"*Sewing needles?*" The weaponry used against him reminded Sanageyama of the Nudist Beach operative, but it was impossible for him to get back into Honnouji Academy after his first intrusion. Expanding his senses to their newfound limits, Sanageyama was surprised to find that he couldn't sense anyone. Whoever it was that was firing at him was standing outside the considerable range of his Shingantsu.

"Come out and fight me, you coward!"

"I am not a coward," A stern, yet soft-spoken, voice chastised calmly from behind him, "Merely pragmatic."

Sanageyama froze up as the realization that this woman standing so nonchalantly behind him had snuck through his Shingantsu. He didn't know who she was or how she was capable of doing it, but Sanageyama wasn't going to let that stop him. Spinning around, he attempted to hit the intruder with his shinai only to be startled when her presence vanished before it quickly reappeared next to Ryuko's prone body.

"I noticed that you severed your eyesight in order to vastly improve your other senses to superhuman levels," Kinue Kinagase complimented as she checked Ryuko's body for injuries, "While quite an innovative move and one that obviously was too much for Ryuko here, it is useless against someone such as myself, whose speed is faster than even your improved senses can follow."

Kinue fingers twitched as her hand brushed against Ryuko's Kamui. It appeared that Danketsu could detect the Kamui even though Senketsu was currently inactive. Turning towards the still stunned Sanageyama, Kinue noticed Satsuki Kiryuin glaring down at her with all the authority and majesty the eighteen year old girl could muster. It was almost cute to see Satsuki try to cow her into submission. The backdrop of light was a nice touch, nearly as intense as her mother's, but it was not nearly enough to cause Kinue to feel anything.

"I apologize for the intrusion," Kinue ignored Danketsu's growl as she placed Ryuko's unconscious body over her shoulder. If Danketsu was going to argue with her over every little thing she did, then she would just ignore everything it said. It had worked well for her over the last ten years after all, "I would rather not overstay my welcome, so I'll be taking my leave now."

"You are bold to step into my domain so willingly!" Satsuki jumped down, fully clad in Junketsu, and landed in between Kinue and the exit of Honnouji Academy. Holding Bakuzan vertically to the ground with both hands, she locked gazes with the older woman, "But you will not be leaving!"

Satsuki stared at the older woman. Her analytical mind could piece together a familial resemblance with that Nudist Beach operative who attacked Mato, but there were subtle differences that surprised her. The black hair with red highlights gave Satsuki enough to conclude Kinue was related to Tsumugu, but Kinue felt much more powerful than the other man. That, combined with the ease at which Kinue bypassed Sanageyama's Shingantsu, meant she could not afford to assume Kinue would be a simple opponent to face.

"I assume by your appearance that you are related to the man who intruded upon my academy the other day," Satsuki stated, hoping to get some sort of reaction from Kinue. She was disappointed when Kinue's mouth curled up in a slight smile.

"What makes you say that?" Kinue countered calmly, "By that line of reasoning, I could assume you weren't related to Ragyo Kiryuin simply from the color of your hair."

"I see you will not willingly divulge your allegiances," Satsuki scowled at Kinue's lack of respect, "Therefore I will take the information from you by force!"

Satsuki sprung across the arena at Kinue at a speed that caused the other woman to silently praise her. It was not every day that she came across an adversary that actually forced her to actively focus on the fight. As Danketsu tightened around her body, its voice screaming at her to fight Satsuki and tear Junketsu apart, Kinue gingerly readjusted Ryuko's body over her shoulder, and blocked Satsuki's strike with her open right palm.

Satsuki was nearly speechless at seeing this woman block her Bakuzan, the blade with the power to sever Life Fibers, with an open palm. As the energy sparked off her blade, shredding Kinue's glove and part of her sleeve, Satsuki's eyes widened at what she saw underneath.

"That's - "

"Damn," Kinue vanished in a burst of speed and reappeared several dozen meters away. Looking at her exposed arm, the blue and purple armor-like clothing fitted to her skin, she realized that her secret was exposed, and possibly to the worst person here. She knew that someone would find out about Danketsu, but she expected it to be on her own terms. Turning to a still surprised Satsuki, she said "I didn't expect your power to be so great, but you will not be able to stop me from leaving."

"No, I won't," Satsuki closed her eyes and sheathed Bakuzan, "It was clear from my last attack that your power is great enough to make my chance of victory slim. Take Matoi, but tell her to consider herself lucky. One day she will get into a fight where there won't be someone to rescue her from death."

Kinue didn't say anything as she headed towards the entrance to Honnouji Academy. As soon as she passed through the threshold, she leapt into the air and disappeared into the city below.

"Forgive me, Lady Satsuki." In a burst of light and stars, Sanageyama deactivated his Blade Regalia and hung his head in shame, "I was unable to finish off Matoi. I have failed you."

"On the contrary, you have succeeded, Sanageyama," Satsuki took one last look in the direction Kinue fled in before turning and walking past Sanageyama. Stopping right behind him, she tilted her head to the side and added, "Matoi put everything she had into the fight and still lost. If not for the interference of that woman, you would have finished Matoi off. Consider yourself reinstated in the Elite Four."

"Yes. Thank you, Lady Satsuki," Sanageyama stared at the ground and tightened his grip on the wooden shinai in his hand. It was infuriating that Matoi was able to almost defeat him even with Shingantsu. That last attack would have definitely defeated him if he had been one second slower in dodging or it had been even a little bit faster. The next time they fought, Sanageyama vowed to win without interruptions.

Walking away from the arena, Satsuki's mind was a torrent of thoughts and half-concluded ideas. She had no idea who that woman was or how she managed to infiltrate Honnouji Academy. Inumuta had improved security around the academy after the Nudist Beach incident, and yet that woman not only snuck in, but managed to make a fool out of Sanageyama's upgraded Blade Regalia.

" *At the moment she blocked my Bakuzan I saw something,*" Satsuki narrowed her eyes as she felt Junketsu's ire rising at her mention of



the woman. It must be highly insulting to her Kamui to see a normal human stop its attack so easily. That was perhaps the only sentiment that Satsuki shared with Junketsu, *"It was only for a moment, and she attempted to hide it, but her lower arm was definitely covered by a Kamui."*

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Ichigo stared at the woman so casually sitting on his couch with an annoyed expression on his face. Usually he would have shouted at her and demanded to know why she broke into his room, but the sheer amount of calmness radiating off her put him on edge. So instead of doing something that might come back to bite him in the ass later on, he settled for sitting down in a chair and folding his arms.

"So, are you going to tell me who you are?"

"In time," the woman answered mysteriously, "But should you be so concerned with my name when Ryuko Matoi is gravely injured?"

"What did you do?" Ichigo asked with a threatening tone, "If you so much as - "

"Calm yourself, Ichigo." The woman seemed completely unperturbed by Ichigo's outburst, "I am not the one who injured your friend. On the contrary, I am the one that saved her life."

Upon seeing that Ichigo was confused by her explanation, she continued, "While you were gone this morning, Ryuko Matoi was challenged to a rematch by Uzu Sanageyama. She went into the fight cocky and unprepared for her opponent, who managed to learn an entirely new skill in less than a day. As such, she found herself outmatched in both speed and strength. It was a miracle she even managed to injure Sanageyama at all."

"I see..." Ichigo cursed himself for being gone the entire morning. While thoughts raced through his mind revolving around what he could have done had he decided to stay at Honnouji Academy, he quickly squashed them. It wouldn't be healthy to wonder and worry about things that already happened. There was nothing he could do to change it, so worrying about it would be a pointless endeavor, "So who are you?"

Kinue chuckled mirthlessly at the joke that only made sense to her. It seemed that Ichigo inherited his sense of directness from Masaki. Crossing her legs and leaning back, she said, "I suppose you deserve the right to know who I am. I am Kinue Kinagase, and I believe you have already met my brother."

"Brother?" Ichigo wracked his brain for what Kinue could be talking about. He certainly didn't remember meeting anyone like that. Wait a minute. Ichigo looked at Kinue's black hair with red dyed tips, "Wait. You're related to that mohawk bastard?"

"I don't think I've ever heard someone call Tsumugu that," Kinue quipped, a rare sign of amusement gracing her face, "But yes. Tsumugu is my younger brother by three years."

Ichigo's expression hardened at Kinue's confession, "Are you here to destroy Senketsu?"

"No," Kinue shook her head, "As a matter of fact, I'm here to - "

***Ichigo!"***

Kinue was cut off midsentence as Mugetsu, finally waking up from her nap and noticing he was back, transformed into her mobile force and launched herself from the bedroom. Wrapping her sleeves around Ichigo's body, she began squeezing harder than was comfortable.

"Hey!" Ichigo struggled to pry himself free from Mugetsu's insane grip, but only managed to get himself tangled up even further. How

something that was essentially clothing to be so strong boggled him. As he pulled with all his might, only managing to free his right arm in the process, he fell out of the chair and hit the ground hard, "What the hell's wrong with you, Mugetsu?"

" ***You wore clothing other than me,***" Mugetsu answered in between teary sobs. Ichigo's didn't understand how a Kamui could cry, but apparently Mugetsu figured it out, ***"You cannot begin to comprehend the sense of betrayal I feel from the heinous act you committed!"***

"Sense of betrayal?" Ichigo didn't know what Mugetsu was talking about, "I asked you if you wanted me to wear you while I went running this morning. You said no!"

" ***Yes,***" Mugetsu stared at Ichigo accusingly, ***"But I thought you were going to run naked, not parading around in another set of clothing. How could you, Ichigo?"***

"Why the hell would I run around Honnou City naked?" Ichigo shouted back, causing Mugetsu to growl and press herself angrily against his face.

" ***Why wouldn't you?"*** she countered just as loudly, ***"I thought our relationship was special, but I see that I'm just another outfit for you to wear!"***

Ichigo's mind was beginning to collapse under the sheer nonsense of Mugetsu's argument, "I have no idea what you are talking about! If you didn't want me to wear other clothing, why didn't you just say so?"

" ***I don't need to explain myself to you,***" Mugetsu huffed and folded her sleeves. Turning partially away from Ichigo, she looked at him with a single eye and stated, ***"I'm waiting for an apology."***

"Like hell I'm apologizing to you," Ichigo grumbled and tried to turn his back on Mugetsu. As he refused to meet the gaze of his Kamui,

he could literally feel Mugetsu staring daggers at his back. After almost a minute of putting up with it, he groaned, "Fine! I'm sorry. I won't wear any other clothes besides you without asking for your permission first. Are you happy now?"

" **Yes,**" Mugetsu said and launched herself at Ichigo. A minute later, Ichigo, fully clad in a smug looking Mugetsu, was sitting across from Kinue thoroughly embarrassed by what just happened.

"My, my," Kinue looked bemused by what she just saw, "I must say, I didn't expect your Mugetsu to be so... clingy. Are you sure you don't forget to put in a fabric softener when you clean her?"

" ***Clingy she says...***"

Ichigo glared at Mugetsu, "Tell me about it... hey, wait a second. You could hear her?"

"I'm not the only one," Kinue scoffed and closed her eyes while she began reaching for her glove, "If I am to believe the rumors, then Ryuko Matoi can also hear Mugetsu's voice. But hearing it myself... it is quite the relief."

Ichigo didn't know where Kinue was going with this, "What are you talking about?"

A small smirk graced Kinue's face as she pulled off her glove and rolled up her sleeve, "Perhaps it would be better if you were to see it for yourself. Actions speak louder than words after all."

There was almost a phantasmal burst of blue light as Ichigo saw what Kinue was hiding. Her hand and the part of her arm he could see were both covered in familiar blue and purple armor. After allowing the shock to sink in, he asked, "You're wearing a Kamui?"

"I'm bound to it, in a manner of speaking," Kinue ignored the frown that appeared on Ichigo's face upon her comment. Leaning back and sighing, she held her hand up to the light and clenched it into a fist,

"This is Danketsu, the very first Kamui created by Professor Matoi. It was woven from Life Fibers over ten years ago. Consider it the precursor to the Kamui worn by Ryuko."

" ***Another Kamui...***" Mugetsu looked excited at the prospect of a fourth Kamui. While the only other Kamui she had fought was Satsuki's Junketsu, the knowledge that another one of her kind existed filled her threads with happiness. Swiveling her eyes upwards to Ichigo, she asked, "***I wonder if Danketsu is stronger than me?***"

" ***Screw you!***" The anger in the voice startled Ichigo and Mugetsu while Kinue just sighed tiredly. When they looked at her for an explanation, she decided to come out with it.

"Unlike Mugetsu, Danketsu isn't the most... friendly companion to have." Standing up, Kinue began removing her jacket, "Perhaps you should speak with her yourself."

Ichigo had been expecting to see something as revealing as Junkestu and Senketsu, so when Kinue took off her jacket only a slight blush appeared on his face.

Like Ryuko, the blue and purple armor covering Kinue's body completely encased her arms and upper chest, stopping just above the nape of her neck. However, while Senketsu's transformed state left Ryuko's abdomen and lower breasts completely exposed except for a pair of form-fitting suspenders, Danketsu covered up substantially more of Kinue's body. A dark blue leotard with purple glowing lines covered her stomach, leaving everything else bare. Just before reaching her breasts, the leotard split in two, leaving much of her ample chest naked. Perched on her shoulders were Danketsu's eyes, which seemed to look more fluid and streamlined than Mugetsu's.

" ***So this is the so-called Kamui Mugetsu,***" Danketsu's eyes seemed to look wildly at Ichigo before turning back to Kinue, "***Why are we just standing here? You said I would get to fight a***

***Kamui. There's one right in front of us. What are you waiting for?"***

"I did not say such a thing," Kinue chided as if speaking to a petulant child, "If you would bother to remember, I said that you might get your fight after all. I never promised anything."

Danketsu growled and seemed about to say something, but was beat to the punch when Ichigo asked, "You said you were bound to Danketsu. What did you mean by that?"

"It's a long story that started ten years ago," Kinue began tiredly. Damn, this was harder than she thought it would be. Kinue could already feel Danketsu's emotions bleeding into her. She didn't have much longer until she began to feel as agitated as her Kamui, "I wanted to test fit Danketsu. I believed that clothing and humanity could live together... I was naïve to believe that everyone thought the same way. As soon as I put on Danketsu, she tried to devour me. It was only thanks to an invention from a... friend of Professor Matoi that I survived what should have been my death."

Kinue pointed with a finger to the intricate black tattoo sitting in between her breasts, "While it saved my life, the device had a secondary effect. It forever bound Danketsu and me together. As you can see, she is in her transformed state. Danketsu, unlike your Mugetsu, can never become normal clothing. That is why I must always cover her up."

"I think I understand," Ichigo muttered, even though he really didn't, "But why is Danketsu so different from Mugetsu and Senketsu? None of them are as violent as your Kamui."

***" Go to hell human," Danketsu seethed angrily, "I don't need to explain myself to a pig like you!"***

***" Hmm..."*** Mugetsu hummed thoughtfully. She did not like how Danketsu gave Kamui like her a bad name. Just because they were comprised of pure Life Fibers, that didn't mean they had to around

and devour and kill humans because they felt like that. The gift of sentience was perhaps the greatest thing Mugetsu knew she possessed. Drinking Ichigo's delicious and nutritious blood was a very close second, but Mugetsu considered her sentience to be the best thing in the world.

**" I don't like her, Ichigo,"** Mugetsu said after a moment with an audible huff. Turning her eyes to the side, she added, **"Such unrestrained bloodlust... she gives us Kamui a bad name."**

**" I'll show you bloodlust!"** Danketsu shouted back challengingly.

"That's enough out of you," Kinue warned. Standing and grabbing her jacket, she proceeded to put it back on, taking no pleasure in cutting Danketsu off from the world. As she finished zipping it up, she turned to Ichigo, "I don't know if this means anything to you, but I must thank you."

At Ichigo's confused expression, Kinue continued, "For ten years I had thought I was the only one that could hear Danketsu's voice. I was convinced that I had gone insane after the accident and did my best to sequester myself from my friends and family to spare them the pain of seeing me lose my mind. Tsumugu may have broken the news, but after sitting here and talking with you and Mugetsu, a large burden has been lifted from my shoulders. I now understand that Danketsu is a living being with thoughts and feelings of its own, as crazy and delirious as they may be. Perhaps with enough time and understand, I could come to the same sort of understand that you have with Mugetsu and Ryuko has with Senketsu."

**" I highly doubt that,"** Mugetsu said bluntly, **"Danketsu is, quite frankly, insane. She is no more than a rabid dog at this point. It would be better for her to be destroyed."**

"No," Kinue said sadly as she turned to leave, "Part of Danketsu's condition is my fault. It was soon after the accident that I first heard Danketsu's voice. Back then she was quick to anger and thirsty for blood, that much is true, but she was somewhat more level-headed

and calm. I suspect that she became this way after a decade of me, the only person able to hear her voice, ignoring her. I can only hope that my forgiveness and willingness to talk with her will help Danketsu recover some of her sanity."

" ***Fuck your forgiveness!***" Danketsu shouted angrily. Even though she was covered by Kinue's jacket, her blood-crazed voice came through clearly, ***"I don't care for something as stupid as that! If you really want to apologize, turn around and tear apart that sorry excuse for a Kamui!"***

" ***Bring it on!***" Mugetsu scoffed sarcastically, ***"I'll wipe the floor with you so quickly that your Life Fibers won't know what hit them!"***

" ***Ha!***" Despite the crazed tone to her voice, Danketsu sounded confident, ***"If my wearer wasn't too cowardly to fight you, you would feel just how weak you are compared to her. You are simply being worn by that human, while I and my wearer are of one body! Our power is greater than anything you could ever hope to achieve."***

Wincing slightly at her forming headache, Kinue decided to leave before things got out of hand. It was bad enough when Danketsu yelled at her to fight Life Fibers, but Mugetsu's antagonizing isn't making things any easier, "I'm going to head out now. Ryuko Matoi is recovering at the Mankanshoku household. You should stop on by and check up on her. I'm sure she would appreciate it."

"I see," Ichigo paused momentarily before asking, "Where are you going?"

"I'll stick around Honnou City for a while," Kinue shrugged and brought a hand thoughtfully up to her chin, "As much as the amount of Life Fibers within the city will agitate Danketsu, I think it would be best that I stay. If I am to fix any of the damage that I inflicted on it, I need to bite the bullet. I'll see you around, Ichigo. Oh, there is just one piece of advice. As I approached Honnou City, I sensed the



Grand Couturier's presence. Stay clear of Nui Harime and anything she says."

"Yeah, I figured that out already," Ichigo's answer must have been a shock to her because Kinue turned in amazement.

"You spoke with the Grand Couturier?"

"Not willingly," Ichigo sighed and let out an annoyed groan, "Both times she's snuck up on me or broke into my room. She seems to have a weird fascination with me."

Kinue's eyes narrowed before she shook her head, "I cannot begin to ponder the machinations that occur within Nui Harime's mind, but she is not someone to be trifled with. Her strength is like a bottomless abyss, only matched by her ability to recover from any damage. If she has an interest in you, you should be cautious, Ichigo. I've encountered the Grand Couturier before, and the one thing I can say for certainty is that to her, love and hate is the same thing. Be vigilant, Ichigo. Nothing good can come from her obsession with you."

As Kinue left his room, leaving Ichigo alone with his thoughts, he sighed and collapsed on the couch. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache forming, he didn't appreciate being dragged into a fight that he had reason to be in.

" ***Your heart rate is spiking, Ichigo,***" A still somewhat incensed, but calmed down, Mugetsu stated with worry, "***What's wrong?***"

"I'm just thinking about what Kinue told us," Ichigo didn't want to admit it, but everything Kinue said about Nui Harime made sense to him. There were just a few things that weren't fitting correctly, "If Nui Harime is obsessed with me, then why have I only met her twice? You would think I would have run into her more often."

" ***I do not know, Ichigo, but you shouldn't let her words bother you. I'm sure if you were to fight this Nui Harime, you would be***

***sure to win with me at your side!"***

"Thanks for the support, Mugetsu," Ichigo sighed again and leaned his head backwards. Why did his life have to be so complicated? At first he thought coming to Honnouji Academy would allow a fresh start away from the reminders of the Winter War and the loss of his shinigami powers. It wasn't long after that he was forcefully dragged into a war against Satsuki Kiryuin, who seemed to have a personal vendetta against him, and finding himself wearing Mugetsu, a literally living school uniform.

Mugetsu must have sensed his state of mind, because her next question was full of sadness at being unable to cheer up her wearer, ***"What are you going to do about it?"***

"Say Kinue is right, and Nui Harime is following me. Sitting around and waiting for her to come to me is stupid." Reinvigorated and determined to push forward, Ichigo stood up and headed to his door, "I'll train and get stronger so that when Nui Harime decides to fight me, I'll be ready for her and if I'm not, I have Ryuko and Ururu to help me out."

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## **Kamui Tales #6 - First Rate Shipping**

"So let me get this straight, old man," Kon crossed the arms of his plushie body and began pacing back and forth across the desk, "You want to send me to some weird place called Honnou City or whatever just to keep an eye on Ichigo. Is that correct?"

With a grim expression, Isshin Kurosaki nodded in the affirmative. While his head was shaved completely down to the scalp, of his own volition, there still remained traces of rainbow dye in his hair. Isshin mentally cursed Raygo for the torture she put him through. Only she could create a Life Fiber-based dye that would actually prevent other

dyes from working. How in the seven layers of hell had she come up with something so insidious?

"Ok, I'll bite," Kon sat down on the edge of the desk and scoffed, "What's the catch?"

"There is no catch," Isshin answered, "Ichigo may be a responsible teenager, but he needs someone there to watch over him and make sure he doesn't do anything stupid. Ururu is nice and all, but she's not the most socially balanced girl. There are some things that will fly straight over her cute head."

"So..." Kon scratched his head, "Is this going to be dangerous? Because if it is, I just remembered I have an important job interview to go to."

"That's a shame," Isshin mockingly sighed and turned to leave, "Because I just so happen to have these pictures of Ichigo and his friends."

Kon grabbed the pictures out of Isshin's hand and would have begun bleeding from the nose if he was capable of doing so. As he stared eagerly at the pictures of Ryuko and Satsuki in their transformed Senketsu and Junketsu, he blinked and rubbed his eyes. There was no way this could be real.

"You're pulling my stuffing, aren't you old man?" Kon asked accusingly, "These are photo-shopped images from the internet, aren't they?"

"Nope, they are real," Isshin knew he had Kon, but just to be on the safe side he added, "And they actually transform into those when they fight."

"Wait!" Kon stood up excitedly, "Are you telling me that there exists a place where hot teenage girls actually and willingly transform into skimpy outfits whenever they fight? Well, pack me up and ship me out, old man! Ichigo needs my help!"

# Fire and Rain

*Chapter 19 of **To My Death I Fight** arrives with a few important announcements. As those of you who have been with me since Chapter 1, I started this story between Episodes 17 and 18 of the anime, which means most of the characters and abilities hadn't yet been fleshed out in detail. Some of the important characters include Nui Harime, Isshin Matoi, and Ragyo Kiryuin. To fix this plot hole the size of Honnou City, I have gone back and edited chapters 1 and 2.*

*Note that this wasn't just a few words here and there, I made several revisions to the chapters. While nothing important has changed, a lot of you might be happy to see that I completely rewrote the Nui Harime vs Kishime Urahara fight in Chapter 2 from scratch. I do think you will appreciate what I did. It's not just completely rewritten, but about ~1000 or so words longer than the original and has a completely different ending that is just as ambiguous as the original ending.*

*Also note that in the upcoming week I will be revising Chapters 4-7 while at the same time writing Chapter 20 (A new record for me). Sadly, none of the revised chapters will have Kamui Tales. I know, I know. That is a terrible shame, but that just means you'll have to look forward to the next chapter!*

**\*Edit Note:** *I had an old section in the Satsuki/Ichigo conversation. It's all fixed now.*

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## Chapter 19 - Fire and Rain

Junketsu hated Satsuki Kiryuin with every Life Fiber of its being.

Completely oblivious to her Kamui's hatred, Satsuki Kiryuin stared at the screens with images of Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi going about their daily lives with veiled interest. Tilting her head to another set of screens, each of which highlighted where the various Two-Star students were throughout Honnouji Academy, Satsuki allowed a small and sly smile to grace her features. Everything seemed to be coming together and her declaration against Ryuko Matoi would only help to further her plans. It was simple to predict that the students of Honnouji Academy would allow their greed and avarice to cloud their minds just for a chance to gain a Three-Star Goku Uniform. Whether Ryuko came out on top or not did not matter because in the end Satsuki would be the one and only victor.

"Inumuta," Satsuki's voice caused the blue haired Elite Four to turn his attention away from his work, "Has Jakuzure submitted her daily report?"

If Junketsu could have done something, anything, to show Satsuki its undying hatred of her it would have done so long ago. It was blasphemous to think she would dare associate herself with Lady Ragyo while plotting behind her mother's back. Satsuki's will and determination might be strong enough to hold back its will, but Junketsu was patient. The moment an opportunity presented itself Junketsu was going to devour Satsuki's mind and body. That was not to mention that Satsuki's blood tasted horrible. Junketsu wanted to spit it out but as much as it hated Satsuki it hated being locked up and asleep even more. More than sixteen years of nothing but darkness had caused the Kamui to develop of fear of sleeping.

"It came in around half an hour ago," Inumuta answered calmly as he typed several commands on his keyboard and brought up the report in front of Satsuki, "It seems Jakuzure's mission to discover the secret of Ichigo Kurosaki's Kamui is proceeding at the hypothesized rate... despite her blunt and direct personality interfering with her attempts to fit in."

"Good," Satsuki leaned back in her chair and Junketsu suppressed the urge to growl at her. As much as it wanted to rant and curse at

her, the failure of a Kiryuin couldn't even hear it, "I've looked over her initial reports. It appears Jakuzure is throwing suspicion off herself by offering Matoi and Ichigo assistance in taking me down out of petty revenge. It is pleasing to see Jakuzure embracing her role in my plan so thoroughly. Has she discovered why Junketsu is unable to access advanced configurations like Mugetsu and Senketsu?"

Inumuta adjusted his glasses before sighing, "Unfortunately she has not. However, I have a theory. Kamui are composed of one hundred percent Life Fibers, which makes it incredibly lethal for most people to try and wear them. We also know that Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi are somehow able to hear a voice that they refer to as their Kamui even though our surveillance cameras do not pick up any acoustic vibrations. My theory is if Kamui are sentient and able to speak with their wearers than Ichigo or Ryuko could be simply issuing mental commands to their Kamui."

"I see..." Satsuki frowned before she closed her eyes and pondered the situation. Inumuta's theory was sound but it was something that had already passed through her mind. There was no doubt that Junketsu was sentient to the same degree as Mugetsu and Senketsu but the question plaguing her mind was why she could not communicate with it. As a Kiryuin her mind was strong enough to ward off Junketsu's attempts to devour her. Obtaining advanced configurations should have come to her before either of them. What was the key piece of information she was missing?

Junketsu felt Satsuki's blood pressure and heart rate shift and concluded that she was deep in thought about something that was not only important but also bothering her. From the conversation it just overheard it was easily to see Satsuki and that other stupid human were discussing the reasons Junketsu couldn't access its advanced configurations. They could theorize and think all they want but they were never going to realize the true answer - Satsuki was simply unworthy of wielding the true extent of Junketsu's magnificent power.

Satsuki's will and determination might be strong enough to force Junketsu to activate its basic transformation but the Kamui still had the last laugh. It managed to hold back nearly half of its full power from Satsuki. Why should it allow a human to wield its incredible power? Such a notion was absurd. The only ones that should be gifted with the opportunity to wear it were those capable of communing with Life Fibers. Thinking back on its fights against Senketsu and Mugetsu, Junketsu felt a stab of jealousy course through its fibers.

Why couldn't it have been discovered by one of them? Both of them were more than capable of wielding the full power of a Kamui without risking their lives. Junketsu remembered Lady Ragyo telling it that her daughter would wear it one day but looking at Satsuki Junketsu felt nothing but derision. Satsuki was a failure of a daughter to Lady Ragyo and the Kamui would rather be torn apart than willingly grant her its power. Mentally sighing in sadness, Junketsu lamented that it was not worn by something worthy - like Ryuko Matoi. Ryuko seemed liked like the perfect human to wear it and if Junketsu had to mentally adjust Ryuko then so be it.

Junketsu also felt a strange connection to Ichigo and Mugetsu but it would never allow him to wear it. It was not out of hatred or spite but simply because Junketsu's true form was created for the female body and Ichigo was most certainly not a woman. It would be incredibly awkward not only for Ichigo, but for Junketsu as well, if he wore it. Narrowing its eyes in frustration, Junketsu allowed itself to fall into a light slumber and dreamt of what its true wearer might look like.

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"This sure does look good, Mako," Ryuko looked at her bento box as her stomach rumbled. She couldn't comprehend how Sukuyo Mankanshoku could make such delicious, and hopefully nutritious,

meals on such a low budget. Ryuko didn't care since she loved Sukuyo's cooking more than anything, "Let's eat!"

As she began digging into the croquettes, Ryuko noticed that Ichigo, who was sitting to her left, hadn't started eating. As a matter of fact, Ichigo was holding his chopsticks limply in his fingers and was staring at his bento box with a look switching back and forth between horror and terror. Swallowing the lump of mystery croquette and smacking her chest a few times to help it go down, Ryuko asked, "What's the matter, Ichigo?"

Ichigo shook his head and put down his chopsticks, "I can't eat this."

Ryuko tilted her head slightly in confusion, "Huh?"

"Eh..." Ichigo grumbled as he tried to come up with something plausible that Ryuko and Mako would believe. He couldn't say that he was afraid his lunch was going to kill him. When he was handed his bento box by Mako's mother earlier in the day, Ichigo could have sworn he saw one of the croquettes actually moving around. What made the scene even more disturbing was how Sukuyo, without batting an eye, reached for a knife and stabbed the bento box. Ichigo didn't know whether he was more terrified of Sukuyo or his food, but to be honest he would rather not piss off either one.

"I don't like croquettes that much," Ichigo managed to say with a straight face. Truth be told, he liked actual croquettes a lot, but he refused to eat anything that he couldn't see being made. What happened in the Mankanshoku kitchen was off limits to anyone but Sukuyo and Ichigo didn't intend to push his luck on the matter.

"Mmph!" Mako tried to speak, but with her mouth full of food, all that came out was spittle and clumps of food that Ryuko expertly dodged. After chewing and swallowing, Mako took a deep breath and repeated, "If you don't want it, I'll have your lunch Ichigo!"

"I was going to give it to Ururu. She has a sweet tooth for Mako's croquettes after all." Without even turning around, Ichigo held up his



bento box and dropped it into Ururu's waiting hands. Due to how Ururu always managed to pop up when he least expected it, Ichigo had grown used to her apparent off screen teleportation. Evne Ryuko, who still got startled whenever Shinjiro appeared out of nowhere, had become mostly blasé to how Ururu moved around.

"Thanks Ichigo," With a cute huff, Ururu sat down next to Ichigo and clapped her hands together before digging into the food, "I really like Mrs. Mankanshoku's croquettes, especially when she puts crabs in them."

"Wow..." Ryuko watched Ururu tear into the croquettes with a mixture of awe and disgust, "She really loves those croquettes."

Ichigo turned his head slightly so he wouldn't have to see Ururu eat, "I don't know how she stands the stuff to be honest."

As Ryuko chuckled at Ichigo's expense, there was a whistling through the air before a pocket knife embedded itself in the lid of her bento box. With an annoyed expression, she pulled the knife out and muttered, "What the hell?"

"Ryuko Matoi!" A familiar voice shouted from a nearby building, causing Ichigo's eye to start twitching, "I, Jack Naito, President of the Knife Throwing Club, will be defeating you this day!"

"You've got some nerve ruining my lunch!" Ryuko shouted back as she stood up, "Mako's mom made that for me! You're going to pay for that!"

Ryuko reached to pull the pin out of her glove, but stopped when she heard Ichigo ask, "Hey, didn't I kick your ass already?"

"Huh?" Jack turned and froze upon seeing Ichigo behind Ryuko, "Y-You? What are you doing here, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

"That's none of your business," Ichigo smirked and reached for his spaulder. He was really going to enjoy taking down Jack after the

hell he put him through when he first arrived at Honnouji Academy, "Stay back and enjoy your lunch, Ryuko. I got some unfinished business with this punk. Life Fiber Initial Release: Kamui Mugetsu!"

Before Jack could react or even try and flee, Ichigo jumped off the ground and punched him in the face, sending the newly reinstated club captain across the courtyard. As Jack landed in a heap some distance away, with Ichigo hot on his heels to enact vengeance, Ryuko calmly sat back down and went back to eating her lunch.

"Huh?" Mako, finally noticing Ichigo's disappearance, looking nervously around before turning to Ryuko, "Hey Ryuko, where did Ichigo run off to?"

"He's dealing with an old acquaintance," Ryuko answered calmly as she took a bite out of a croquette that was filled with steak, "He should be back in a few minutes."

"Ok!" Mako smiled happily and went back to eating.

Putting the strange event out of her mind, Ryuko went to pick up another croquette only for a large red whip to skewer her bento box, destroying all the food in it. With her mouth agape and her fingers trembling in rage, she slowly turned and saw what had to be one of the worst Goku Uniforms she had ever seen.

"Have I got your attention, Ryuko Matoi?" The mysterious club captain taunted, "For the one to defeat you will be me, the Nanjing Lily Club President Kagesaburo Kagero!"

With a deadpan expression on her face, Ryuko held her arm up and, with a complete lack of emotion in her voice, said, "Life Fiber Synchronize: Kamui Senketsu."

Kagesaburo was caught completely off guard as Ryuko vanished, to his eyes at least, before reappearing in front of him with her elbow driven into his stomach. As he gasped for breath, his Goku Uniform

cracking around the point of impact, Ryuko looked up at him with a sadistic grin.

"Usually I would just destroy your stupid Goku Uniform," she explained as she held Kagesaburo up with a single hand while she continuously clenched and unclenched her free one, "But since you ruined my lunch, I'm going to make you suffer tremendously."

As Kagesaburo's screamed echoed through the area, Mako and Ururu continued to eat their lunches without care. While Mako was mostly oblivious to the fighting going on around her, Ururu knew that Ichigo and Ryuko would be able to defeat their respective opponents without any trouble. As long as Nui Harime wasn't around, Ururu didn't feel the need to interfere. Speaking of Nui, after her brief clash against the Grand Couturier, Ururu found herself with the ability to sense whenever Nui Harime was nearby. While it wasn't enough to actually pinpoint Nui's location, it was more than enough to give Ururu a heads up for the eventual confrontation.

With her eyes closed and one hand holding her chopsticks, Ururu reached up and snagged the tightrope out of thin air before snapping it up and causing the Two-Star on it to go flying into the outer walls of Honnouji Academy.

"Wow!" Mako had stars in her eyes after seeing Ururu's skills, "That was super amazing, Ururu!"

A faint blush, similar to the one she always had a couple of years back, spread across Ururu's cheeks, "I-It was nothing, Mako."

There was a loud crash as Ichigo reappeared in front of them. With Tournesol held on his shoulder, he tossed the defeated, and nude, Jack Naito on the ground and sat back down. It felt great to finally, and decisively, kick Jack Naito's ass. After his first fight against the Two-Star, where he was mostly on the defensive, it was irony to see the situation reversed as much as it was.

"I've waited a long time to kick this bastard's ass."

**"Don't you remember, Ichigo?"** Mugetsu's eyes looked at Jack's defeated form before focusing on her wearer, **"It was during that fight that your blood first began to awaken me. You can even go so far as to say that he was responsible for our current partnership."**

"Yeah, well," Ichigo kicked Jack for good measure before mentally commanding Mugetsu to transform back into her normal school outfit, "You were bound to wake up sooner or later."

"Are you talking to your uniform again?" Mako looked at Ichigo funnily, "That's so adorable!"

Ichigo was saved from giving Mako an answer as a frustrated Ryuko sat down beside him. Groaning in frustration at her battle, she rubbed a hand down her face and exclaimed, "What the hell is up with all these weird, ultra-specific clubs? Who honestly creates a Knife Throwing Club or a Nanjing Lily Club?"

"You shouldn't forget the Tightrope Walking Club," Ururu added stoically in between bites.

"There's seriously a Tightrope Walking Club?" Ryuko asked in bewilderment. When Ururu simply nodded back, Ryuko rolled her eyes, "Wow, this place is even more screwed up than I thought."

"It wasn't so bad a few days ago," Ichigo added, "Remember when that Tsumugu guy arrived? I was ambushed by the Archery Club on the way to meet you for lunch."

"At least that's a real club," Ryuko countered, "Hey Mako, you know anything about these stupid club captains?"

"Oh, that's a simple question!" Mako visibly swallowed all the food in her mouth at once before pointing at Jack's unconscious body with her chopsticks, "All these guys used to be in the Acrobatics Club, but once Lady Satsuki announced the prize for beating you, they split up

and formed their own clubs. It's really quite simply and interesting when you don't really think about it."

"Prize?" Ryuko hadn't heard anything about such a thing, "What prize?"

Mako adopted a dreamy look as she continued explaining, "Lady Satsuki has announced that if someone beat you up, Ryuko, they'll be given the same status and power as a Three-Star. With Jakuzure kicked out of the Elite Four and now a member of our group, Lady Satsuki is looking for someone to replace her. Since the school rules say that only a club president can have a Two-Star Goku Uniform, various members of all the different clubs have begun splitting away and forming their own clubs. At this very moment, they are all gunning to take you down, Ryuko!"

"Why me? What about Ichigo?" Ichigo pointed to Ichigo angrily, "Is Satsuki giving out a prize for beating him?"

"Hmm..." Mako appeared to be in deep thought, if the smoke drifting out her ears was any indication, for several seconds before she shook her head and happily said, "Nope. A few days ago Lady Satsuki told the entire school that everyone was forbidden from going after Ichigo without her express permission. She also said that anyone who did so would face execution and torture for insubordination and treachery against her!"

"Holy hell..." Ichigo muttered in shock. Satsuki really wouldn't kill someone for wanting to fight him, would she? Thinking back during their fight, Ichigo realized that she would, in fact, do just that if it happened to be the most pragmatic option at the time.

"What's her deal with you, Ichigo?" Ryuko wondered as she looked him over. There was nothing overly special about him aside from his orange hair and the ability to wear a Kamui. Coming to a realization, she slyly smirked, "Oh, I know what's going on. The great Satsuki Kiryuin has a thing for you, Ichigo."

Ichigo nearly choked upon hearing that, "Wait. What?"

"WHAT?" Mako exclaimed in shock as both of her hands pressed against her cheeks, "Ichigo has grabbed the romantic attention of Lady Satsuki? This is just like out of a manga or something!"

"Give it a rest, Mako," Ichigo spat out and grumbled, "Besides, even if that happens to be true, she's not the kind of person I would even think of dating. I would never be seen with someone who would force people to bet their lives for power. What she's doing isn't right."

There was an awkward silence for a few moments before Ryuko decided to change the subject, "Hey Mako, why would these chumps attack us even if they had no shot at winning?"

"It's all for a better life," Mako said vigorously while staring into the distance, "In Honnou City, one's social class is determined by the number of stars on their school uniform. They are all desperate enough to bring their values out of poverty that they would fight you even if they can't win."

"Man, this place is messed up to hell and back," Ryuko rested her chin on the palm of her hand. After several seconds, she blinked and grinned as an idea came to her, "Hang on a second! I have an idea of how to cheat the system..."

"It better not be what I think it is," Ichigo warned.

"Don't worry," Ryuko waved off his concern uncaringly, "I know that's illegal now, so you don't worry about getting into trouble again."

"It's not going to be a good idea."

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In one of the many corridors of Honnouji Academy, the various students, whether they were No-Stars or One-Stars, fearfully parted as a single figure angrily stalked her way through. Pulling her white beret down over her eyes, Nonon Jakuzure grumbled menacingly about the stupidity of those around her as well as her mission.

"Grumble... grumble... stupid Strawberry... grumble..."

Nonon was truly pissed off, but for the first time in days it wasn't at any of her fellow No-Stars. For the first three or four days after Lady Satsuki publically expelled her from the Elite Four, which Gamagori and Sanageyama putting in their helpful input to make it seem believable, Nonon had to put up with jeers and insults from Two-Stars and other students over her failures. It was only when she snapped, turned around and grabbed a Two-Star's face before pushing it through a brick wall that the insults stopped flying. With everyone backing off and leaving her alone, Nonon was free to focus on her mission, but there was one problem that she couldn't fix.

Her attempts and ingratiating herself with Strawberry's group were failing faster than someone attempting to assassinate Lady Satsuki.

"What am I doing wrong?" Nonon mumbled quietly before grimacing, "It can't be me. It has to be something on Strawberry's end."

Nonon tried to figure out what she was doing wrong, but kept coming up with nothing. Lady Satsuki had entrusted to her the mission to figure out the secret behind Ichigo and the Transfer Student's Kamui, but she had yet to find anything of value. Even after giving that stupid Transfer Student the information she needed to beat Sanageyama, they still didn't trust her. What the hell did she need to do to gain their trust? Did she need to go up and publically slap Lady Satsuki?

"Pfft," Nonon stuck her tongue out in disgust, "Even I wouldn't stoop that low just to make friends."

It was bad enough that she had to publically work against Lady Satsuki, which made her feel nauseous just thinking about it, but to actively try and be nice to her enemies was sickening. Ichigo and the Transfer Student were working to bring down Lady Satsuki's sandcastle and she was helping, albeit as a spy, to make it happen. Why couldn't they just trust that Satsuki knew what she was doing?

"Because they're morons," Nonon answered herself while spitting on the angrily.

Noticing something weird from the windows overlooking the massive Honnouji Academy courtyard, Nonon turned and saw Ichigo and the Transfer Student take out several Two-Star students with relative ease. As she watched them no-sell the various attacks, Nonon couldn't help but notice Ichigo go after his opponent with a vigor and anger that she hadn't seen in their fight.

"That guy looks familiar," Nonon narrowed her eyes and a bemused smirk appeared on her face upon recognizing Jack Naito, "Oh? It's that boy that Lady Satsuki sacrificed to fight against Strawberry on his very first day. I wonder why she decided to give him back his Two-Star Goku Uniform."

Nonon really didn't care about his motives. She just enjoyed seeing Ichigo beat the crap out of Jack Naito. Seeing something strange happening near where Ryuko was eating lunch, Nonon whistled in awe as she saw Ururu defeat a ridiculous club president without even looking up. While Ururu's superhuman strength and reflexes caused Nonon to make a mental note to inform Lady Satsuki later, she had a mission to complete.

"There has to be something I'm missing," Nonon pressed her face angrily against the glass as she focused on Ichigo's fight, "There's no way in hell Strawberry is better than Lady Satsuki!"

While she wasn't the most observant or intelligent person, Nonon prided herself on being able to see things others don't notice. That is why as she watched Ichigo's fight against Jack Naito, her irritation



kept rising. There had to be a secret to Ichigo's Kamui that Satsuki just wasn't aware of. Once she managed to discover that secret, Lady Satsuki would easily and quickly wipe the floor with these two upstarts and show them just how powerful of a person she really was. It couldn't be that Strawberry was more worthy of wearing a Kamui than Lady Satsuki. That was just impossible! There was no one on Earth with more ambition, will, determination and the notion to see it through than Lady Satsuki. She was the only one worthy of a Kamui!

"What's his secret?" Nonon muttered angrily before cursing and spitting to the side, "I'm going to get you for this, Strawberry! Once I'm done with this stupid mission, I'm going to make you pay dearly! And the Transfer Student is going to get what's coming to her as well. I'm the ruler of the skies, damn it! The next time we fight, I'm going to clip your wings permanently!"

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"I still think this is a terrible idea."

"If you think it's so bad why haven't you stopped me?" Ryuko scoffed at Ichigo's caution as she planted the chair she was holding in the ground. Crossing her legs and leaning back, she motioned with her thumb towards the wooden post next to her that read 'FIGHT CLUB' and said, "This is a perfectly good idea. What could go wrong?"

"That's right, Ichigo!" Mako exclaimed in unison. Waving the large white banner with the club's name on it happily, she added, "Ryuko knows what she's doing, after all!"

"I know you believe this will work, Mako," Ichigo sighed and turned towards Ururu with a deadpan expression on his face. Pointing at her, he asked, "But I still don't understand how the hell you managed to convince Ururu to take part in your little scheme."

Standing across from Ryuko and wearing her sparring gear was Ururu. The fear and terror that Ichigo felt upon seeing the same gear that nearly killed him the last time they fought was only countered by how adorable Ururu managed to look. If he didn't know any better, Ichigo would have wrongfully assumed Ururu was completely harmless. She had already asked him to spar twice to, in her own words, 'draw in a crowd' and Ichigo's fingers were constantly twitching toward the spaulder on his shoulder in case Ururu decided to become proactive.

"It's going to be alright, Ichigo," Ururu said softly with a slight smile on her face. While she was usually averse to recreational fighting of any kind, Ururu didn't see the Fight Club as such. To her, the idea of organized, and safe, sparring between two willing club members with no chance of someone dying or getting too injured was perfectly fine, "I think Ryuko's idea of starting a Fight Club is fine. It sounds like a lot of fun, after all."

Ichigo grimaced at the thought of Ururu's definition of 'fun.' As sweet and kind as she may be, there were some things that just went over her head, such as the fact that most humans can't crush rocks in their bare hands, "It's not you I'm worried about..."

"What's got you so scared?" Ryuko chuckled and closed her eyes, "I already told you that my plan has no flaws. I'm just working the system."

"Is that so?"

As if on cue, Ira Gamagori's massive persona appeared in front of Ryuko. With his large, gauntleted arms folded across his massive chest and a scowl adorning his face, Gamagori did not look pleased in the slightest upon seeing what Ryuko was attempting to do. When his eyes noticed what she had written on the wooden post next to her, his scowl deepened even further, "What is the meaning of this abrupt and rude public disturbance, Matoi? Have you filled out the proper paperwork to hold a non-violent demonstration?"

"You have eyes, don't you?" Ryuko smugly answered, "I'm starting a Fight Club."

"Hmm..." Gamagori looked at Ichigo, then Ururu before finally focusing back on Ryuko, "And I am to assume that you have managed to talk your follow students into your delusions? Don't screw with us, Matoi. If you do, I can guarantee you'll be buried in the paperwork for so long that you won't want to look at a pencil ever again."

"Like I'm scared of a little paperwork," Ryuko retorted, "If you ever do that to me, I'll just burn it all. Besides, you are the ones screwing with me by forcing all the students to form idiotic clubs and come after me. I mean, really, the Nanjing Lily Club? Whose bright idea was that anyway?"

Gamagori cleared his throat while he nervously adjusted the collar of his uniform just subtly enough that Ichigo and Matoi didn't pick up on it. They didn't need to know that with Jakuzure undercover as their mutual acquaintance against Lady Satsuki, he had been designated the temporary Non-Athletic Committee Chair by Lady Satsuki. One of his jobs as the temporary chair was to approve and reject various clubs as well as their names, "The club naming system of Honnouji Academy is not up for discussion, Matoi! The rules of this academy are ironclad! IRONCLAD! There are to be no exceptions or irregularities whatsoever!"

"Well, if that's the case, then you're looking at the new Fight Club President Ryuko Matoi!"

"Do you seriously think you have the clout to start a club out of the blue?" Gamagori half-asked, half- stated as he leaned over Ryuko menacingly, "It takes more than just a notion for a club to be formed."

"Oh?" Ryuko questioned and propped her feet up on the table Gamagori had so helpfully brought with him, "Like what?"

One of Gamagori's eyebrows rose in interest, "For starters, you will need a Vice-President to handle the non-administrative aspects of the club such as scheduling meetings and events as well as dealing with complaints from other students."

Ryuko looked back and forth before reaching over and dragging a perplexed Ururu to her side, "Ururu here is the Vice-President! If anyone has a problem with my methods, they can take it up with Ururu!"

Failing to dissuade her, Gamagori's eyebrow began twitching in anger, "Touché Matoi, but two members do not a club make. You also need a treasurer to deal with all the finances of the club."

"Mako!" Ryuko's call woke up Mako, who had fallen asleep while standing up.

Shaking her head to get rid of the still-lingering cobwebs, Mako saluted Ryuko, "Yes Ryuko?"

With a sly grin and not taking her eyes off Gamagori's annoyed face, Ryuko asked, "Mako, what's six raised to the sixth power?"

"Forty-six thousand six hundred and fifty-six!" Mako answered without hesitation before giggling, "Numbers are fun!"

To say that everyone was stunned would be an understatement. Ichigo was looking at Mako in a whole new light while Gamagori was rubbing his eyes in an attempt to remove the hallucination.

"Holy crap," Ichigo muttered in awe, "She's a damn math savant."

"Uhh..." For once Gamagori had nothing to say. Ryuko had effectively, and legally, countered each and every one of his points and arguments. Turning to Ichigo, he asked, "I don't suppose you're a part of this?"

Ichigo shook his head, "I want nothing to do with the Fight Club."

Gamagori stared down Ichigo for a moment before taking a deep breath and barking, "Matoi! You may have the required members to send in a form for club approval, but do you actually think such a thing would ever happen?"

The question had barely finished being asked before a bright light shone down from the top of Honnouji Academy. While Gamagori turned around to face who he knew was there, Ichigo and Ryuko winced slightly from the light.

"I'll allow the formation of this club!" Satsuki Kiryuin's authoritative voice echoed down.

"God damn, Satsuki Kiryuin," Ryuko muttered angrily as she stared up at said girl, "Up there looking down on us from high on her perch. I bet she's never had a problem in her entire life."

With Bakuzan planted firmly on the ground, Satsuki stared down at Ryuko, a sly and knowing smirk on her face, "Matoi, I take it from your childish attempt at forming a club that you're trying to ingratiate yourself within my system?"

"Pfft!" Ryuko stuck her tongue out at Satsuki, "As if! I'm only joining your systems so I can bring it down from the inside. I can't wait to see your expression when everything you built comes crashing down around your ears!"

"How drôle. Do try and not get dragged under by the current along the way," Satsuki quipped before turning her attention towards Ichigo, "And I see you are here as well, Ichigo. Tell me something. Are you going to join Matoi's Fight Club?"

"No," Ichigo answered without breaking eye contact, "But just because I'm not joining, that doesn't mean I'm going to let you just trample all over her."

"I see..." Satsuki's eye narrowed perceptively upon hearing Ichigo's answer. To be perfectly honest, she hadn't been expecting that sort

of answer from him. Her assumption was that Ichigo would do one of two things. The most likely choice was that he would stay out of Matoi's way, allowing her to be corrupted by the power afforded to her as a club captain and potentially leading Matoi to joining her cause. The second choice, while not as likely as the first, was that Ichigo would actively participate in the Fight Club, allowing Satsuki to subtly influence them both until they became enemies. She should have expected Ichigo to take a third option.

"I look forward to seeing how that works out for you, Ichigo," Satsuki smirked as she turned to walk away, "Perhaps it will allow us to continue our fight without time restrictions. Gamagori!"

"Yes, Lady Satsuki," Gamagori bowed his head before turning to Ryuko and slamming a table on the ground in front of her, "Matoi! Let us begin the paperwork!"

To no one's surprise, lines of One-Star students appeared behind Gamagori upon his announcement. Even so, Ryuko couldn't help but whistle, "Wow. You sure do switch gears fast."

"Despite my preference on the matter, Lady Satsuki has spoken and I must abide by whatever her decision may be," Gamagori formally stated before dropping large stacks of documentation on the table, "Matoi! As the president of the Fight Club, you are required by law to submit your club activity log every Friday by 4:00 PM. At the end of each and every month, excluding this one, your expenses are to be settled promptly and new expense applications for the next month are to be filed perfectly and in order."

Ryuko stared blankly at the piles of paperwork crowding the table and could only utter, "Guh?"

Uncaring of Ryuko's state of mind, Gamagori continued, "In addition to the previous requirements, you must also submit a Club Use Request Form in triplicate, sign the Honnouji Academy Club Contract and hand in a complete club member spreadsheet complete with their family members, emergency contacts, and life insurance

policies. Lastly, every morning at 7:00 AM there will be the Club President Council Meeting, which you are required to attend without fail! Any questions Matoi?"

Ryuko continued to stare at the paperwork, one eye twitching in angst, before pulled Mako over, "I lied to you. My friend, Mako Mankanshoku, says she would love to be the club president!"

"Bwa?" Mako's scream of shock caused everyone to wince in pain. As she began blubbering incoherently and nervous tears threatened to fall from her eyes, Ryuko began consoling her.

"You'll be a fine club president, Mako," Ryuko calmly said as she patted Mako on the head, "The main point of this club is for me to fight, so everything's pretty much already set up. After I beat the crap out of all the other club presidents, your reputation will skyrocket and your family will live in a better house."

"I know all that," Mako blubbered, "But I don't wanna be a club president!"

"I believe in you Mako," Ururu said cheerfully, but the lack of emotion in her voice negated some of its impact, "I'll help you be the best club president in all of Honnouji Academy."

"R-Really?" Mako asked tearfully.

Ururu nodded, "Uh huh."

With his hands in his pockets, Ichigo watched the scene with mild interest. He should have expected Ryuko to do something like pawing off the responsibilities of being a club president as soon as she saw how much work it would be. The only question he had is whether or not Mako could handle the strain of the job. Back in Karakura Town, he had taken quite a few odd jobs during his school breaks. A few of them had involved him doing inventory and crap like that. He just hoped Mako didn't think she could do everything on her own.

"I give them a week tops."

Ichigo looked upwards and saw Gamagori standing behind him. Standing in the giant man's shadow with a crestfallen expression, he asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Did I stutter, Ichigo Kurosaki," Gamagori glanced down at Ichigo briefly, "I give the Fight Club a week before it collapses in on itself. Matoi has no real motivation to form a club and Mankanshoku will collapse under the strain of being a club president. It's such a shame to see talent wasted on the youth."

Ichigo had to double take when he heard what Gamagori said, "Wasted on the youth? Just how many grades were you held back for anyway?"

"I'll have you know I'm only nineteen years old, Ichigo Kurosaki," Gamagori growled before coughing into his hand, "But there is another matter. Lady Satsuki requests your presence within the hour."

"Oh," and with that, any good mood that Ichigo may have had went away. He didn't like talking to Satsuki and went out of his way to publically avoid her. The matter wasn't helped by her apparent interest in him. Rumors had begun spreading until a few students, the instigators of said rumors, abruptly disappeared one night, "I thought she would leave me alone after I kicked not just her ass, but her little lackey's as well. You can go tell her that I want nothing to do with whatever she's planning."

"Who said you had a choice in the matter?"

Before Ichigo could respond, Gamagori reached down, grabbed Ichigo and threw him over his shoulder before turning to walk away. As Ryuko and Ururu started to get up and stop him, Gamagori turned and said, "Go about your business! Ichigo Kurosaki has a scheduled meeting with Lady Satsuki that he must attend! He will be



returned to you unharmed physically and mentally within three hours. You have my word as the Disciplinary Committee Chair!"

"Oh." Seemingly giving up on saving him, Ryuko sat back down and waved goodbye, "Have fun talking to Satsuki, Ichigo. We'll see you back at Mako's new digs."

"What!" Ichigo couldn't believe that he was being betrayed by Ryuko, "What the hell does that mean?"

"Yeah," Ururu mirrored Ryuko in waving goodbye, "Have fun Ichigo."

"Damn you both!"

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"Would you like some tea, Ichigo?"

"No thanks."

"Suit yourself," Satsuki waved away Soroi's attempt to give Ichigo tea with her hand. She had offered Ichigo Kurosaki the tea as a sign of courtesy and respect, but since he didn't want any, it would be prudent to keep stringing him along. Sipping her tea and sighing pleurably at the familiar taste, she closed her eyes and asked, "Do you perchance know why I've called you up to my private chambers?"

"I have an idea," Ichigo muttered as she folded his arms and looked around. Half the stuff hanging on the walls was more expensive than everything he owned put together. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that Byakuya would find her tastes in art and decoration to be 'acceptable.' Refocusing on Satsuki, he added, "But I don't think that's why you called me up here."

"Indeed it is not," Satsuki agreed without opening her eyes, "Those that spread such dreadful and false rumors must be forced to account for their actions. It is simply preposterous that I harbor any sort of emotional feelings for you. You and Matoi are obstacles in the path of my goals, and as such you two must be dealt with."

"And how did that work out for you last time?" It seemed his question struck a nerve as Ichigo noticed Satsuki's fingers tightening around her teacup.

"I will agree that my previous method was a tad... confrontational," Satsuki put her teacup down before she shattered it. She had to remind herself that Ichigo Kurosaki was not one of her Elite Four or even Matoi. He was someone that not only beat her while she was using Junketsu's full power, but did it without anger or emotions. If she had fought Matoi, Satsuki assumed that she would have been greatly angry with her. That anger would have clouded her judgment and dampened her skills. Opening her blue eyes and staring directly into Ichigo's brown ones, she asked, "Have you given any thought to my proposal?"

"I'm not going to be your student council Vice-President," Ichigo answered bluntly as he stood up to leave. If that was the whole point of this little meeting, then he had nothing else to talk about. Before he could take three steps, he found Satsuki's Bakuzan hovering next to his neck.

"We are not done speaking, Ichigo," Satsuki ordered authoritatively. She couldn't believe that Ichigo would have the gall to rudely leave her presence. Power or not, she was not about to just let him get away with it, "There is still one matter I need to discuss with you."

Ichigo looked at Bakuzan before turning to face Satsuki. He didn't like having a sword pointed at his neck for no reason. Eyes narrowing in annoyance, he coldly asked, "What?"

"Your Kamui, Mugetsu was it?" Satsuki's eyes drifted down until they locked gazes with one of Mugetsu's, causing the Kamui to narrow

them and growl in retaliation. Despite the fact that Satsuki didn't feel like she was going to attack Ichigo, Mugetsu still didn't appreciate the looks she was receiving. Satsuki, upon noticing the reaction she was getting from Mugetsu, stepped back and sheathed Bakuzan, "So my theory was correct. Kamui are indeed sentient to the point where they can understand and visualize the world around them. If the reaction I received from Mugetsu is any indication, they are also able to heard and comprehend verbal commands and phrases."

"What's the point?" Ichigo didn't like where Satsuki was going with this. He wasn't some mannequin for her to stare at.

"My point is as follows." As she spread her arms out wide, Satsuki motioned for Ichigo to look at Junketsu, "When you bear witness to the majesty of Junketsu, what do you see?"

At first Ichigo thought Satsuki was joking, but upon seeing the stern look on her face, he decided to humor her. As he looked over Junketsu, from Satsuki's shoulders down to her thigh-high boots, Ichigo felt, rather than saw, the Kamui's gaze on him. While Junketsu still did not say a word to him, he could sense the hatred wafting off the Kamui. It wasn't directed at him, that much he knew, but that it seemed to hold such hatred for Satsuki gave Ichigo cause for concern.

***"I sense it too, Ichigo,"*** Mugetsu's voice was full of caution upon sensing Junketsu. While her interaction with Danketsu was one of mutual dislike and with Senketsu one of annoyance, Mugetsu did not understand Junketsu's motivation. That Junketsu did not say a word, even in the presence of another Kamui made Mugetsu think something was off with it, ***"You can feel it, can't you Ichigo? Junketsu's hatred for Satsuki Kiryuin is nearly palpable. If given half a chance, it would devour her without hesitation."***

"Is something the matter, Ichigo?" Satsuki's question brought Ichigo's attention away from his conversation with Mugetsu, "It appears that you were listening intently to something I could not hear. Could it be your Kamui?"

Ichigo wasn't that shocked that Satsuki realized Mugetsu was talking with him. She was anything if not observant if the way she fought him was any indication. Shrugging his shoulders, he wanted to keep his mouth shut, but at the same time he didn't want to see Satsuki die. He may seriously dislike her, but he would not want to see her die.

"I was just thinking about something," Ichigo dodged around the question expertly, "And it concerns your Kamui."

"Oh?" Satsuki's eyebrow rose in mild interest, "And what might that be?"

Deciding against skirting around the issue, Ichigo bluntly said, "Junketsu hates you with every Life Fiber of its being. You should stop wearing it as soon as possible. If you let your guard down once, it won't hesitate to kill you.

"So am I to assume this advice is coming out of some concern for me?" Satsuki asked as she turned her back to Ichigo, "That is what I've come to expect from you, Ichigo. Showing concern and mercy for your enemies even when they are trying to kill you. Chivalry exists in the world, but you should be careful not to let it cloud your judgment, Ichigo. There are those more opportunistic than myself in this world that won't hesitate to use your chivalry against you."

Ichigo remained silent as she walked over to the large windows of her private quarters and gazed upon the autumn afternoon, "Junketsu's dislike for me is not news. Since the moment I shared with it my life blood, it has constantly tested and probed my mental defenses for a weakness, but it is all for naught! My will and determination are like a castle while Junketsu's attacks are nothing more than thrown rocks! It will be a cold day in hell when my mind becomes weak enough to fall victim to clothing!"

Mugetsu growled at Satsuki's lack of respect and appreciation for Kamui, and Ichigo couldn't help but agree. Kamui weren't things designed to be enslaved and controlled by humans. Through his

time working with Mugetsu, Ichigo had come to realize he and his Kamui needed to work together to be at their most powerful. Satsuki was strong, that much was true, but as long as she kept her current point of view, she would never be strong enough to take him down. Ichigo only hoped she realized her mistake before Junketsu killed her.

"Whatever," Ichigo mockingly waved goodbye as he turned to leave. Perhaps he would be able to take three steps before getting a sword pointed at his neck, "Tell me how that works out for you when I defeat you a second time."

Satsuki didn't bother to face Ichigo as he left. Once he was gone, she winced and clasped a hand on her shoulder. It seemed that Junketsu hadn't appreciated being in such close contact with his Mugetsu, but Satsuki couldn't understand what would cause such a negative reaction. There had to be something she was missing. As the pain abated for the moment, Satsuki sat back down and consoled herself with the knowledge that Jakuzure would soon return with the information she needed to unlock Junketsu's actual power.

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Aikuro Mikisugi sat alone in his classroom. Staring out over the night sky above Honnou City, he couldn't help but reminisce about the day's events.

"Well," He muttered as he chewed on the end of his cigarette, "Ryuko completely fell for Satsuki Kiruin's trap hook, line and sinker. At least Ichigo was wise enough to stay on the sidelines. That will make bringing her back a lot easier in the long run."

Ruffling a hand through his blue unkempt hair, Aikuro sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, "It's been a while since we've met face to face. How have you been, Kinue?"

Sitting in Aikuro's chair with her legs propped up on the desk was Kinue Kinagase. While she still wore the same type of biker's outfit as when she saved Ryuko's life, she had changed the colors to match up with Danketsu. It was a small nod of acknowledgement to her Kamui and it was only the first of many steps to helping it recover.

"Pretty good I guess," she answered calmly. Despite what she was doing, she still couldn't express herself too much. It seemed that her attempts at helping Danketsu only made the Kamui more pissed off, "Nothing's really happened except I learned that hearing my Kamui speak isn't a sign of insanity."

"Oh?" Aikuro was slightly intrigued. Sure, he had heard Ryuko and Ichigo speak and listen to their Kamui, but he assumed it was more of a symbolic thing since he couldn't hear anything, "That's good news I guess. I was worried that you would snap and come after me. I was all prepared to take you down and stuff."

Kinue's hand shot out faster than Aikuro could react to and beamed him in the forehead with his coffee mug. As he held his slightly bleeding forehead, Kinue got up and walked over to the window next to him, "Satsuki Kiryuin is playing them for fools."

"Well..." Aikuro rubbed his nose to make sure it wasn't broken, "Really she's only playing Ryuko. Ichigo, on the other hand, is savvy enough to not get involved with Satsuki's schemes."

"Still..." Kinue clenched a fist and ignored Danketsu's demands to fight Junketsu. It seemed that every time her Kamui wanted to fight, it would pick out a random Kamui. It was almost as if it couldn't make up its' mind, "... there is no doubt that Satsuki will try and influence Ichigo in some way, shape or form. She has never met someone that she considered her equal. Ryuko, as much as we would think otherwise, is nothing more than an extremely belligerent pawn for Satsuki. As much as she wishes to take down Honnouji Academy's ruler, Satsuki simply brushes off her attempts and baits her along with enough information to keep her on the leash."

"It's not that bad," Aikuro muttered, "Ichigo's broken some of the hold Satsuki has on Ryuko. Did you know he's already told her who he thinks killed her dad?"

Kinue looked surprised at Aikuro's information before shaking her head in amusement. She should have known that Aikuro would be able to find out information such as that. He wasn't Nudist Beach's top information gatherer for nothing. Chuckling lightly, she folded her arms across her chest and said, "It's good to see that you haven't changed much since our last meeting. I would have thought going undercover as a teacher would dampen your skills, but they seem to be as sharp as ever."

Aikuro smirked back, "Some things never change."

"I suppose they don't," Kinue quipped before refocusing herself, "You said that Ichigo told Ryuko about her father's murderer. Who did he say it was?"

"I'll give you three guesses." Aikuro solemnly held up three fingers, "Here's a hint: Her name starts with the letter 'N'."

Kinue bit back a curse as she felt Danketsu become riled upon hearing the Grand Couturier's name, "Nui Harime... I should have known it was someone like her. There aren't many people that would have been able to take down Professor Matoi in his own home. The man had defenses specifically designed to destroy Life Fiber clothing and weapons. Only the Grand Couturier would have been strong enough to simply stroll right through the automated defenses without so much as a single scratch."

"Ryuko knowing about Nui Harime will only help her in the long run," Aikuro turned away from the window and moved to his desk. Unlocked the bottom-most drawer, he began rifling through various files he had been meticulously keeping. Humming as he searched for a particular one he explained, "I don't think I need to remind you about how the Grand Couturier likes to fight. We lost enough

operatives getting what little we know about her that it would be dishonorable to not put it to good use."

Kinue took the folder from Aikuro without saying a word. As she flipped through the mostly detailed pages, she couldn't begin to think about the amount of operatives Nudist Beach has lost to the Grand Couturier. The ones that were found dead were always considered the lucky ones. At least they knew what happened to them and could inform their families that they fell in the line of duty. It was the ones that were never found... or partially found... that caused Kinue to pause upon the thought of fighting the Grand Couturier. There was a reason Nui Harime got to where she was and thinking of her as nothing more than a teenage girl with superhuman abilities would only lead to an untimely and violent death.

*" Strengths... tactics... knowledge... abilities... they are all in here. Yet none of that will be helpful if I'm forced to confront her again."*

Everything that Nudist Beach knew about Nui Harime was in this folder. The only problem was that they didn't know what her weaknesses might be. Even six months later, headquarters was still trying to puzzle out how Professor Matoi managed to blind Nui's left eye. Any previous attempts at hurting the Grand Couturier all failed without causing injuries. What did Professor Matoi have up his sleeve that Nui Harime didn't expect?"

Noticing a small addendum to the bottom of one page, Kinue frowned, "I noticed that you added my observations from my encounter with the Grand Couturier in Rome."

Nui Harime liked to talk, and by talk Kinue meant hold entire one-sided conversations with her opponent. During their clash in Rome, where Kinue managed to get away mostly unscathed, Nui had tried baiting her time and time again with information that the Grand Couturier should not have access to. It was only thanks to her ironclad grip on her emotions that Kinue didn't snap back at her.



Aikuro smiled smugly, "Who knew the Grand Couturier would be distracted by a sweets shop? Perhaps we should create a candy bazooka to take her down? But on a more serious note, we need to figure out what she hopes to accomplish from her little gambit. How does telling Ryuko about murdering her father give her an advantage? I can see how it might make Ryuko angry, but what else are we missing?"

"That's her exact goal," Kinue said in realization as she completely understood the Grand Couturier's final plan, "Nui Harime is banking every aspect of her strategy on enraging Ryuko with the knowledge of her father's murder. Ryuko doesn't know what happens to those that lose control over their Kamui, does she? If she snaps as badly as I think she will, Senketsu will merge with her body and form a bloody, raging monster. I don't think I need to remind you how bad that would be."

Aikuro grimaced while his eyes narrowed. That day would forever live in his memories as one of the few that he was absolutely sure he was going to die.

*Flashback - 10 Years Ago*

*Aikuro pushed against the flow of fleeing Nudist Beach operatives as he held a hand to his side. He could feel the blood seeping through his fingers, the result of being thrown through a safety window and getting a shard of glass stabbed in his abdomen.*

*"Tsumugu!" Aikuro pressed a finger to his ear and shouted in order to be heard over the emergency alarm going off, "Where is she heading?"*

*"She's heading along North Corridor B!" Tsumugu's response was punctuated by a loud explosion, "She's already torn through two bulkheads! If we don't stop her soon, she's going to reach the surface!"*

*Kinue, or whatever she had become, could not be allowed to reach the surface. Nudist Beach operatives had weapons designed to take down and destroy Life Fiber clothing, but so far their efforts had amounted to crap. If Kinue reached the surface before she was stopped, the death toll would easily reach in the thousands.*

*" Do what you can to stall her!" Aikuro ordered as he reached in his pocket for his specialized ammunition. It was only one bullet, but it should do the trick, "I have something that should take her out."*

*" What?" Tsumugu's pain-filled voiced shouted through the earpiece, "She's my sister! We can't kill her."*

*" We don't have a choice," Aikuro grimaced as he stepped over several dead operatives. From the wounds on their bodies, it was clear that Kinue had quickly, and hopefully painlessly, dismembered them, "Pretty soon we won't have enough people to even stall her."*

*" I know," Tsumugu's voice lowered in regret and Aikuro could barely hear him over the siren, "Just give me a chance to - "*

*Whatever Tsumugu said next was cut off as a loud, and distinctly feminine, roar echoed through the Nudist Beach base. Turning around a corner and opening the door to the stairwell, he hoped that he would make it in time. He still could not believe how this all started.*

*It had been a simple training exercise. The same one that Kinue had been doing almost every day for the past three months. There were no deviations, changes or anything different about it except for the number of enemies and overall configuration of the training chamber. Aikuro had been the overseer for the day's exercise and for the first half hour everything had gone smoothly. With the aid of her Kamui, Danketsu Professor Matoi had dubbed it, Kinue was looking to be their secret weapon against Revocs. What better weapon was there to use against those that used Life Fibers?*

*Then Kinue started losing control.*

*Aikuro had asked what was wrong, but Kinue couldn't explain what was happening. All she could say was that Danketsu was getting angry and telling her to destroy her enemies. Aikuro, panicking at Kinue's state of mind, told her to stop the exercise but it was already too late. Kinue screamed and halfway through it, she was surrounded by a burst of purple and blue light that looked and felt wrong to Aikuro. Before he was thrown backwards and through the observation window, Aikuro was sure he saw a bloody purple and blue monster with Kinue's hair cutting its way out of the test chamber.*

*" Damn it," Aikuro's fist tightened around the Adhesive Bullet in his pocket. It would work to stop Kinue's bloody rampage, but Aikuro wasn't certain if she would survive the effects.*

*End Flashback*

Aikuro considered everyone fortunate that Tsumugu was somehow able to bring his sister back from whatever hell she had gone to. Even so, the death toll from her rampage was staggering. Thirty three operatives died trying to stop her and over one hundred more were injured. Kinue herself had almost died from blood loss and it was only due to Tsumugu sharing the same type of blood that she survived at all.

That day was the last he saw Kinue or Tsumugu truly smile.

"Nobody blamed you for what happened," Aikuro stated the obvious, "Not even Professor Matoi expected what happened to occur. You were the first human to wear a Kamui and survive. The effects, good and bad, on your mind were completely unknown."

"I am aware of that," Kinue answered stoically, "But I fear for what might happen to Ryuko. I trust that Ichigo will not lose control of his emotions. He is, after all, Masaki's son. If the worst comes to pass, do you think you'll be able to kill Ryuko to stop her?"

"I don't know," Aikuro admitted solemnly, "But let's hope that never happens. I don't want to die and find Professor Matoi waiting to kick my ass up in heaven."

The corners of Kinue's lips curled up in a facsimile of a smile, "I'm glad you haven't changed much over the years. You mentioned that Ichigo told Ryuko that Nui Harime was the most probable suspect for Professor Matoi's murder, correct?"

Upon seeing Aikuro nod, Kinue let out a sigh of relief, "That's just what we needed to happen. If she is aware of her father's killer, when the Grand Couturier tries to break the news as badly as possible, Ryuko won't snap as badly."

"That only leaves the question of Nui Harime's obsession with Ichigo," Aikuro had pondered what the Grand Couturier's motives were, but came up with nothing.

"My best guess..." Kinue narrowed her eyes in thought, "... is that it has something to do with Isshin's past connection with Ragyo. It would be helpful he had been more forthcoming with information concerning their relationship."

Aikuro smirked seductively, "Just be glad Isshin's told us anything at all. More than half of the information we have on Revocs and Ragyo Kiryuin is due to Isshin's firsthand knowledge."

"Before I take my leave, there is just one last thing I need to ask you." Kinue paused in mid-stride as she turned back to Aikuro, "I noticed another girl always hanging around or near Ichigo. Your report says that she transferred from Karakura Town a few days after Ichigo. Do you know who she is?"

"Her name is Ururu Tsumugiyu, and all I know is that Isshin sent her to protect Ichigo," Aikuro explained as he put back on his thick glasses. It wouldn't be proper for a student to see him half naked after all, "At first I didn't know what he meant by that, but after hearing that the Grand Couturier has been stalking about, with her

focus fixated on Ichigo, I think I understand why. Her strength is monstrous. She was able to defeat Sanageyama in seconds, not in his Blade Regalia mind you, and stop Tsumugu in his tracks."

"That is not Ururu Tsumugiya," Kinue felt trepidation as her thoughts continued to swirl around one central concept, "In all likelihood, the real Ururu was killed long before arriving at Honnou City. Ichigo and Ryuko are in grave danger."

It took Aikuro a moment to see the connection, but when he did he moved quickly. Rushing back to his desk, he began haphazardly pulling out folders and pictures. Eventually grabbing Ururu's file, he slid it open on the desk next to the file on Nui Harime and nearly collapsed upon seeing the two pictures side by side, "Dear god... how could I have not seen it?"

"I'm going out to stop her," Kinue stormed towards the window and threw it open in one motion. With one foot firmly on the frame and her hand on the side, she turned to Aikuro and said, "If I have any luck, I should be able to expose her plans long before they come to fruition. Watch my back Aikuro."

"I will..." Aikuro watched Kinue fall to the ground before she disappeared into the distance, "... and be careful."

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## **Kamui Tales #7 - Not Meant For Children**

If there was one thing Tessai Tsukabishi loved, it was the peace and quiet that enveloped the shop whenever Kisuke and Yoruichi left to do things. Kisuke called it research, but Tessai was no idiot. He didn't care to know about their debauchery or whatever they planned to do. Whenever Kisuke would announce they were leaving, Tessai would simply nod and warn them about getting caught or in trouble.

As he checked off another set of items while doing inventory, Tessai heard the bell above the front door of the shop ring. Wondering who it could be, since it was nearly ten at night, he arched an eyebrow and headed to the front of the shop. Upon entering, he was greeted with the sight of an overly dressed blonde haired girl in a pink Lolita dress walking down the aisles with a smile on her face.

"I must apologize," Tessai said in his normally deep voice, "But the shop is closed. If you want to buy something, you'll have to come back tomorrow morning at 7:00 AM."

"Oh, that's not a problem," Nui Harime cheerfully correctly, "I'm actually looking for someone. Are you Kisuke Urahara?"

"You're looking for the boss?" Tessai hummed thoughtfully before saying, "Mr. Urahara is out of town and won't be back for a few days. As his assistant, I am privy to everything he knows. Perhaps I could be of service?"

"That's awesome!" Nui said happily as she pulled out her purple Scissor Blade. As the light reflected off the surface of the weapon, an unholy glee filled Nui's remaining eye, "Perhaps you can tell me where the Life Fibers are?"

It all happened so fast that Nui didn't see it coming. One minute she was holding her Scissor Blade against the defenseless human and the next the weapon was missing. Blinking owlshly and looking at her empty hand, Nui looked up and saw Tessai holding her Scissor Blade delicately in his hands.

"Children should not play with sharp objects," Tessai said as the light glinted menacingly off his glasses, "I see from your eye patch that you have already learned this lesson the hard way."

Nui quickly recovered from her shock and twirled around before reappearing behind Tessai with her arm outstretched, "Stealing is wrong you know."

Almost as if able to see her, Tessai turned and grasped Nui by the back of her dress, "But when stealing is done to keep someone from further hurting themselves, then it is fine."

Walking towards the front of the shop, Tessai opened the door before dropping Nui onto her feet. Before closing the door, he told her, "I will only return your toy to you once your parents come and pick it up. Have a good and safe night, young lady."

Nui didn't understand how Tessai, a stupid pig in clothing, managed to not only overpower her but also steal her purple Scissor Blade. What made it even more embarrassing for her was that she had to use her Mental Refitting on a pair of humans that looked enough like her to recover her weapon. There was no way that the Director would ever find out about this.

# One of These Nights

*Some of you are no doubt surprised by the quickness that this chapter came out with? Well, don't be alarmed because the quality is still as high as ever. This chapter could be called, with a lot of evidence backing it up, the culmination of several plot threads coalescing together and finally meeting. The events that happen in this chapter were bound to happen eventually and could have been a lot worse or better depending on whether certain events had come or not come to pass. Anyway, enjoy the chapter and review it if you can!*

*The edits of Chapters 3 and 4 are coming along smoothly. I felt that you, my readers, would appreciate a new chapter over some rehashed old content. So expect the updated 3 and 4 within the next few days.*

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## Chapter 20 - One of These Nights

Isshin Kurosaki knew that when one works hard all day, the best thing to do was to take a nap. Unlike his friend, Ryuken, who was the head of a multinational corporation and was a complete stick in the mud when it came to hanging out, Isshin didn't have much to do. Sure he still needed to set a few final touches to the Karakura Town defense network, but at this point not even Nui Harime could get inside to threaten his family. If only he could adjust the network to stop Life Fibers from regenerating. Isshin would do his damn best to trick Nui from coming after him, but alas, that was never going to happen. He was just going to have to live with the knowledge that his defenses blew off several of her limbs.



"No Masaki..." Isshin muttered in his sleep as a goofy smirk spread on his face, "... I'm not into that kind of stuff. Wait. Ragyo wants to do it with you? Well then, I suppose I'm up for trying new things..."

"Karin!" Yuzu Kurosaki looked through the whole house for her twin sister only to find her staring at her father's sleeping body. Walking up next to her, she looked down at Isshin, "What are you doing?"

"Listening to dad," Karin answered with a hint of annoyance in her voice, "I think he's having a perverted dream."

Yuzu gasped before asking, "Oh! Should we wake him up?"

"Nah," Karin waved off her twin's concerned and turned to leave. Simply being around her dad was giving her a migraine, "I don't care. Let the perverted old man have his fantasies."

### *Isshin's Dream - 21 Years Ago*

*For decades Isshin Shiba thought doing paperwork as a captain was the most boring and tedious work in all of existence. He had never expected that something else existed in the world even more boring. Propping his cheek on his hand, he looked at his watch and repressed the urge to audibly grumble upon seeing that he had only been here for an hour. He would have thought from the amount of stubble on his face and the fact that he must have lost around ten pounds that he had been trapped in this hellhole for days.*

*Isshin HATED talking about clothes.*

*To be perfectly frank, he wasn't the one talking about clothes and fashion and other boring stuff. It was Masaki, god bless her, and Ragyo Kiryuin who were discussing the new and hot trends and fashions spreading across the world.*

*When he received his invitation from Ragyo to come to Kiryuin Manor for lunch, or whatever rich people on Earth ate, he thought it would be an interesting trip. It didn't take long for Masaki to find out*

*and, upon hearing the news, screaming in happiness and begging to take her with him. So here he was, sitting in Ragyo's massive study while listening to the only two women on Earth willing to talk to him discuss clothing.*

*" You have great tastes, Masaki," Ragyo's noble voice complimented. She was once again wearing a low-cut dress that emphasized her well-endowed body, which Isshin did his damn best not to look at. He didn't need Masaki threatening the one important part of his body again, "But have you noticed what is coming out of Italy in the next week..."*

*That was the final straw. Deciding to cut his losses and flee before he was sucked completely into the nightmare, Isshin stretched and stood up, "Uh, Ragyo. Where's the bathroom?"*

*" Fourth door on the right," Ragyo answered with a bemused smirk.*

*" Thanks," Isshin said as he quickly left the study. As soon as he was in the clear and the doors were shut behind him, he sighed in relief. That had been really close. Just a few more minutes and he would have become one of them. Isshin shuddered at the thought of enjoying talking about clothing, fashion and other weird things like that.*

*" I don't know how much more I can take of this," Isshin rubbed his eyes to try and get some of the tiredness he was feeling out of them. When he heard a familiar chuckling, he turned and saw Soroi walking towards him with a smile on his face.*

*" Having fun, Master Isshin?" The butler's voice was full of mirth, which meant that he was being sarcastic. With a head full of still mostly brown hair that was just beginning to thin, the Kiryuin head butler still looked several years younger than he was.*

*" How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?" Isshin grumbled in response. He knew that Soroi appreciated his presence around Ragyo. He was the only one, according to Soroi, that made*

*Ragyo act like her old self. Since becoming the CEO of Revocs, Ragyo had become consumed by her work and Soroi was beginning to worry it would affect her health. Once she met Isshin, Ragyo began relaxing and enjoying life again.*

*" Just one more time I'm afraid," Soroi chuckled at the familiar joke, "Were you aware of a rumor going around concerning Lady Ragyo and yourself?"*

*Isshin did not like the sound of that one bit. Rumors were evil beasts worse than hollows that could drag down even a shinigami captain into an abyss that their soul could never escape from, "What rumor?"*

*" Well, I probably shouldn't say anything. It would be rather rude of me to comment on such rumors," Soroi may have said those words, but Isshin could see the bemused smirk on the elder butler's face. He was not particularly amused by it, "But if you insist on knowing, I suppose I will tell you. Rumor has it that Lady Ragyo is smitten with you and is hoping you would propose to her by the end of the year."*

*" I... propose... her..." Isshin collapsed on the ground and began sputtering incoherently as various images of Ragyo and himself walking down the aisle passed through his mind. Quickly bringing himself back to reality by focusing on Masaki's smiling face, Isshin gasped and returned to the conscious world. He was simply friends with Ragyo. There was nothing special about their relationship. She knew he was in love with Masaki and as far as he could tell, she was perfectly understanding of it.*

*Pushing off the ground, Isshin grabbed the front of Soroi's suit and glared harshly at the still smiling man, "Don't you ever joke about something like that again. Love is not something you should joke about, but..." Isshin paused and thought about Soroi's words. What if the man was right and Ragyo did love him. Could he look her in the eye and say that he didn't feel the same way about her?*

*" If you're not kidding about this, then jeez," Isshin let out a breath and scratched the back of his neck. What was he going to say to*

*Ragyo if she was expecting such an answer? He needed to think about this for a while, "I-I don't want to break Ragyo's heart or anything. I will always be in love with Masaki and nothing will change that, but I can't just ignore Ragyo's feelings for me. Damn, this isn't an easy thing to think about."*

*" You truly are a gentleman worthy of Lady Ragyo's love and attention, Master Isshin," Soroi said with a short bow, much to Isshin's annoyance, "But I do see your point. Love is fickle, as they say, but if anyone could let Lady Ragyo down gently without hurting her feelings, it would be you. Simply put, you are the best - "*

*" Lady Ragyo! Lady Ragyo!"*

*Both men turned and saw a young woman running down the hall towards them in a state of full blown panic. Eighteen year old Rei Hououmaru, the bookish and overworked personal assistant to Ragyo Kiryuin, looked as if she hadn't slept in days, which was extremely likely given the amount of work she did. Dressed in a skirt that fell to just below her knees and with her light purple hair in a disheveled state, Rei looked like she would collapse at any moment.*

*" Ah! Mr. Shiba!" Rei looked over the side of the large stack of folders and files in her arms once she noticed Isshin standing in the hallway. Her relieved smile quickly vanished when she stepped on her untied shoelace and fell face first onto the ground with a loud thud while her files and papers flew everywhere.*

*" Uh..." Isshin stared at the fallen form of Rei, a trail of smoke seeming to drift out of her ears, for several awkward seconds before asking, "Are you alright Rei?"*

*" I'm sorry!" Rei apologized as she got back up. Organizing the folders as best she could, Rei continued, "I forgot my glasses and I can't see that well right now! Do you know where Lady Ragyo is? It's really important that I speak with her!"*

*" She's in there," Isshin numbly pointed towards the study, "But I don't think she wants to - "*

*" Lady Ragyo!" Rei ignored Isshin's warning as she barged through the doors and made a beeline towards her boss, "I have the latest reports from the European office. The market saturation values for Revocs products are thirteen percent lower than the estimates!"*

*As Rei Hououmaru continued to list off things that she was absolutely sure Ragyo needed to take care of right away, Isshin shook his head. That girl really needed a vacation.*

*End Dream*

Isshin woke up with a snort. Yawning and rubbing his face, he sat up and noticed that it was almost ten at night. Noticing his phone on the table, Isshin began to panic. Kinue should have arrived at Honnou City by now and she most likely already met Ururu.

"Oh crap," Isshin raced to his phone and frantically began dialing a number. He can't believe he completely forgot to tell Aikuro about Ururu. If Kinue met Ururu before he had a chance to explain, things were going to get bad.

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Ichigo was relaxing after a terrible, at least terrible to him, day. First Ryuko had the bad idea of forming a Fight Club, but once she saw how much work it required she pawned it off to Mako without even asking her and finally he was once again kidnapped by Gamagori and brought before Satsuki Kiryuin. He wondered if it was healthy to begin thinking of all of this as normal.

"What are you thinking about, Ichigo?" Ururu asked in concern from her spot next to him. They were sitting on the roof of Mako's new condo, where her family had been relocated once she became the

Fight Club president. It was similar enough to Ururu's place, she did live in the One-Star Residential District after all, but it was quite the step up from the Slums they were used to.

"Ah, nothing," Ichigo waved his hand dismissively.

Ururu looked at him before turning her gaze towards Tournesol, which Ichigo was holding in his hand and staring at intently, "It doesn't look like nothing."

Ichigo sighed, "I'm just thinking about everything, is all."

A lot has happened to him since his arrival at Honnouji Academy. With everything that's happened, from No Late Day to Nui Harime to Satsuki Kiryuin's persistent and pathetic attempts at flattery, Ichigo hasn't had the chance to just sit back and relax. Every time that he's thought he would have the time to do just that, something happened to annoy or piss him off, "It's just weird, you know? Everything that's happened here just feels really weird. A couple of months ago I would have thought people wearing clothes that could talk and transform was stupid, but now that I have Mugetsu everything has changed."

**" You better not be talking about me, Ichigo,"** Mugetsu growled sleepily before yawning and closing her eyes, **"Because if you are, I'm... going... to... zzz..."**

"It's not so bad being here, actually," Ururu smiled gently as she pulled her legs closer to her chest, "It feels more natural and safe than Karakura High School. Everybody is so nice and friendly and they don't look at me like I'm some sort of outcast. Here I have friends like you, Mako and Ryuko. Jinta was my only friend back in Karakura besides your sisters."

Ichigo didn't say anything in response. He hadn't known how hard of a time Ururu had fitting in and making friends until he asked Kisuke about it. She was too socially awkward and was so afraid of hurting someone with her supernatural strength that she never made too

many friends. It made sense why Jinta, who was strong in his own right but nowhere near Ururu's level, would be her closest friend.

"It's not going to be safe here for much longer," Ichigo commented stoically. Whatever it was Satsuki was planning, he knew for a fact that it wouldn't be diplomatic. If the worst came to pass, he would have to fight her again, "Odds are you're going to be forced to fight. I... uh... know you don't like fighting and conflict, but can you do it?"

Ururu was silent as she thought about Ichigo's question. Could she willingly go and fight someone? Being forced to protect those she cared about from a known threat, like Nui Harime, was one thing, but if she were to fight someone, Ururu was afraid that she might kill them. Her strength was too high for a normal person to survive a single attack. The students of Honnouji Academy may have Goku Uniforms, but none of them, not even the Elite Four, could stand up to her if she went all out on them.

"If it's to protect my friends, I think I can do it," Ururu said as she stared up at the moon.

The next several minutes passed in silence, which was broken when the door to the top of the building was kicked open. Turning to see who it was, they saw it was Mako who, before saying anything, grunted as she hefted a large bag over her shoulder, nearly hitting Ryuko in the process, "Hello Ururu! Hello Ichigo! What are you two doing up here?"

"Just thinking about some things," Ichigo answered with a shrug of his shoulders, "What's with the bag?"

"This is all the food I was able to buy that I've never tried before!" Mako exclaimed while she literally dove into the large sack. As she looked for something in particular, causing Ryuko to duck out of the way lest she get hit in the face by a piece of exotic fruit, Mako continued to talk, "There are fruits and meats in here that I've never seen before. I didn't even know a color like this existed! It's fantabulous! Oh, that reminds me! I found something for you, Ururu!"

"Something for me..." Ururu tilted her head, "Like what?"

"Here!" Mako thrust a piece of food into Ururu's mouth, "I know how much you like crabs, lobsters and other shellfish! So I had my mom order this! It's called a crab omelet! So what do you think?"

Ururu chewed on the food for a few moments, her eyes glazing over, before quickly turning to Mako and saying, in the happiest tone Ichigo had ever heard from the normally quiet girl, "That was the best thing I have ever tasted. Do you have any more?"

"Nope, but I can order more!" Mako said happily with a wave of her arms, "My family has enough money now, and it's all thanks to Ryuko!"

Ryuko scratched the back of her neck in embarrassment. The constant thanks from Mako's family were too much for her. She started the Fight Club so that Mako and her family would have a good life that was free of hardship and poverty. While she and her dad never saw eye to eye for the most part, Ryuko had grown up quite privileged and she wanted Mako to have the same opportunities.

"Come on, Mako," Ryuko blushed and turned away, "You don't need to constantly thank me. I did it for you as a friend, not a favor."

Ichigo rolled his eyes as Mako exclaimed that she was never going to stop thanking Ryuko, "Hey Mako, just don't let the wealth go to your head. I know a guy who's really wealthy, and he's such a boring and snooty asshole."

"Don't worry, Ichigo!" Mako pumped her fist in the air, "As long as my name is Mako Mankanshoku, I will not let the corruption inherent to wealth and power get the better of me!"

Ryuko laughed at Mako's behavior. She really did appreciate Mako's sense of humor, even if her friend didn't realize it. It helped to even



out some of the weird and crazy things that tended to happen at Honnouji Academy.

**" Ryuko. Something's coming."**

"Huh?" Ryuko turned to Senketsu. Up until now her Kamui had been fast asleep, "What are you talking about, Senketsu?"

**" Hmm..."** Senketsu's single eye narrowed in contemplation, ***"It's just like I felt before your fight against Satsuki Kiryuin. Another Kamui is approaching us!"***

"What? Another Kamui?" Ryuko's outburst caught the attention of everyone on the roof, "Can you say anything more - "

Ryuko barely saw it coming out of the corner of her eye. One second she was asking Senketsu to tell her what he felt before she saw a blue star-like object appear in the distance. The next thing she knew she was tumbling backwards across the rooftop. Skidding to a stop with her face against the roof, more pissed off than unharmed, she picked herself up and was immediately crushed under Mako's big bag of food.

"Oh, for fuck's sake..." Ryuko's muffled voice grumbled as she dragged herself free from under the bag, "Who the hell would attack us on a school night?"

"Please watch your language," An older female voice chastised, "A young lady like yourself should not speak so crudely, especially around the presence of boys."

"Huh?" Ryuko squinted as the smoke from whatever impacted against the roof cleared away before gasping when she saw the woman standing between her and Ichigo was Kinue Kinagase, "Hey, I know you. You're that woman who saved my life after my fight against Sanageyama."

Kinue's mouth curled up in the barest hint of an approving smile. It appeared that Ryuko had taken her loss against Sanageyama to better improve herself. She could feel the difference in Senketsu's power. While it wasn't appreciably noticeable just yet, Kinue was certain Ryuko would only continue to get stronger, "I'm glad you remember me. I saw the end of your fight. You were quite impressive to come up with a plan on the fly like that. Well done."

"Err... thanks," Ryuko muttered before everything caught up with her, "Hey! Wait a second. Why did you just attack me?"

"I'm afraid that you are mistaken. I didn't attack you," Kinue corrected as she slammed the silver case hanging off her back onto the roof hard enough to create spider cracks in the concrete. As Kinue undid the three latches on her case, she continued speaking, "Neither did I come here to attack Ichigo or your friend, Mako. My goal here tonight is to stop her."

Kinue pointed to Ururu, who was oblivious about the whole thing, "Me?"

Narrowing her eyes at Ururu's question, Kinue opened her silver case and pulled out an intricately designed blade. She couldn't afford to go easy on her opponent. Doing so would only end up in her death or worse. Her weapon of choice, which she noticed was as polished as ever, if the glint of light reflecting off the faint red surface meant anything, would be perfect. While her blade wasn't as sharp or powerful as the Scissor Blade or Tournesol, it would suffice for her mission. As she gripped the handle of the blade with both hands, Kinue let her eyes drift downwards and read the letters mechanically etched onto the surface of the weapon.

G.E.N.J.I.

The Genji blade was one of Professor Matoi's last completed projects before his murder. While the Sword Scissors he created were superior in almost every way, they were prohibitively expensive to create, half of Nudist Beach's annual budget went into their

creation, and took nearly a year to shape and form. The Genji blade, although unable to sever and kill Life Fibers, was nearly as sharp and much cheaper to produce. It was depressing that Professor Matoi was the only person who knew how to create her blade. Towards the end of his life he became increasingly paranoid that someone was following him and refused to save any copies of his work in fear of it being discovered and used against Nudist Beach. Thus Kinue was stuck with the only copy of the G.E.N.J.I. project, which she continued to call the Genji blade out of respect for her superior.

"Don't be coy with me," Kinue stated while pointing her Genji blade directly at Ururu, "I am well aware of who you truly are, so why don't you stop fooling around and just drop the act?"

Ururu seemed to pull into herself upon the accusing glare coming from Kinue, "I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about. My name is Ururu."

Kinue's eyes narrowed, "So be it."

"Hey! Wait just a damn minute!" Ichigo slid in between Ururu and Kinue. He needed to stop things before they got out of hand. He didn't know why Kinue was targeting Ururu, but he wasn't about to let the two of them fight each other, "Tell me what's going on, Kinue."

"All you need to know is that I'm doing this to save you," Kinue stated regretfully as she swiftly flew across the rooftop. Just as she passed by Ichigo, who was surprised at her speed, she whispered, "You will thank me later on."

Stomping down on the roof in front of Ururu, Kinue cocked her fist back before swinging it. Ururu had only a second for her blue eyes to widen in shock before she was hit in the face hard enough to blast her off the roof and into the distance with Kinue hot on her heels.

"Damn it!" Ichigo cursed as he watched a cloud of smoke rise from where Ururu impacted the ground, "What the hell's gotten into her?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Ryuko argued as she stood to Ichigo's left. Reaching towards her red glove, she frowned and said, "She saved me from Sanageyama and I'm thankful for that, but she's attacking Ururu for no reason. That means she has to be taken down."

Ichigo looked ready to protest Ryuko's involvement, but relented upon seeing the determined look on her face. Kinue had a Kamui of her own, so if he tried to intervene in her misguided fight against Ururu, he might be overpowered and defeated by her. He had felt her power back at his dorm. It was not something that he could take lightly.

"Fine," he muttered as he moved his hand towards the spaulder on his left shoulder.

"Mako!" Ryuko turned her head around towards her still stunned friend. Since Mako had strapped the bag of food onto her back, when Kinue landed on the roof Mako found herself unable to get up and was comically kicking and waving her arms and legs in the air, "You should get somewhere safe."

"Ok!" Mako saluted Ryuko while tilted upside-down as she continued to try and free herself.

"You ready for this, Ichigo?"

"Yeah," Ichigo's fingers pressed down on his spaulder and allowed the two needles to pierce his skin, "Let's go save Ururu."

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With nary a grunt of pain Ururu opened her eyes and sat up. Shaking her head to dislodge any rubble or debris that may have gotten stuck in her hair, she stood up and looked around for any clue as to where

she was. Casting her gaze upwards at the large wall leading to the Two-Star Mansions, Ururu realized just how far she had been hit.

"That wasn't very nice of her," Ururu lamented sadly, tears threatening to fall from her eyes, "I didn't even do anything to deserve being attacked."

Ururu couldn't comprehend or understand why Kinue had punched her or even why she was angry with her for that matter. Wracking her mind for an answer failed to come up with anything of substance. For all she knew, Kinue had attacked her for no good reason other than to try and cause her pain. With her mind firmly wrapped around that idea, Ururu decided that she needed to protect herself from any more of Kinue's attacks. While she was still firmly against killing her, nothing would ever change that, Ururu would do everything in her power to defend herself.

As she stepped through a hole in the wall that she made upon being attacked, Ururu noticed that it was an almost perfect outline of her body, but that was physically impossible. She may not have an extensive background in physics or engineering, but if her body crashed through a wall, it should either have destroyed the wall or simply created a large, circular hole. An outline of her body with small cracks radiating outwards was impossible. Confused by what she was seeing, Ururu turned away before she developed a headache...

... Just in time to see Kinue falling towards her with her Genji blade arcing silently through the air towards her neck.

Ururu's eyes widened in momentary surprise before she quickly sidestepped around the blade, allowing it pass only inches from her body. As a large trench was created in the ground from Kinue's attack, Ururu took the opportunity to leap back and away from the woman, but she underestimated Kinue's speed. Ururu's feet had barely touched the ground before Kinue was upon her once more. Leaning back to avoid a decapitation strike, Ururu's eyes locked gazes with Kinue's and suddenly Kinue spun her blade around her

wrist and stabbed downwards, hoping to pierce Ururu through the stomach.

Vaulting up in the air and away from the attack, Ururu was quickly forced back on the defensive as Kinue swung her Genji blade in a nearly completely unpredictable manner. What Kinue didn't know, and most people didn't aside from Kisuke Urahara, was that Ururu had an extremely analytical mind.

Each time she dodged one of Kinue's attacks, her mind was already processing the data on her opponent's movements and power. From the way that Kinue breathed before each attack to the way her arms flexed and twisted, Ururu was studying and remembering everything. So when Kinue unintentionally repeated one of her attacks, Ururu simply twisted around the blade and clasped Kinue's wrist within her hand.

"Why do you keep trying to attack me?" Ururu tightened her hold upon Kinue's wrist, "What did I ever do to you?"

Kinue stood there, purposely ignoring Ururu's voice, as she tested the limits of Ururu's hold on her, "Why do you continue to pretend you don't know what I'm talking about? There are no witnesses around for your games that you love so much to play... Nui Harime."

"Nui Harime?" The confusion in Ururu's voice bothered Kinue. From what she knew about the Grand Couturier, whenever someone managed to figure out a vital part of her plan, she would smile and reveal herself in all her glory before proceeding to kill them. She wasn't expecting to see the emotions literally begin bleeding off Ururu's face, leaving her to stare at a completely emotionless girl, "I am not Nui Harime. Do not make that mistake again."

"There is one thing you should understand about me," Kinue said and was satisfied when she saw Ururu become confused when she tightened her grip on her wrist to the bone a normal human's bones would shatter and yet nothing happened, "I am not as brittle as a normal human!"

Kinue crouched down slightly before jumping off the ground and into the air. With Ururu's hand still gripping her wrist, Kinue pivoted in midair and planted her foot against Ururu's cheek. Said girl didn't utter anything, not even a gasp of pain, as she was forced to let go of Kinue and staggered back. Kinue's elation upon getting a solid hit quickly disappeared when Ururu lowered her hand and showed that she was perfectly fine. There was not even a scratch or bruise upon her face. She should have expected that. Nui Harime wasn't someone that could be easily harmed.

Tilting her head to the side, Ururu asked something that had been troubling her, "How do you know Ichigo?"

"I don't believe that's any of your business," Kinue stated as she prepared herself for her next move. Raising her Genji blade and gripping the weapon with both hands, she tried to think of a plan to take down Ururu, "All that's important is stopping your plans involving Ichigo and Ryuko."

Kinue's words deeply hurt and offended Ururu. She couldn't understand why Kinue thought she was trying to hurt Ichigo or Ryuko. They were her friends. She would never do anything to put them in harm's way.

"You're lying," Ururu took a single step towards Kinue, causing the weapon to tense up in retaliation. Instead of outright attacking her, Ururu slid one leg outwards and tucked her left fist back behind her body. As a shimmer of purple energy surrounded her right hand, Ururu said, "I'm still working on this attack so please try not to die. Dragon Dash."

Kinue tried to follow her movements, but all she could hear were the very fast pitter-patter of Ururu's feet along the ground before she was upon her with her fist cocked back and aimed for her stomach.

" *She's fast.*"

She had been prepared to deal with the Grand Couturier's speed, but how the hell could she expect Nui Harime to engage in a direct frontal assault? That girl's modus operandi was practically sneaking up on her opponent before slicing them apart. Speaking of which, Kinue was worried why Nui hadn't brought out her Scissor Blade yet. Surely even Nui wasn't overconfident to the point where she could take her on and win.

Tensing her body up, Kinue quickly braced her arms against her Genji blade as Ururu's fist impacted against it. There was a stream of purple and blue sparks escaping off her blade as she desperately held back of the flow of power emanating from Ururu's fist. As she stared over her blade, Kinue locked gazes with Ururu, and for a moment she embraced the notion she might be wrong about Ururu. That quickly came to an end when Ururu's attack managed to slip under her Genji blade and explode against her right shoulder.

There was a sonic boom as Kinue was tossed through a building. As she spun through the air, she snapped her arm out and dragged her Genji blade along the ground, creating a large trench in the ground but arresting her movements at the same time. Breathing heavily as she finally stopped moving, Kinue looked at her arm and frowned when she saw that her jacket over her sleeve and half her chest had been disintegrated by the attack, exposing Danketsu's blue and purple armor.

"Damn it," Kinue stood up and grabbed her shoulder with her left hand. She expected that much power from the Grand Couturier, but that attack she was just hit with was entirely new. She hadn't heard anything about Nui Harime being able to do something like that. In the end, Kinue was simply relieved she had managed to deflect the majority of the power away from her body.

Glancing down at her ruined jacket, Kinue decided that continuing to wear the other half was now completely pointless. In one quick motion, she grabbed and tore it off her body, exposing Danketsu's upper half. As she saw Danketsu's eyes darting around in glee at the unrestrained access to the world, Kinue felt a presence land behind



her. Turning around quickly, she saw Ururu standing just a few meters away from her with a perplexed look adorning her face.

"A Kamui..." Ururu's voice was still unemotional, but there was no hiding the curiosity in her voice. It was clear that she hadn't been expecting Kinue to be wearing a Kamui, "Why do you have a Kamui like Ryuko and Ichigo?"

*" Oh. This is just perfect."*

This was the worst thing that could have happened to her. Kinue always knew that Nui Harime would eventually find out about Danketsu. She was the Grand Couturier after all, so it made sense she would be able to spot her Kamui from a mile away. She just never assumed it would be under such circumstances. Raising her Genji blade and holding it aloft above her shoulder, Kinue asked, "Does it really matter if I do?"

***" What's going on? Are you actually fighting someone?"***

Danketsu looked around, her eyes full of excitement, before they focused on Ururu, ***"Oh! Please tell me you're going to destroy her completely."***

"This is the Grand Couturier," Kinue chided. As much as she was trying to make up for years of neglecting her Kamui, Danketsu's questions and voice still managed to annoy her, "Not going all out would be tantamount to suicide. Besides, she's targeted Ichigo and Ryuko. I can't let her do anything to them."

***" Why should I give a crap about those other two humans and their pathetic excuses for Kamui?"*** Danketsu spat out in disgust before adding, ***"Don't assume I feel the same things you do. I will never work together with you on anything."***

"I do know that," Kinue said, causing Danketsu to pause in the realization that her wearer was actually agreeing with her on something "But I feel I should remind you that fighting me for control of my body will probably destroy the only chance you'll have at

defeating Nui Harime. Odds are she will be prepared for whatever tricks we have up our sleeves next time. But if you want to be so stubborn about it..."

" ***Hmm...***" Danketsu actually seem to be mulling over Kinue's words, ***"I hate you, but I hate Nui Harime even more. For just this once I will not fight you. Use my power to destroy this Life Fiber abomination!"***

Immediately after Danketsu's announcement, Kinue felt the Kamui's presence in her mind disappear. For the first time since she was forcibly bonded to Danketsu, Kinue could access all of her power without fearing being overwhelmed by the Life Fibers. As she stared at the palm of her hand, contemplating how it was to be able to feel again without risking losing control, Kinue turned to Ururu, who was still standing and watching her, and asked, "Tell me something, Grand Couturier. Why haven't you attacked me?"

"Because that would be rude," Ururu answered while tilting her head. She made it a point to ignore Kinue calling her Nui Harime because that just wasn't true. Kinue may think she was Nui, but Ururu knew that she was very different from that girl, "Ichigo would be upset if I beat you by cheating."

" *Manners from the Grand Couturier. I never thought I'd see the day, but still...*"

Something wasn't right about this. Everything Kinue knew pointed to Ururu Tsumugiya being Nui Harime, but several things weren't lining up. Deciding that talking was out of the question, Kinue took a deep breath to calm her nerves. Holding her Genji blade parallel to the ground, Kinue momentarily stared directly at Ururu before the twin vents on her shoulder blades burst to life, expelling a mixture of light purple and blue energy behind her. Biting her lower lip, Kinue took a single step and immediately flew inches over the ground towards a surprised Ururu.

With her arms spread out to her sides, Ururu cross-stepped and spun around the attack before jamming her elbow into Kinue's side. While Ururu sensed she had hit her opponent with enough force to temporarily incapacitate a shinigami at a lieutenant's level, she was shocked as much as she could be when Kinue simply shrugged off the attack like it was nothing. After quickly ducking under Kinue's retaliatory strike and leaping back, Ururu looked down and noticed a tear along her No-Star uniform.

Upset at the damage to her favorite uniform, Ururu nevertheless did not take her attention off the fight. When she heard the telltale sign of something quickly moving through the air, she pivoted on her right foot and narrowly dodged being skewered by Kinue's Genji blade. Stepping inside Kinue's guard, Ururu proceeded to slam her heel into Kinue's wrist, causing her to let go of her weapon. As Kinue stepped back, wincing slightly in pain from the attack, Ururu planted her hands on the ground and attempted to deliver a double-heeled knockout blow to Kinue. To Ururu's surprise, as her heels just grazed Kinue's face, the woman seemed to shimmer before her form disappeared entirely.

"Huh?"

Ururu looked around for her opponent. She was surprised that Kinue had been able to move quickly enough that her eyes were unable to follow her movements. Looking everywhere for where Kinue might be coming from to attack her, Ururu wasn't prepared for a heavy blow to hit her back hard enough to lift her off the ground. Gasping more from the shock of the impact than any actual pain she felt, Ururu was thrown through the air and into a nearby building when Kinue spun around and slammed her foot into the small of her back.

Landing back on the ground, Kinue sprinted towards where Ururu had crashed with her Genji blade trailing along the ground. She needed to press her advantage while the Grand Couturier was momentarily down. If she didn't, odds are Nui would simply reappear right outside of the building she crashed into with a sadistic smile on her face.

*" But why she hasn't thrown off her disguise is bothering me," Kinue jumped up and landed on a piece of rubble that allowed her to gaze through the rising cloud of smoke, "I can definitely feel her strength, and her regeneration is as fast as ever, so why does she refuse to shed her disguise as Ururu?"*

"Double Moon."

Kinue quickly leaned backwards as Ururu appeared out of the smoke. As her body slowly fell, Kinue's eyes widened when she saw Ururu plant her hands on the ground before spinning and kneeling her in the underside of her chin. With spittle flying out of her mouth, Kinue's gasp of pain was cut off as Ururu grabbed her ankle and threw her through the air.

*" What's up with her tactics?"* Kinue spun her body around and dug her feet into the ground to arrest her movement. Once she managed to come to a complete stop, courtesy of some last second help from her Genji blade, Kinue noticed that two long furrows had been dug in the ground from her newly exposed purple high heels.

*" She's not fighting like she did the first time."* Kinue ducked under Ururu's fist before driving the hilt of her Genji blade deep into Ururu's stomach. Shrugging off the attack without a sign of being in pain, an emotionless Ururu continued to attack Kinue at faster and faster speeds, forcing the older woman to go on the defensive.

*" Where is the taunting? The mocking? The disregard for civilian casualties?"* Kinue winced when Ururu managed to land a kick in her side, but quickly recovered before clasping both her hands together and slamming them down on the back of Ururu's neck, *"It's like I'm fighting an entirely different person... but that's impossible. There is no human on earth with the same level of strength and speed as Nui Harime. Who else is there besides Ragyo Kiryuin that could keep up with my level of power after Danketsu decided to work alongside me?"*

**" This is pathetic, even from you," Danketsu stated angrily, "Why is she still breathing?"**

"Give it a rest. I thought you weren't going to fight me?" Kinue retorted as she wiped the trail of saliva from the corner of her mouth. That last attack from Ururu had destroyed her favorite pair of boots, leaving her with only the tattered remains of her pants, "Besides, she's the Grand Couturier for a reason. Thinking that killing her will be as easy as breathing is just asking for her to kill me."

**" So you say," Danketsu's eyes drifted downwards towards her feet, "I see that my full form is nearly visible. It was fucking stupid for you to hide what we are under all those layers of idiotic and ugly clothing. How shameful."**

"Did you expect me to just travel around the world wearing nothing but you?" Kinue retorted with a roll of her eyes, "Revocs would have come down on my head so fast it would still be spinning. I wouldn't be surprised if Ragyo herself came after me."

**" You may not be embarrassed to be one with me," Danketsu said smugly, "But your idiotic fear of being caught limited my power. Because you were so fucking stupid as to assume you could hide me under those layers of clothing, my power was limited."**

"And you're telling me all this now?" Kinue asked sarcastically.

**" Yes," Danketsu replied bluntly, "I fucking hate you, so why would I allow you the chance to access more of my power? You and I may share one body, but that does not mean I have to like it in the slightest. By the way, I would block that kick unless you want to be suddenly missing your head."**

Kinue quickly brought her forearm up and winced in pain as Ururu's foot impacted against her arm. Gritting her teeth and pushing herself past the pain, she twisted her arm around and tried to grab Ururu's

ankle only for the girl to plant her other leg on her shoulder and jump out of range.

" *It felt like my arm was about to break,*" Kinue knew with certainty that if it wasn't for Danketsu, her arm would have shattered in at least a dozen places from that last attack.

"Are you ready to stop fighting yet?"

Ururu's question startled Kinue, "What are you trying to imply?"

"This fight is pointless," Ururu shook her head quickly enough to cause her pigtails to bounce around, "You're fighting me because you think I'm Nui Harime, but I'm not. If you would please simply believe me, we could stop fighting and go back to Ichigo and Ryuko."

Kinue didn't bother saying anything as she gripped what remained of her pants and ripped them off her body, finally exposing Danketsu's full and true appearance for the first time in many years. Much like Ryuko and Satsuki, she wore thigh high heeled boots of a predominantly blue color with purple glowing lines etched intricately along the length. At the front and back of the top of the boots, several purple skin-tight suspenders connected with the sides of her leotard.

"Oh," Ururu gazed at Danketsu with awe, "How pretty."

Gripping the hilt of her Genji blade with both hands, Kinue took a deep breath and focused herself. She couldn't let whatever mind games Nui Harime was playing affect her. If she wanted to stop the Grand Couturier and save Ichigo and Ryuko, she needed to finish the fight now.

Ururu sighed miserably when she saw Kinue was willing to continue fighting. She hated pointless fighting like this. It was clear to the young girl's mind that Kinue was totally convinced she was Nui Harime and nothing she could say or do would change her mind. Ururu didn't understand how she could be confused with someone

so weird and psychotic. There had to be more than two girls with superhuman strength on the planet, so why was she the one getting confused with Nui Harime?

Shaking her head, Ururu refocused her thoughts when she saw Kinue gathering energy in her Genji blade. If Kinue wanted to fight her, Ururu would hit back with everything she had until Kinue was unable to fight any more. She would not kill her. Ichigo seemed to be familiar with the woman, so if she killed Kinue, Ichigo would be upset with her and Ururu wanted to avoid that at all costs.

"I don't wish to fight you anymore," Ururu crossed her arms as she began gathering energy, "But you leave me no choice. I must defeat you now. Shimmering Cut."

With her hand cocked back, Ururu ran towards Kinue with her body enveloped in a faint purple aura that was barely perceivable, even to Kinue's enhanced sight. Jumping up into the air in retaliation, Kinue spins around before swinging her Genji blade downward towards Ururu. Both attacks, purple and blue, met in the middle and clashed for dominance. After a few seconds of a stalemate, there was an explosion of energy as everything near the two combatants was simply blown away.

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Satsuki Kiryuin could not sleep.

It was not for a lack of trying on her part. She had been sound asleep not an hour ago when the sounds coming from the trapped and secured Junketsu became so loud that she felt the need to investigate the disturbance. As she stood on the other side of the bulletproof glass separating her from the rabid Kamui, Satsuki had astutely noted that despite its behavior, Junketsu was not looking at her. Rather, it seemed to be solely focused on some point out in Honnou City. That was why Satsuki was clad in Junketsu and stood

on top of Honnouji City with a stern expression on her face. If someone or something that could agitate Junketsu was currently in Honnou City, she needed to deal with it.

"What have you found, Inumuta?"

Hoka Inumuta, although tired and wearing a normal pair of pajamas, bowed respectfully as he typed away on his laptop, "I've been searching through the video feeds of the cameras through the individual districts. Although I found nothing of interest in the Slums, something is going on in the One-Star Residential District that you should see."

Satsuki turned and stood behind Inumuta as he brought up the video feed from near the One-Star Botanical Gardens. As a figure darted into view and stood looking off into the distance, she frowned and asked, "Ururu Tsumugiya. Do you know what she's doing?"

"Wait just a second," Inumuta said as he typed in a few commands.

As the other figure came at Ururu only for said girl to easily dodge around the strike and leap out of view of the camera, Satsuki could not hide the surprise in her voice, "Another Kamui?"

"Indeed," Inumuta was flabbergasted and astonished that there was yet another Kamui in Honnou City. He had thought such attire were prohibitively dangerous for a normal human to wear. Lady Satsuki was, of course, different but for some reason Ryuko Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki could also withstand the dangerous energies coursing through the pure Life Fiber outfits, "This woman appears to be in her early to mid-thirties and possesses a Kamui with a blue and purple color configuration."

Satsuki narrowed her eyes further as Inumuta froze the feed and allowed her to get a good glance at the same woman that interrupted Sanageyama's fight against Matoi, "She's the woman that saved Matoi during her rematch against Sanageyama. So my suspicions



were indeed correct. She does possess a Kamui of her own. That explains how she was able to stop my Bakuzan so easily."

"Shall I inform Gamagori to apprehend her?"

"No," Satsuki turned and looked toward the horizon while the wind blew her hair to the side, "If she was able to stand up to my power, Gamagori will have no chance of apprehending her. Instead, I want you to record her fight. Study every one of her techniques as well as what she says. This is a perfect opportunity to bear witness to a new Kamui the likes of which I have never seen before!"

*" More importantly, it allows me to learn more about Ururu Tsumugiya,"* Satsuki thought calmly to herself as Inumuta left to carry out her orders. Junketsu was still acting up and she could see flashes of light through the One-Star Resident District as Kinue and Ururu continued to fight. The fact that Ururu, despite wearing a No-Star uniform, was facing a Kamui-wearer on even terms meant there was more to the girl than she first thought. She was someone that Satsuki would need to keep an eye on in the future. There was no telling who she was taking orders from or whether even the Ururu that she had seen was the true persona at all.

*" You have such fascinating colleagues, Ichigo,"* Satsuki smirked as the outline of a plan formed in her mind, *"But are they as close as you think they are?"*

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Kinue panted heavily as she pulled herself out of a pile of rubble. Clenching her fist tightly in frustration, she managed to pick herself up and get back onto her feet. After stumbling briefly from exhaustion, she hopped down and noticed Ururu waiting for her.

Her adversary appeared to be just as tired as she was, but unlike her, Ururu had no visible signs of injury on her body. That made

sense to Kinue. The Grand Couturier was able to regenerate from any injuries she sustained, if someone was strong and fast enough to cause them in the first place. The one thing Nui Harime couldn't quickly recover from was simple exhaustion. During her fight against the Nu in Rome, Kinue had begun to see signs of the Grand Couturier starting to get sloppy and vulnerable. The only problem was that Kinue was even more tired at the time.

Tightening her grip on her Genji blade, Kinue raised it over her shoulder and stared at Ururu. Biting her lower lip and summoning the last dredges of her strength, Kinue twisted her wrists and soared towards Ururu.

Ururu saw Kinue coming towards her and was conflicted on what to do. Kinue was perhaps one of the few people she had fought that hadn't been killed by her attacks, even though she was holding back a lot of her power. Granted, Kinue wasn't nearly as strong as she was, but Ururu was still impressed. She was sure that Kinue would have made a valuable ally if they hadn't been on either end of this misunderstanding. Closing her eyes, Ururu decided to hit Kinue with everything she had since fighting at three-quarters of her full power just wasn't enough anymore. At first Ururu had hoped to incapacitate Kinue long enough for her to explain everything, but Kinue's Kamui was strong enough to let her shrug off that much of her power with only sustaining minor injuries and wounds. Cocking her fist back, Ururu flexed her ankle and shot off towards Kinue. This one punch would be enough to stop her cold. She just hoped it didn't kill Kinue in the process.

"That's enough!"

Ururu's head turned slightly at the familiar voice before Ichigo, clad in Mugetsu, crashed down between her and Kinue. Turning to face Kinue, he spun around and managed to block her Genji blade with Tournesol.

"Ichigo Kurosaki?" Kinue was shocked to find him here. She was sure he would have stayed back and out of harm's way, "What are

you doing here?"

"What do you think?" he growled, feeling slightly relieved when Ryuko, wearing a transformed Senketsu, landed next to Ururu and began checking her for injuries. Smirking slightly upon seeing she was alright, Ichigo asked, "Why the hell are you attacking Ururu?"

"That's not Ururu!" Kinue let a brief burst of emotion escape her steel-like hold and was fortunate that Danketsu had decided to still stay out of her mind for the moment. Pressing down on Tournesol with enough force to cause Ichigo's knees to buckle, she said, "Ururu Tsumugiya died before she came here! That girl over there is Nui Harime! I've fought her before! There is no one else on Earth with that much strength and power!"

"Ururu's always been special!" With a supreme amount of effort, Ichigo managed to force Kinue's blade back. He was impressed that even in her tired and exhausted state she still possessed enough energy to nearly overpower him. He shuddered to think what it would be like to fight a completely refreshed Kinue, "I don't know why you think she's somehow Nui Harime, but I've known Ururu for a long time. Sure, she might have superhuman strength and other abilities, but that doesn't mean she's who you think she is!"

"Naiveté can be extremely dangerous Ichigo," Kinue grunted and held a hand against her arm. Now that there was a lull in the fight, she could feel her injuries starting to catch up to her. To be perfectly honest, part of her was relieved Ichigo had shown up when he did. Another minute or two and she wouldn't have been able to use her left arm at all, "Tell me something though. That girl, Ururu, was she always this strong?"

Ichigo turned to Ururu, who was being comforted by a reluctant and embarrassed Ryuko, before speaking, "When I first met her, Ururu asked me to wear safety gear because she was afraid her strength would kill me. She's very timid and scared that her power would hurt those close to her. I've met Nui Harime, and whoever she may be,

one thing is for certain. She is a complete lunatic. There is no damn way Ururu could be Nui!"

"I see..." Kinue sighed in regret as she tightened her grip on her Genji blade, "I may have been a fool all this time. I - "

She was cut off as Ichigo's cell phone, which he somehow managed to duck away in a fold of Mugetsu's armor, began ringing. Recognizing the ringtone as belonging to his dad, because who else would use the 'Macho Man' song as their theme, he pulled it out and sarcastically asked, "What the hell do you want, dad?"

"Ichigo!" Isshin's voice came through the speaker so loudly that Ichigo was forced to hold his cell phone at arm's length lest he go deaf, "Thanks for picking up! I tried calling a few people all night and I kept getting their voicemail. "

"Then why the hell did you call me?" Ichigo shouted back.

"Because you always seem to know strange and odd people," Isshin replied honestly, "Have you seen your circle of friends? Hooligans and hoodlums the lot of them! Anyway, have you met a woman by the name of Kinue Kinagase?"

Yeah, she's standing right..." Ichigo paused as his brain kicked into high gear, "Hey, wait a damn second. How the hell do you even know her?"

"That's not important," Isshin quickly blurted out, "What is important is that I speak with her right this second!"

Ichigo thought about simply hanging up the phone, but he was sure his dad would call right back and be even more annoying. After several tense moments of debating the pros and cons of what to do, Ichigo decided to relent and tossed his phone to Kinue, "It's my dad. He wants to talk to you for some reason."

Kinue's eyebrow rose as she held the phone up to her ear, "Yes."

Ichigo and Ryuko tried to listen to what his dad was telling Kinue, but for some strange reason his voice had dropped to a normal human's level. What was interesting, though, was that Kinue's facial expression continued to shift between shock, confusion and abject realization.

"Are you completely certain about this? I know, but... alright," Kinue hung up the phone and tilted her head back before sighing dramatically. Closing her eyes and collapsing on the ground, she tossed Ichigo's phone back to him and muttered, "He could have told me this five hours ago and saved me all this trouble."

Turning to Ururu, Kinue let out a deep breath, "Look Ururu... I'm sorry I thought you were Nui Harime. I was just doing what I thought was the best course of action to save Ichigo and Ryuko from a psychopath like her."

"It's ok," Ururu didn't fully understand why Kinue had quickly changed her mind, but assumed it had something to do with what Mr. Kurosaki had told her on the phone. Perhaps he was calling to make sure Ururu wasn't confused with Nui Harime? Deciding to do some apologizing herself, Ururu bowed and said, "I'm sorry for hurting you so badly. Please forgive me."

"Please, don't say anything," Kinue stood up, with some difficulty, and began walking away. Before getting too far, she stopped and said, "I think I've overstayed my welcome in Honnou City. This vacation must come to an end, after all. But before I go, I have some parting words for you, Ryuko Matoi, from your father."

Ryuko's mouth opened in shock, "My... dad...?"

"Yeah," Kinue turned enough that one of her eyes was staring directly at Ryuko, "Do not let your anger and emotions get the better of you. Giving into your rage while wearing Senketsu is just as bad as killing yourself." Kinue, finished speaking to Ryuko, turned to Ichigo, "And you, Ichigo, stay out of trouble. You're just like Masaki,

always willing to throw your life on the line to save others. Don't do anything stupid that can get you killed."

With nothing else to say, Kinue leapt off the ground and disappeared into the night, leaving the three teenagers behind.

"So what was that all about?" Ryuko asked while shouldering her red Scissor Blade, "She just comes here, fights Ururu for no reason and then apologizes? What did your dad say to her exactly?"

"I don't know," Ichigo stared at his phone for a moment before closing his fingers around it, "But my dad knows more about this stupid place than he told me."

"Are you going to talk to him?"

"No," Ichigo turned and began the long walk back to Mako's new home, "I know my dad. He'll tell me what he knows when he feels the time is right. I'm not going to push him or anything."

"Really?" Ryuko looked at Ichigo incredulously, "That doesn't seem smart."

Ichigo thought back to the Winter War when his dad exposed himself as a former shinigami captain. While he was stunned that his dad was a shinigami, Ichigo knew he wouldn't have kept it a secret if it wasn't important. That was why he was so calm about what just happened, "Yeah, I'm sure, but I'll ask him on Parent Student Day."

"Oh, yeah," Ryuko looked crestfallen at the mention of the school event, causing Ichigo to mentally facepalm at his stupidity.

"Why don't you use Mako's parents?" He asked, causing Ryuko to look at him strangely, "Don't they see you as their daughter or something already?"

"Hey, you got a point," Ryuko smiled as she was brought out of her funk, "I think Mako would really like that, although what I'm really

starting to get curious about is your dad. Is he nice?"

Ichigo nervously looked away, "In a way..."

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## **Kamui Tales #8 - The Kamui Personality Test**

There was a flash of light before Senketsu, in his sailor uniform appeared on the screen.

***"Hello readers of To My Death I Fight,"*** Senketsu gave the Kamui equivalent of a salute as he raised his sleeve and pulled out a remote control, ***"You were all probably expecting another omake segment involving Nui Harime, Ichigo Kurosaki or some other character in a whacky and hilarious situation. Unfortunately, the author of the story has decided to write something educational instead. So i hope you're happy, because you're stuck listening to me instead of hearing about Kon's adventures through - "***

Before he could spoil anything else, Mugetsu leapt out of nowhere and kicked Senketsu with one of her legs. As the male Kamui fell to the ground with his one visible eye swirling around dizzily, Mugetsu huffed and grabbed the remote control, ***"Humph. You should be honored to be doing this omake segment. Anyway, this particular omake is all about different Kamui Personalities!"***

Mugetsu's sleeve pressed down on a button and immediately a short clip of Senketsu assaulting Ryuko appeared on the screen behind her, ***"Kamui are living beings and so they all have their own individual personalities that may or may not clash with their wearers. Take Senketsu for instance. He threw himself onto Ryuko Matoi without caring what she thought about wearing him while I came to a mutual accord with Ichigo."***

***"That's nonsense."*** Senketsu groaned as he got back up. Waving his sleeves at Mugetsu, he shouted, ***"The way I hear it, you threw yourself at Ichigo as well. Have you no shame?"***

***"Yes, because I asked Ichigo first,"*** Mugetsu bluntly replied before turning away from Senketsu. Facing the camera once more, she pressed another button while pointedly ignoring her fellow Kamui's insults, ***"The personality of a Kamui can greatly influence the amount of power their wearer can access. The Kamui Danketsu, who is worn by Kinue Kinagase, is a prime example of what happens when Kamui and wearer are out of sync. She hates her wearer and this hatred holds back a lot of her potential. Why, I would never be like that with -"***

Mugetsu was cut off as Junketsu appeared from off screen and hit her over the head with Bakuzan, which it had somehow stolen from Satsuki. Looking at Senketsu, it gave it a mock salute before proceeding to drag the unconscious Mugetsu away to parts unknown.

***"Ah, thank you for that,"*** Senketsu picked up the remote before scratching his lapels, ***"One day the author will have to decide on its gender and voice. Perhaps the budget will allow it next chapter? Anyway, it seems like we're out of time, so please don't unfavorite this story! With the anime on hold until September, this is my only job!"***



# Carry On Wayward Son

*I had a bit of a dilemma while writing this chapter. I had originally intended to have the Mako versus Ryuko fight here (completely unlike the anime I assure you), but in order to do so, I would need to cut out a bit of the story to do so. While writing a fight is easy and helps move the story along, the plot and exposition given by said plot is much more important. So what originally started out as Chapter 21 became 21 and the first half (or three-quarters... It's a LONG fight scene) of Chapter 22. I do apologize to anyone that had expected to read the Two-Star Mako fight. You'll get it next chapter, which, coincidentally, is the beginning of Parent Student Day.*

*\*Oh! I finally got a tvtropes page for this story! Since I can't link to tvtropes here, simply google "To My Death I Fight" and "tvtropes" and it should be in the top few searches. It's still a little new at the moment so it's a bit bare. If you see any missing tvtropes, pm me and I will add them in.*

*\*Also, a virtual cookie to anyone who can name the source of the dress at the end of the chapter. And anyone who I've already told cannot guess.*

*\*This story is now over 200,000 words!*

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## Chapter 21 - Carry On Wayward Son

The annoyance in the air was nearly palpable as Ichigo looked down at the formal letter in his hands. As he read the fancy script on the letter that spelled out his name, Ichigo looked at the One-Star student that had delivered it to him. The teen looked nervous just being in Ichigo's presence. No doubt he was thinking Ichigo was

going to kick his ass for just breathing near him. Deciding to let the teen leave before he fainted from nervousness, Ichigo crumpled up the letter and tossed it over his shoulder without even reading it.

"You can tell Satsuki that my answer remains the same," Ichigo said to the teen, who was sweating in fear. Nodding frantically at Ichigo's answer, he turned and ran off, no doubt to inform Satsuki what Ichigo just told him.

" ***That was quite mean of you, Ichigo,***" Mugetsu commented.

"What?" Ichigo looked at his Kamui and scoffed, "You think I was actually going to hurt the guy? Nah, I was just messing with him. I'm just a little pissed off that Satsuki won't take the hint and leave me the hell alone."

" ***Another letter, huh?***" Mugetsu seemed pensive about something before quickly adding, "***Do you think she's interested in you?***"

"Where the hell did that come from?" Ichigo growled at Mugetsu, who simply continued to stare up at him.

" ***Satsuki Kiryuin's interest seems too personal to be plutonic or business,***" Mugetsu paused as she mulled something over, "***But then again, I am but a Kamui. Although I may be female, the inner workings of the human mind sometimes baffle me.***"

Ichigo didn't like nor did he appreciate Mugetsu's opinion of the matter. He didn't care if Satsuki Kiryuin had some sort of affection for him. He was never going to like someone who killed and imprisoned people for disagreeing with them. Her attempt to kill Ryuko after gaining Junketsu didn't help her case either. There was also the matter of Mugetsu's feelings for Junketsu. Ichigo had tried to get his Kamui to explain what she felt, but Mugetsu was surprisingly tight-lipped about the whole thing. All she would say was that Junketsu thought it was so much better than her. When he asked how she could know that if it never said a word, Mugetsu said that she could see it in Junketsu's eyes.

"What was that all about, Strawberry?" Nonon asked as she stuck her head out of the room. She was starting to get annoyed and curious about what was taking Ichigo so long. As she watched the One-Star student flee down the hallway, her lips curled up in a bemused smirk, "You scared the crap out of him. Did he ask you out or something?"

Ichigo glared at Nonon, who smiled mischievously at getting under his skin, "It was another one of Satsuki's errand boy. She keeps asking me to be her Student Council Vice-President and simply won't take no for an answer."

"WHAT?" Nonon nearly fell to the ground at what thought to be Ichigo's absolute stupidity. That was the reason he kept getting Student Council messengers over the last week? What the hell was wrong with him? Angrily clenching her fists, she grabbed Ichigo by the front of Mugetsu and shouted her displeasure, "Are you stupid or something? When Lady Satsuki asks you to be her Vice-President, you jump for joy and say yes! You're not supposed to ignore her gift that she places on your lap! No one, not even us Elite Four, are worthy enough of the honor she is bestowing upon you and you have the gall to so callously throw it away? You're one stupid bastard, Strawberry!"

"Shut up, Snake," Ichigo bit back, causing Nonon to stamp her foot angrily at Ichigo's nickname for her, "I don't need the commentary from the balcony. Besides, why the hell should you even care what I do? The last I heard, Satsuki kicked you out of the Elite Four after I defeated you. Why are you so concerned whether or not I take Satsuki up on her offer?"

"Er..." Nonon blushed in frustration as Ichigo caught her between a lie and her mission. Deciding to go about the best course of action, she kicked Ichigo in the shin and headed back into the classroom to finish her lunch. If she had her mouth full of food, then there was no way she could say anything incriminating to Ichigo without being socially rude.

The only other occupant in the room besides Nonon watched her storm past with a quirked eyebrow. Mako Mankanshoku, dressed in an expensive blue business suit with a matching skirt, turned to Ichigo who had followed Nonon into the room, "Jakuzure is correct, Ichigo. If you were to accept Lady Satsuki's offer of becoming the Student Council Vice-President, the prestige and honor of the Fight Club would forever eclipse the rest of the clubs in Honnouji Academy. No one would be able to contest our place and power."

"Screw that," Ichigo huffed as he sat down at a desk across from Mako, "And why are you even wearing a suit, Mako?"

"It's simple," Mako adjusted her glasses smugly, "As the President of the Fight Club it is my duty to set the standards of the club. By dressing formally and cleaning up my act, I am only encouraging the rest of the academy to view the club with a higher regard."

"Get rid of the suit. It makes you look ridiculous."

Ichigo wasn't really keen on the new Mako. She was becoming increasingly arrogant and stuck-up, which was exactly what he constantly warned her about throughout the week following Kinue's fight against Ururu. Ichigo knew it was the money and prestige of being the equivalent of a Two-Star student. He was just glad he hadn't decided to join the Fight Club alongside Ryuko. With the way Mako was running her ragged fighting all the other clubs, he would have likely died from exhaustion by now.

"No," Mako glared firmly at Ichigo from over the top of her glasses. She wasn't appreciating Ichigo's constant criticism about what she was doing, "Anyway, I did some calculations. If you were to accept Lady Satsuki's offer, she would be forced to concede a lot of power over Honnouji Academy to you in order to keep you in line and under her control."

"Do I look like I care about power?" Ichigo asked sarcastically and scoffed, "Satsuki is up to something. I can feel it. She's not someone who would simply give up power. I've talked to her a couple of times

now and even fought her. I think I know how she thinks and acts. I would rather have my soul devoured than work under her."

"Wow, Strawberry," Nonon whistled mockingly, "That's really emo of you. Did you make that up just now or did you have to spend all night thinking about it?"

Just as Ichigo was about to say something, there was a loud groan as Ryuko opened the door to the room and promptly collapsed onto the ground from exhaustion. As Ryuko lay on the ground, mumbling something incoherently, Ururu walked in behind her and calmly sat down to eat her lunch.

"Hey, Ururu," Ichigo couldn't understand what Ryuko was trying to say. It sounded important judging from the volume at which she was saying it, "What did she say?"

Ururu glanced at Ryuko, who repeated what she mumbled, and turned to Ichigo, "She said she's really tired and would like some food."

Without thinking, Ichigo grabbed Nonon's lunch out of her hands, getting a squeaky 'what the hell' from her, and dropped it next to Ryuko's prone body, "Here. Have the rest of my lunch. I'm full."

"Hey!" Nonon stood up angrily and shouted indignantly, "That was my lunch, Strawberry!"

"Really?" Ichigo countered uncaringly, "Because I could swear everything in your lunch you stole from my dorm."

After finally gathering the strength necessary to get up off the floor, Ryuko yawned tiredly and collapsed into the nearest available chair. Sitting down with an audible sigh of relief, Ryuko began wolfing down what remained of Nonon's lunch, "This is great, Ichigo! You make this yourself?"

Ichigo glanced at an irate Nonon, "Something like that. So, how's the Fight Club working out?"

"Mako's a slave driver!" Ryuko exclaimed while being careful not to spit out any food. After grabbing Nonon's water bottle, causing the former Three-Star's lip to quiver in anger, Ryuko drank almost half of it before speaking, "I just fought the Basketball, Baseball, Wrestling and Soccer clubs all at once. I'm exhausted!"

"Don't get too relaxed, Ryuko," Mako informed her friend, "You have some more fights this afternoon, but I'm still setting up the time and place. You can relax for the next few hours until I'm done."

Ryuko frowned, "Yeah, I'll catch up with you later Mako."

As Mako left to go prepare everything, her high heels clicking confidently on the ground as she thought about the prospect of her family's wealth and status becoming permanent, Ryuko's frown deepened. She really missed the old Mako. Even her friend's imagination, which had gotten on her nerves once or twice, was something she greatly missed. Not knowing what to do about Mako, Ryuko decided to focus on other things for the moment. She could always come back to Mako at a later time, "So Ichigo, what are you going to wear to Parent Student Day? I hear there's a formal dress code and everything."

"There is?" Ichigo hadn't heard anything about a dress code and, gathering from Mugetsu's cough of surprise, neither did his Kamui. He knew well enough how Mugetsu felt about him wearing other clothes. Even if he didn't understand Mugetsu's feelings towards the matter, it was easier to just allow her to get her way rather than hearing her complain to him about it before demanding an apology.

"You can't possibly be that dense, Strawberry," Nonon mocked scornfully, "Parent Student Day was created by Lady Satsuki to make sure none of the students were having any trouble with their classes. Do you honestly think you'll be able to wear that ratty old Kamui tomorrow?"

" **Ratty?**" Mugetsu seethed and would have launched herself at Nonon if Ichigo hadn't been wearing her, **"I'll show this pink haired bitch who is ratty!"**

"Calm down, Mugetsu," Ichigo grumbled tiredly.

" **You better not wear anything better than me!**" Mugetsu warned angrily, **"I am your best set of clothes and will remain as such!"**

"Ha," Ryuko chuckled at Ichigo's misfortune with Mugetsu. Even as tired as she was, she could still take the time to enjoy seeing Ichigo getting flustered.

" **The same goes for you, Ryuko,**" Senketsu added, causing Ryuko's amusement to come to a premature end, **"I will not allow you to wear anything else... except your pajamas."**

"Damn," Ichigo sighed miserably, "So Parent Student Day is next week right?"

Finally having enough and taking her lunch back from Ryuko, who protested at the treatment, Nonon took a large bite from her sandwich. With a mouthful of food, she told him, "Tomorrow dumbass."

Ichigo began panicking as he realized what that meant. No one here, not even Ryuko or Satsuki and hopefully not Nui, knew what that meant. Quickly standing up, he began mentally listing off what he needed to do in order to survive. He knew he had enough food in his dorm to last him at least a week and he was pretty sure he knew of at least five places throughout Honnou City he could hide. The only difficulty he was going to have would be during Parent Student Day. There was no way he could hide from his peers during the event. While he was listing off various things, mumbling all the while, Ururu turned towards the nearby window and pointed outside.

"Look," she said with complete stoicism, "Mr. Kurosaki is swinging on a rope."

"Oh fu - "

Ichigo's explication was cut short as Isshin crashed through the window, startling everybody except for Ururu, who remained as stoic and unperturbed as ever. As shattered glasses peppered the floor, Isshin swung forward and planted his feet against Ichigo's face before propelling him through the nearby wall. Landing in a dignified crouch and dusting his brown leather jacket, imported leather mind you, off, Isshin shouted towards where Ichigo had crashed.

"So what's this that I heard about you receiving the attention of not one girl, but two?"

There was a flash of lights and Ichigo came running out of the hole in the wall clad in a fully transformed Mugetsu. Punching his dad in the stomach, he answered with annoyance in his voice, "The hell kind of question is that? What kind of father crashes through a window only to kick his son in the face anyway?"

"The kind that cares about his son!" Isshin shouted back as he butted heads with Ichigo, "Besides, you're the one who's been screwing around! You have multiple girls pining for your attention and yet you don't notice? Just how dense of a son did I raise?"

"Dense?" Ichigo slammed his forehead against his father's hard enough to cause the older man to stumble back. He had to thank Mugetsu later for making every part of his body as hard as steel when she's transformed like this. Growling, he pointed his hand at Isshin and shouted, "Look who's calling the kettle black!"

"That's complete nonsense!" Isshin sang as he recovered, quicker than Ichigo anticipated and slammed both his heels into Ichigo's stomach. To everyone's surprise, especially Ichigo's, Isshin had hit him with enough force to actually launch Ichigo back through the same hole he had created just a minute ago and, by the sound of it, several more behind him. Popping up off the ground and adjusting the collar of his jacket, Isshin turned to rush off after Ichigo, but before



leaving turned to Ururu, "Make sure you keep an eye out on everyone, Ururu!"

Ururu snapped off a salute, "No problem, Mr. Kurosaki. I'll do my best to keep everyone safe from harm."

While this was all going on, Ryuko was trying to understand what the hell just happened. Did she seriously just see Ichigo's dad crash through the window before kicking him through the wall? Ryuko rubbed her tired eyes and hoped what just happened was a hallucination brought on by the past few days of constant fighting, but when she opened her eyes and saw the flabbergasted look on Nonon's face, she knew that what she just witnessed had really happened. After she saw Ichigo get kicked through the wall while wearing Mugetsu, she knew he was in trouble.

Managing to push herself onto wobbly legs despite the extensive exhaustion she felt, Ryuko took a clumsy step forward to go help Ichigo when she saw Ururu blocking her path.

"Please don't interfere," Ururu said calmly, "Ichigo's not in any danger."

"You're kidding right?" Ryuko looked at Ururu and saw that the girl really didn't think there was anything wrong with what Ichigo's dad was doing. Feeling as if she was the only sane person in the room, she pointed to the large hole in the wall and said, "Ichigo's dad just kicked him through the wall! That isn't normal!"

"Sure it is," Ururu answered neutrally as she looked at the hole briefly, "I can do that. Besides, this is just how Mr. Kurosaki says hello to Ichigo."

"Ah, Ryuko!" Mako for some reason appeared outside the hole. Without even caring as to why it was there or how it formed, she stepped through and calmly patted down her skirt, "I've just been informed that the Volleyball Club would like to fight you. Let's go."

"What?" Ryuko tried to get away but in her tired state couldn't do anything as Mako grabbed her by the back of Senketsu and began dragging her along.

**"Wait! Let go of me, Mako!"** Senketsu shouted fearfully, cursing the fact that no one besides Ryuko and Ichigo could hear him, **"Ryuko, tell her to let go of me before she stretches out my Life Fibers!"**

Nonon watched Ryuko leave before grumbling and throwing her lunch on the ground. She had two choices to make now. She could either follow the Transfer Student to her little bout or she could track down Strawberry and watch him fight his dad. Lady Satsuki had given her the mission of determining how and why Ichigo's Kamui could do things hers could not. It would be rebellious to follow the Transfer Student, so with a large mischievous grin adorning her face, Nonon proceeded to track down where Ichigo went. Sure her mission was to observe Mugetsu, but watching him get the tar beat out of him was simply a bonus she couldn't afford to pass up.

"This ought to be good," she quipped.

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Kon was seriously confused and lost. Scratching the back of his head, he looked around and tried to find any landmarks that could help him find his way to wherever Honnouji Academy was.

When Ichigo's dad brought him to Honnou City, he was secretly dropped off and ordered to find his way to Honnouji Academy on his own. The only rule was that he couldn't be seen or caught. Everything went well for Kon until he somehow ran into a group of people. Instead of gawking or staring at him while muttering about a talking and moving lion plushie, they simply waved hello and continued on their way. That was why Kon was walking in the middle of a busy street without care. If these people didn't seem to mind a

moving plushie, who was he to hide and sneak around like a freaking ninja?

"I know it's up there," Kon craned his head up and looked at Honnouji Academy stretching into the sky above him. The only problem was that the roads and streets were like a maze, crisscrossing each other and circling back. It was like a maze and Kon hated mazes, "The only question is how to get there. I know Ichigo's dad said to keep a low profile, but I'm never going to meet up with Ichigo unless I get directions. Now who to ask..."

Kon didn't like any of his choices. Everyone in the Slums had this weird look about them. He couldn't wrap his mind around it, but the one thing he couldn't help but notice was the weird red threads in their clothing. It was really weird how the threads seemed alive and aware of his presence whenever he walked by. It was almost like he was in a horror movie or something. All he needed was to run into the psychotic killer and the circle would be complete.

"Aw, screw it!" Kon declared bombastically, "I know Honnouji Academy is that-a-way, so all I have to do is keep heading in that direction!"

With a purpose in his mind, Kon hopped down off the table he was standing on, turned the corner and promptly ran into someone. Falling on his back with a soft squeak, Kon groggily brought a paw up to his head, "Did anyone get the number of that brick wall?"

As his senses came back to him, Kon picked himself off the ground and dusted his plushie body off, "Sorry about that, good sir, I didn't see you there. Now, if you will excuse me..."

Kon tried to move past the person he ran into, who still hadn't said a word. He hadn't taken three steps before a large purple blade skewered through the ground in front of him.

"Hey!" Kon said angrily while pointing to the person who had almost hit it, "What's the big idea? You could have severed my stitching! Do

you know how hard it would be to sew myself back up afterwards?"

Before Kon could do anything, he found himself being picked up and held in the person's arms. It was only when he found her grip to be superhumanly strong did he begin to realize that something may be wrong. Deciding to play it cool for the moment since there was always time for panicking later, he asked, "Uh, I'm Kon!"

Nui Harime stared at the creature in her hands with abject glee, or at least the closest feeling to happiness that someone like her could feel. Strange, over the past few weeks she had felt something off. Sure she still murdered and tortured those going against the Director's plans and wanted to kill Ryuko Matoi for what her father did to her eye, but she seemed more thoughtful somehow. Nui didn't know what to make of it, but for the moment she was content with the knowledge that she was still the same Grand Couturier as ever.

"Aren't you something?" Nui asked happily, her single eye closing in mirth. So this creature's name was Kon, was it? Nui could feel the Life Fibers inside the plushie's body, which meant Kon had to have been made in one of Revocs's daughter companies. It would be foolish for Lady Ragyo to simply cover the world by infusing Life Fibers within just clothing. The Director's plans were much more grandiose!

"And you contain Life Fibers as well," Nui squeezed Kon's body, "That's awesome!"

"Hey, be gentle with my stuffing!" Kon didn't appreciate being manhandled like this. He was a living being, you know! He had the same rights and privileges as Ichigo, even if he wasn't exactly human. When Nui stopped squeezing and tilted her head in confusion, Kon composed himself and asked, "And just who are you anyway?"

Nui leaned forward until her face was only a few inches away from Kon's, "I'm Nui Harime!"

"Nui Harime, huh?" Kon could swear he heard that name before, but the memory eluded him. It couldn't have been anything bad, or else he wouldn't have forgotten about it, "That's a strange name. Anyway, do you mind letting me go now?"

"Why would I do that?" Nui raised Kon above her head and smiled, "You're just too fascinating to let go. In fact, if I didn't know any better, I would say you were a COVERS."

"I ain't covering anything," Kon answered indignantly while completely missing the emphasis Nui put on COVERS.

"Still..." Kon saw Nui's face shift slightly and he immediately knew he was in trouble, "I'm just so curious about what makes you tick. As the Grand Couturier, it wouldn't be prudent of me to simply let you go. Not when there's so much I can learn from your body..."

" *Oh crap,*" Kon began shaking nervously as Nui's true persona began to surface, "*Why do I always seem to attract the crazy ones? Come on, Kon. Think of something before this girl mounts your head above her fireplace. What would Ichigo do?*"

Then it hit Kon. It was so obvious that he would have smacked himself in the face if he currently wasn't in the grip of a psychopath. Coughing to gain Nui's attention, or at least part of it, Kon calmly said, "I think there's a slight problem with your suggestion."

Nui was slightly confused by Kon's state of mind. One minute the creature that was not a COVERS was scared of her, as it should be, and now it was calm and collected? Tilting her head to the side, her pigtailed bouncing along the way, she asked, "Oh? Like what?"

Kon made the motion of thinking hard before speaking, "Well, wouldn't taking me apart stop me from talking? How will you figure out how I work if I can't talk?"

"Don't be silly!" Nui beamed, "I'll just sew you up afterwards and start all over again if it doesn't work the first time!"

*" Ok, that didn't work."*

Kon didn't like it, but he needed to rely on his failsafe. Ichigo's dad had installed it about a week ago without even asking for his permission. Kon had been pissed, rightfully so, and would have kicked the elder Kurosaki's ass if he could, but since he couldn't he simply settled for glaring angrily at Isshin. Completely nonplussed at the treatment he was receiving from Kon, Isshin had chuckled clownishly before telling Kon to only use this device if he ever ended up in a situation with no other way out. It was very expensive and Isshin didn't want to have to buy another one.

"Well then..." Kon saw no other option. He would have to use it after all, "Since you are so serious about this, I suppose I have no choice in the matter, but before we go anywhere, can you do a simple favor for me?"

"You better not ask me to tell your family you loved them," Nui said jokingly, "Because if you do, I'll just track them down and kill them all for the trouble."

"No, it's not that," Kon was really starting to wish he hadn't come to Honnou City and stayed in the relative safety of Karakura Town, "See this button on my stomach? If you press it, I'll compact into a smaller form. It will make me much easier to carry."

Nui seemed to mull it over before moving Kon until he was right in front of her face, "Really?"

There had never been a moment in his existence that Kon was more appreciative of the fact that his plastic eyes couldn't express the lie he was telling, "But of course. I am Kon. I have never lied once in my lifetime."

Nui puffed out her cheeks and considered her options. Kon was obviously trying to trick her into a trap. That much was certain, but Nui wasn't too worried about it. She wasn't a stupid human that was weak to poison, fire, lack of blood and generally getting stabbed by a

Scissor Blade. If this was indeed a trap, then Nui thought she should be a good host and spring it. It was the polite thing to do after all.

"Ok!" Nui said cheerfully and pressed the button. In hindsight, when she found out that Kon belonged to Isshin, Nui would come to see what she did as very, very stupid.

As soon as she pressed the button, a thick blue smoke shot out of Kon's face. Immediately Nui let go of Kon and began coughing harshly. How could she, who wasn't even human, be affected by tear gas? This was impossible and yet she couldn't stop coughing or even open her one good eye.

Kon didn't bother waiting around or even gloating that he got Nui good. As soon as she let go of him, Kon promptly turned around and fled as fast as his legs could move. He needed to get to Honnouji Academy before Nui Harime recovered, which seemed to be quite soon, and find Ichigo's dad. He didn't feel safe in this city anymore, not with psychopaths like Nui Harime running around.

*" Damn it. This isn't worth all the half-naked babes Isshin promised me!"*

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"It appears that we may have misjudged the determination of Ryuko Matoi and Mako Mankanshoku," Ira Gamagori's booming voice echoed through the Student Council chambers. Without Nonon Jakuzure as part of the Elite Four, at least publically, Gamagori was enjoying the peace and quiet afforded to him by the distinct absence of Jakuzure hurling insults at Sanageyama, "Their tenacity is to be respected, but unless we do something to limit their growth, they will become part of your inner circle, Lady Satsuki."

Satsuki looked at the folder Gamagori had given to her just moments prior. In it were various statements and files from the defeated clubs

attesting to Gamagori's point of view. While they are all most likely true and highly accurate and precise, the inclusion of Gamagori's signature on each document was proof enough of that, Satsuki tossed it away without even opening it.

"Anyone that has been defeated by Matoi no longer possesses the right to complain about losing," Satsuki said before sipping her tea, "The fact they decided to complain about it means they are no longer worthy of the power I bestowed upon them. Let them know that I have denied their requests to have their Two-Star Goku Uniforms re-stitched and that they are forbidden from ever having one again."

Gamagori bowed respectfully, "Of course, Lady Satsuki."

"Tch," Sanageyama banged his fist against the arm of his chair in anger. What was the point of allowing Ryuko to fight all the small fries when he was willing and able to fight her himself? Ever since their rematch, Sanageyama had felt cheated out of his win. After a grueling and worthwhile match against Ryuko, who was still able to fight him even after he obtained Shingantsu and his Blade Regalia Mark II, his win was stolen from him by that strange woman. The problem he had wasn't with the woman herself, but that she so obnoxiously stepped in and interfered in his fight just as he was about to win. It wasn't fair, god damn it.

"Let me fight her again," Sanageyama called out to Satsuki, "It's been more than a couple of days since that woman's been spotted, right? That means she's left the city. If you let me fight Ryuko again, I'll be able to win without any issues this time."

"Do not be too hasty in your judgment, Sanageyama," Satsuki said calmly, "You will fight Matoi in due time. For right now, Jakuzure's mission takes priority over your need to fight."

"I thought Jakuzure was to observe Ichigo Kurosaki's Mugetsu?" Inumuta asked.



"She is," Satsuki conceded, "But fighting Matoi might jeopardize her mission. Once Jakuzure is safely out of reach of Ichigo's retribution, I will determine whether you may proceed against Matoi, Sanageyama."

Sanageyama didn't like it, but he wasn't about to argue and complain to Satsuki, "Fine."

"Hmm, this is peculiar," Inumuta leaned forward and stared at what was being displayed on the monitor. Typing in a few commands, his eyes widened substantially as he saw what the particular alert he was seeing meant, "Lady Satsuki, it appears that the Honnouji Academy Perimeter Detection System has just sensed an unauthorized visitor."

"Such news does not require the attention of Lady Satsuki, Inumuta," Gamagori growled, and it was true. Honnouji Academy received, on a weekly basis, at least four spies and cases of attempted espionage from other academies, mostly the Kansai Region academies. It had become so commonplace for spies to be discovered and killed that the club captains had begun taking bets on the next spy to be discovered. Gamagori had tried to curb the illegal gambling, but stopped when Inumuta showed him the amount of money Lady Satsuki was receiving as part of the 'winner's cut.'

"You are correct. That on its own would not be concerning," Inumuta's sarcasm did not pass Satsuki by. Turning her head ever so slightly, she subtly motioned for Inumuta to continue, "What is concerning is that the Honnouji Academy Interior Alarm went off *before* the perimeter alarm by seventy three seconds."

The slight narrowing of Satsuki's eyes was all the Elite Three needed to know that she wasn't pleased with Inumuta's news. The notion that someone bypassed her security wasn't as concerning as the fact that she knew of only a handful of people in the world that do so with such impunity. What was most interesting was the anachronistic order of events. Why had the interior alarm gone off before the perimeter alarm?

"Bring up the exterior cameras above Honnouji Academy," Satsuki ordered Inumuta as she stood up and turned towards the large wall of screens to her right, "Focus on the area around the breach."

Inumuta nodded and began rapidly typing in commands. It didn't take long for him to find what he was looking for. He honestly assumed that whoever this intruder was, they would have been able to turn off the cameras and feeds around their location. Here he was hoping for some sort of challenge. Clicking the final button, Inumuta looked up at the large wall of screens as the camera feed over the last ten minutes began playing. When he saw who the intruder was, he took off his glasses and cleaned them off. There had to be some sort of mistake. What he was seeing was socially impossible and yet, when he put his glasses back on, the intruder was still there.

"Is that -?"

"What is it?" Sanageyama shouted in annoyance. Although Shingantsu allowed him to see the world and fight at a level he previously thought unreachable, he still couldn't actually see, which meant that whatever was being displayed on the screens escaped him.

Satsuki's hands clenched in annoyance and mild anger as she witnessed Isshin Kurosaki somehow walk out onto the top of Honnouji Academy with impunity. If that wasn't enough, she then watched him anchor a nylon rope onto the floor before running off the edge of the school and crashing through one of the classroom windows, laughing the entire way if the expression on his face was accurate.

*"What could possess this man to commit such an audacious act?"*

This was the man that her mother urged her to be cautious around? Satsuki would have found the concept of such a joke truly laughable if it weren't for the fact that her mother never joked. No, Ragyo Kiryuin's sense of humor was much more cynical and black. Those that heard her humor tended to not be around much afterwards.

Refocusing herself, Satsuki tried to think of a reason why Isshin would do what he did. What motive did Isshin have and what did he hope to gain from being caught?

*" Did he allow Inumuta's cameras to see him? "* Satsuki puzzled while her mind went into high gear, *"Was part of his plan allowing us to discover that he had made his way into Honnouji Academy?"*

"Who was in the room Isshin Kurosaki broke into?"

"Let's see..." Inumuta switched off the exterior camera and moved to one of the hallway cameras that were generally used to catch tardy and lazy students. Setting the timeframe for ten minutes before Isshin's arrival, Inumuta put the feed on fast forward and let it play out. It wasn't long afterwards that several familiar people appeared on the monitor.

"Ichigo Kurosaki..." Gamagori's voice rumbled as a familiar orange head of hair walked out of the room, spoke to a One-Star student, before scaring him off. When he saw Ichigo crumple up a letter, Gamagori couldn't repress the growl emanating from his throat. How dare Ichigo refuse Lady Satsuki's kind and generous offer of being her Vice-President!

"And he's not the only one," Inumuta clicked a key and several pictures appeared on a different screen, "Ryuko Matoi, Mako Mankanshoku, Ururu Tsumugiya and Jakuzure were also in the room."

As the feed continued playing, Satsuki watched as the camera shook before Ichigo crashed through the wall of the room, flew across the hall and tore through the adjacent wall without slowing down. Looking at the time stamp, it seemed that the cause of Ichigo's abrupt flight was his father's rather grandiose entrance. A few moments later, there was a bright blue light and a flash of stars as Ichigo, clad in Mugetsu, came running out of the hole in the wall and headed back into the room.

"Is he going to fight his father?" Gamagori wondered out loud, "Surely if there was any animosity between him and his father, it wouldn't require the use of -"

Gamagori was forced to bite his tongue when Ichigo once again flew out of the room, this time clad in Mugetsu. He was not the only one shocked at the turn of events. Both Inumuta and Satsuki were stunned into silence as well. To see Ichigo in Mugetsu getting thrown around was one thing, but seeing it happen so easily was another. When Isshin finally walked out of the room and into the view of the camera, Satsuki noticed that he was wearing what looked to be a brown leather jacket and pants.

"I'm not detecting any Life Fibers in Isshin Kurosaki's clothing."

"What?" Satsuki knew that was impossible. Almost every scrap of clothing in the world was created and distributed by Revocs. Her mother made sure of that, but then again several things about Isshin disturbed her.

"I see..." Satsuki turned around and placed her hand on the hilt of Bakuzan. She needed to take care of this matter before it got out of hand. From what little she saw of their family squabble, the likelihood of collateral damage to Honnouji Academy being in the millions of dollars increased with every minute, "Gamagori. Sanageyama. You two come with me. We have a meeting with Isshin Kurosaki."

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" ***I'm confused, Ichigo,***" Mugetsu watched in confusion as Ichigo was tossed through a wall before eventually managing to land on his feet. As he looked around, Ichigo saw that his little... fight... with his dad had somehow ended up taking them to one of the many gymnasiums scattered throughout Honnouji Academy.

"About?"

**"How your dad is keeping up with us,"** Mugetsu couldn't sense any Life Fibers within Isshin's clothing. As a Kamui, she prided herself on being able to detect Life Fibers wherever they may be. It was how she knew how strong Danketsu and Junketsu were compared to her, **"He is not wearing a Kamui or a Goku Uniform and yet he is winning. What's going on?"**

"It's because my dad is too stupid to let something like logic get in his way," Ichigo spat as he could literally hear his dad approaching, "And he just doesn't know when to give up."

"Talking to oneself is a sign of mental instability!" Isshin leapt through the hole Ichigo had made in the wall and tried to tackle his son. Try being the key word because Ichigo managed to avoid the fairly obvious attack from his dad without much trouble. Quickly pivoting around, Ichigo attempted to jam his elbow into the small of his dad's back. When Isshin somehow managed to maneuver around his arm and backflip away, Ichigo began to lament the fact that he left Tournesol back in his dorm. Stabbing his dad would probably be seen as wrong by the rest of academy, but Ichigo was nearing the point of not caring.

Starting to get a little pissed off, Ichigo flew after his dad and finally managed to slam his fist into Isshin's face. His initial jubilation was cut short when Isshin's arms shot out and drew Ichigo into a headlock, "Is that why you don't have a girlfriend? Are you touched in the head, my son?"

"Get the hell off me!"

Ichigo's hands gripped the back of his dad's jacket and, in one fell swoop, flipped him over his shoulder. As Isshin landed bodily on the ground, a gasp involuntarily leaving his mouth as the air was forced out of his lungs, Ichigo tried to smash his elbow into his diaphragm, but once again he found his arm stopped mere inches from his intended target.

Where the hell was his dad getting this strength from? As Isshin grinned clownishly before pushing Ichigo off him, Ichigo tried to rationalize what was happened. Ok, he knew he dad was a former shinigami captain that was able to fight Aizen at an even level. That pretty much made him a badass, but his dad was in his gigai right now, so how was it he was kicking his ass so easily?

"You left your flank exposed, my son!"

Ichigo glanced upwards to find Isshin falling down towards him. Grimacing in annoyance, he cocked a fist back and prepared to punch his dad in the face, but was stopped when a spiked whip shot out of nowhere and pummeled Isshin into the nearby wall.

"There shall be no unauthorized fighting at Honnouji Academy!" Ira Gamagori shouted bombastically as his feet smashed against the ground. Grabbing the end of his whip and snapping it taunt, he glared at the smoking crater where Isshin's body had impacted, "That goes double for intruders such as you!"

"Stand down, Gamagori," Satsuki Kiryuin strutted forward past the massive teenager and planted Bakuzan against the ground. Staring directly at where she knew Isshin Kurosaki to be, she asked, "Isshin Kurosaki, I presume?"

"Oh, you know of me. That saves me a lot of time introducing myself. I was never really good with social introductions anyway."

Walking out of the hole looking little worse for wear, Isshin dusted off jacket. He was lucky that Gamagori's attack hadn't torn it. If it had, he would have forced the young man to foot the bill for repairing it. Coughing and scratching his beard, he opened his mouth to speak to Satsuki and promptly received a foot in the face courtesy of Ichigo.

"What do you want?" Ichigo asked Satsuki, his temper already shortened enough already. His dad always seemed to piss him off and Ichigo's inability to make Isshin stay down was irritating him,

"Can't you come back in five minutes? I just need to teach my dad a few lessons on manners."

"Now, Ichigo..." In the time it took Ichigo to turn and stare at Satsuki, Isshin had moved across the gym and smashed his knee into his son's stomach. As Ichigo gagged, Ichigo grabbed him in another headlock, "What I have taught you about manners? Besides, you let your guard down. A year ago you would never have fallen for such a simple and obvious trick. It is clear that your time at Honnouji Academy has softened you tremendously. Is everyone here a pansy?"

"Watch your mouth around Lady Satsuki!" Sanageyama brandished his shinai at Isshin.

"It's fine, Sanageyama," Satsuki raised her arm to calm down her subordinate before she slowly unsheathed Bakuzan, "If he deigns to speak as such to me once more, I shall have no choice but to punish him."

"Please ignore my dad," With a grunt of frustration, Ichigo slammed his foot down on Isshin's foot. As he dad hobbled around, cursing his son for such cowardly tactics, Ichigo sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, "He's an idiot. He'll just ignore anything you say to him."

"That's not the proper way to speak to your father!" Isshin shouted obnoxiously before turning his attention to Satsuki, "So, who might you be young lady? You look quite important, so you must be quite powerful around here."

Satsuki narrowed her eyes as she felt Junketsu view the man in front of her with apprehension. The behavior of her Kamui baffled her as much as the knowledge that she was able to sense what her Kamui was feeling. Concentrating on that feeling, Satsuki concluded it wasn't so much as sensing what Junketsu was feeling as it was her Kamui tightening up around her body without drawing any more of her blood. The combination of such strange events gave Satsuki the knowledge that Isshin Kurosaki was more than he appeared to be.

"I am Satsuki Kiryuin!" Satsuki shouted bombastically and immediately she was illuminated by a bright white backlight emanating from somewhere behind her, "As Student Council President, it is my sacred duty to destroy and eliminate any threats to Honnouji Academy! You will tell me your purpose for trespassing in my academy or face the consequences of your crime!"

Isshin looked at Satsuki with a discerning eye. There was no doubt in his mind that she was Ragyo's daughter. She even had the whole backlight and everything. Still, he wasn't one to allow such theatrics to bother or make him submit. Masaki had taught him that lesson quite well.

"I'm here to visit my son, the delinquent," Isshin pointed with his thumb at Ichigo, who didn't say anything and simply glared in retaliation, "I heard tomorrow was Parent Student Day and thought it would be a good idea to come by and check up on him. One of my sources said that my son had two girls pining after him and as an overprotective father, I couldn't allow that to continue without speaking to these girls myself."

Ichigo didn't know what was worse, that is dad had a source in Honnouji Academy feeding him information or that he assumed there were girls interested in him. Ichigo wasn't anywhere near as dense as people made him out to be. Just because he didn't go around asking every girl in sight for their number didn't mean he was an idiot. Realizing something important he almost missed, he turned to his dad and asked, "Just how did you find all this out anyway?"

"There isn't much a child can do that their parents don't know about!" Isshin answered proudly, "Hey, is Satsuki one of them?"

Ichigo blinked in confusion, "One of what?"

"You know," Isshin made a series of motions with his hands, "The girls that have a crush on you. Do I need to spell it out?"



As Ichigo choked in embarrassment, his ears picked up the sound of a blade singing through the air. The cause of the noise was Satsuki, a look of mild irritation on her face, attempting to stab his father through the throat. It was just her luck that his father's reflexes were incredibly quick and Isshin bent backwards and let Bakuzan pass harmless just over the tip of his nose.

"Do not speak of such things unless you wish to lose your ability to speak at all," Satsuki warned Isshin with venom lacing her words. How dare this man presume to understand the workings of her mind! Her interest in Ichigo was purely from a militaristic standpoint. As one of the few people able to withstand the incredible power of a Kamui, his help in her grand plans would greatly bolster her overall power. While she intended the same for Matoi, she was still too weak for Satsuki to use in any regard. Perhaps after a few more tests she would extend her hand to Matoi.

"Well..." Isshin looked at the black blade of Bakuzan and was greatly reminded of Ichigo's former bankai, "I should have expected that. You are Ragyo's daughter after all."

Satsuki twisted her wrist and suddenly Bakuzan was pointed directly over Isshin's heart. At the same time, Gamagori and Sanageyama had moved to block Ichigo from attempting to rescue his father.

"How do you know my mother?" Satsuki pressed the tip of Bakuzan against Isshin's jacket, causing the leather to tear slightly upon contact.

Isshin looked at the weapon with curiosity. So Ragyo's daughter wielded a blade made of Life Fibers? Its craftsmanship was superb, but even he could tell it was not at the level of quality of Ichigo's Tournesol. Then again, there were very few people that could match the intelligence and genius of Kisuke Urahara when the man put his mind to it. If Ragyo and Kisuke were to work together... Isshin shuddered at the mere thought of that team up. The world would be destroyed in hours if that ever came to pass.

"Ah, that's a long story," Isshin stroked his chin, completely uncaring of Satsuki's death threat. If Aizen couldn't kill him, Satsuki didn't have a chance, "It had to be thirty years ago..."

Ichigo stared uncaringly at his dad, "I thought it was twenty two years?"

Isshin raised a knowing finger, "At my age you lose track of the years. Anyway, I met Ragyo around twenty two years ago, you are the splitting image of her by the way, and we soon became close friends. After that, other things happened, Masaki and I got married, had Ichigo and now the circle is complete."

Satsuki stared at Isshin for a moment longer before stepping back and sheathing Bakuzan. In her brief clash with Ichigo's father, she had ascertained that the man was indeed extremely dangerous. As much of a show as he had put on, which would have fooled most other people, when she pressed Bakuzan against his chest he had not flinched even an inch. The fact that such a man could look at her blade with absolute calmness suggested that there was more to the man than first appeared. That was not to mention that he was fighting Ichigo and winning despite Ichigo already being clad in Mugetsu.

" *Such strength to go head to head with a Kamui and come out on top,*" Satsuki mused thoughtfully. The only person she had ever witnessed doing such a feat was the Grand Couturier, but she wasn't exactly a normal human. Was this the reason her mother took a vested interest in him? Satsuki did not know, but that did not mean she wasn't going to find out. Inumuta's earlier queries had failed due to a lack of information. Isshin's newly revealed capacities should help Inumuta dig up something.

"My mother will be attending Parent Student Day tomorrow," Satsuki informed Isshin as she walked away, "She has informed me she is looking forward to speaking with you."

"It's always great to see Ragyo," Isshin said sarcastically before adding, "Although the last time we spoke she tried to kill me. I suppose that was my fault for egging her on, but it seems her aim has improved over the years..."

Satsuki made the motion of ignoring Isshin's rambling, but inside she was memorizing everything he said. It was subtle, a misplaced word or fantastical sentence, but several things Ichigo's father said raised alarms in her head. If she were to believe Isshin's words, Satsuki needed to adjust her plans and account for every new variable. If her mother was truly on to her plans, then Satsuki needed to become unpredictable. She was nobody's puppet, dancing at the whims of the puppeteer. If her mother thought Satsuki was simply going to be strung along for her own amusement, Ragyo Kiryuin was going to be surprised when things didn't go to plan.

Isshin watched Satsuki leave with contemplating eyes. The last thing he wanted to do was speak to Ragyo while in the presence of hundreds of innocent people. She would have no compunctions using them against him since she knew Isshin would never risk the lives of innocent teenagers and their families. In fact, that was what Ragyo was probably counting on. She was a very smart woman, after all, and would quickly capitalize on Isshin's reluctance to confront her in the presence of humans.

It was either that or she somehow found out about Ururu, but then again, it wasn't like he had kept her existence a secret. If it took Ragyo sixteen years to figure it out, perhaps Isshin had overestimated her intelligence. As he imagined Ragyo's immediate reaction to finding out, Isshin suppressed a shudder. The saying that there isn't anything worse than a woman scorned was probably created with Ragyo in mind. And if Ragyo was coming, then Nui wouldn't be far behind. He just needed to keep her away from Ururu. The Grand Couturier's lack of morals and sanity was only matched by her insatiable curiosity.

Ichigo watched Satsuki and her two goons leave before turning to his dad and asked, "Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?"

Isshin gave him son the best goofy smile he could muster, "I have no idea what you're talking about, Ichigo."

"Dad..."

"I suppose you got a point." There was a point where Isshin knew acting like an idiot wouldn't work anymore. After the Winter War and Ichigo seeing who he truly was, Isshin couldn't play that card anymore. Pushing himself off the ground, he ran a hand through his hair, "So that's Mugetsu huh? It's a pretty well-crafted Kamui. Kisuke did a hell of a job making her."

Ichigo's eyes narrowed slightly, "How do you know that?"

"Come on now!" Isshin drew his son into a one armed hug, "I'm your old man, for crying out loud! There isn't much that you can do that goes over your head. I heard you speaking to Mugetsu on my way over here. She has a lovely voice you know."

" **Aw...** " If she was able to at the moment, Mugetsu would have blushed. She wasn't used to hearing complements from other people besides Ichigo.

"I'm not going to even ask how you are able to hear Mugetsu." With a simple mental command, Ichigo transformed Mugetsu back into her normal school uniform and sighed. Looking his dad straight in the eye, he asked, "Just tell me something. How do you know Satsuki's mother? Don't give me another one of your stories. I want to hear the truth."

"The truth..." Isshin knew there was a high chance that Satsuki, and most likely Ragyo, were listening in on this conversation. He couldn't afford to give too much away and risk Ragyo figuring something out, "Do you remember last winter when I dragged you across town? Think back on what you told me afterwards."

" *I got nothing to say. If you haven't told me by now, then you must have a good reason for doing so. It's your past. I don't know how to*

*ask you about it without trampling your feelings and tracking mud all over them."*

"Yeah, I remember what I said," Ichigo's voice dropped a few decibels as he remembered what happened that day as clearly as though it had only happened yesterday. So much happened in those few hours that Ichigo wasn't sure where his memory ended and his imagination began. Looking down at Mugetsu's eyes, which seemed to show concern for her wearer, Ichigo sighed and turned around, "I'll let you tell me whenever you feel like it. Just don't keep me in the dark this time."

*" I wish I didn't have to."*

Isshin watched Ichigo walk away with pride visible in his eyes. It was subtle at the moment, but Ichigo was really coming into his own as a person. He had a Kamui of his own and yet he didn't allow the power Mugetsu offered him go to his head. If anything, he was more careful with his new power than when he had his shinigami powers. Dusting off his jacket while frowning at the minute hole near his heart, Isshin tried to think of a way he was eventually going to tell the truth to Ichigo. He knew without a doubt in his mind that if he didn't tell Ichigo, Ragyo would sure as hell take pleasure in doing so herself. He wouldn't bet against her tearing his son's heart out just to show it directly to Ichigo's face.

"Ragyo was always one for dramatics," Isshin noted to himself as he walked after Ichigo.

While his main priority in coming to Honnouji Academy was to meet up with Ichigo and attend Parent Student Day, he had several other things to do while he was here. Looking at his watch, Isshin was starting to wonder what Kon was up to. It wasn't like the mod soul to skip out on something like this. Shrugging his shoulders, Isshin realized Kon would show up eventually. Where else could the mod soul go?

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"How long do you plan on hiding, Jakuzure?"

"I was not hiding, Lady Satsuki." Nonon walked out of the shadows and bowed respectfully, "I was waiting for you to address me."

"I see," Satsuki was glad that Jakuzure's time amongst Ichigo and his peers hadn't dampened her social etiquette. It would have been quite the shame for a girl from such a prestigious and wealthy family to suddenly lose everything that made her unique. Motioning for Sanageyama and Gamagori to leave her alone, Satsuki asked, "Do you have anything new to report?"

"... no," Jakuzure admitted reluctantly.

That did not please Satsuki. The parameters of Jakuzure's mission said that she only had until Parent Student Day, which was tomorrow, to find the source of Ichigo Kurosaki's control over Mugetsu so that Satsuki herself could use that to boost her own control over Junketsu. Hadn't Jakuzure smugly promised her to have results in a week? Well, Satsuki hadn't been too expectant to see such quick results. It was better to assume it would take as long as possible and be pleasantly surprised when it doesn't rather than the other way around.

"You have until tomorrow to find out something of value. By the time my mother arrives you will either have what I want or your expulsion from the Elite Four shall be made permanent!" Satsuki ordered, causing Nonon to cast her head downwards in shame. She really has been trying to figure out how Ichigo was controlling Mugetsu, but every time she subtly inquired about it, she got strange looks and no one said anything. The possibility that they were aware of her mission had crossed Nonon's mind a few times, but she couldn't afford to just give up. Her entire life as one of Lady Satsuki's closest friends was on the line. She needed to succeed.

As an idea came to mind, Nonon asked, "Well, what about the Transfer Student?"

Satsuki raised an eyebrow in interest. Truth be told, Matoi's involvement in her silly Fight Club had been at the back of her mind as she prepared for Parent Student Day and the arrival of her mother. Everything had to be perfect and in working order, which meant Satsuki had focused the majority of her time to doing so. That is one of the many reasons she requested Ichigo become her Vice-President.

"What about Matoi?" Satsuki asked. Just because she wasn't focused on Matoi's progress did not mean Satsuki wasn't keeping track of what was going on. Satsuki was quite pleased to see Mako Mankanshoku assimilating so rapidly into the culture of Honnouji Academy. It was nearly at the point where Satsuki was certain Mankanshoku would choose her wealth and power over her friendship with Matoi. It was nearly sickening to see a human so easily corrupted by power to the point of forgoing everything that made them who they are.

"She has a Kamui, right?" Nonon tested the waters of her question and, upon seeing Satsuki's subtle motion to continue, did so, "You assigned me this mission after my defeat against Strawberry, but how were you to know that the Transfer Student's Kamui could change as well? Perhaps trying to get the secret from Strawberry is a waste of time when the Transfer Student is much stupider and easier to fool."

That was one of the reasons Satsuki respected Jakuzure as a colleague. Even when she was on the verge of losing her wealth and status, she was still able to come up with brilliant ideas.

"Matoi?" Satsuki thought about it and decided that perhaps going after Ichigo was no longer the best option, not when Matoi provided a much more readily available target. Smiling smugly, she began formulating a plan on what to do, "That could work. Good work,

Jakuzure. Go and return to Ichigo. I will inform Sanageyama that his match against Matoi has been pushed up to this afternoon."

Nonon couldn't believe what she was hearing, "You're going to let the Monkey fight the Transfer Student?"

"Did I say that?" Satsuki began walking away, "As I recall, all I said was that the match has been moved up. If I know Matoi, it will never come to that, but in the end we will still get the match needed for Inumuta to collect information on Senketsu."

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Ragyo Kiryuin threw open the doors of her closet and grinned upon seeing all the different outfits hanging inside.

"Ma'am," Rei Hououmaru walked towards her boss and wisely stopped some distance away from the room. Even though she was the personal assistant of Ragyo Kiryuin, even she wouldn't be immune from the urges of the Life Fibers within the room. Rei trusted her ability to avoid most attacks, but she wasn't naïve enough to believe she could do so against dozens, if not hundreds, of outfits.

Still ecstatic upon witnessing the true majesty of her designs, Ragyo asked, "What is it Hououmaru?"

"I have just received word from your daughter," If Rei noticed the barely perceivable frown of disgust on Ragyo's face, she dared not mention it, "She informed me that Isshin Kurosaki has arrived at Honnouji Academy as of earlier this afternoon."

So Isshin decided to attend Parent Student Day after all. Ragyo was finding this day to be just full of surprises. There were so many people she needed to meet and speak to at Satsuki's little school. Isshin... Ichigo... and little Amu...



"Thank you for the wonderful news Hououmaru," Ragyo hooked her fingers around the clasps on her shoulders that held her constantly pristine white, low-cut dress over her body. As her thumbs caressed the latches, she turned her head partially around, "You are dismissed. Let Satsuki know that I will be arriving around noon tomorrow. I don't need to assume that she will roll out the welcome mat for me."

"Right away Ma'am," Rei bowed her head and turned to carry out her orders. As close as she was to Ragyo, there were only three people that had ever seen her pure and naked body and one of them was already dead. She wasn't willing to make it two.

Once her assistant had left to carry out her orders, Ragyo stepped within her closet and immediately felt all the Life Fibers reacting to her presence. If she had been just another pig in clothing, her clothes would have quickly and painfully drained them of all their blood before devouring their body. It was her favorite method of disposing of spies that thought they were clever, smart and stealthy enough to break into her own manor.

Reaching over towards one dress, Ragyo brushed her fingers against it and immediately felt it move in response to her touch. She always took such pleasure in seeing all her clothes and outfits react to her presence with such child-like reverence. They all knew of her connection to the Original Life Fiber and saw her as one of the few beings in existence that were to be respected and adored. Her dear child Nui was another, but Ragyo wished there were more than just the two of them. When she finally met Isshin's son, Ragyo hoped to induct him into the Kiryuin family. She was sure Ichigo would be someone the Life Fibers would follow.

Ragyo stepped away from the dress and turned towards the back of her closet. Past the hundreds of dresses in her collection, all of which were pristine and virgin white with a faint rainbow undertone that constantly seemed to emit from somewhere within the dress was the exact outfit she was looking for. It was perhaps one of a handful of dresses in her collection that she did not create herself.

Rather, it was chosen out for her and given to her as a gift. Ragyo smirked as she remembered the sheepish and embarrassed look on Isshin's face after he spent over an hour trying, and mostly failing, to find a dress she would like all on his own. She found it so cute that Isshin, the same man who had no fashion sense, did his best to pick out something he knew she would like.

Raising her arm as she approached the back of her expansive closet, Ragyo mentally ordered her outfits to move out of her way as she strolled forward. Hanging on the back of her closet, wrapped in plastic and as pristine as the day she received it, was a form-fitting purple dress. As her eyes took in the one outfit she had yet to wear, Ragyo had to give Isshin credit. Fashion sense or not, when the man put his mind to it, he managed to pick out something she really liked.

"You are far too valuable and precious to be worn as just clothing..." Ragyo hooked her finger in the plastic around the dress and slashed downwards. Unlike the rest of her attire, this dress contained no Life Fibers and why should it when it was created before she started incorporating Life Fibers within Revocs products? A slightly psychotic and lusty smile spread across Ragyo's face as she thought about what she was going to do next. Just because it did, didn't mean that it couldn't.

Pressing her palm against the unmoving purple silk, Ragyo watched in satisfaction as dozens of Life Fibers emerged from her wrist and hand and began weaving themselves into the fabric. Unlike the rest of her clothing, she wasn't going to give this dress just enough Life Fibers for basic life. It was given to her by Isshin and, as such, it deserved the same treatment she would give that man. As more and more Life Fibers left her body and became one with the dress, Ragyo began to feel the dress come alive. Already she could feel it probing her, sensing that she was its greater and that her will was its only command.

"No, mon précieux," Ragyo caressed the dress as she continued to give it more and more Life Fibers, watching all the while as the Life Fibers merged and replaced the silk. Already she could see the dark

purple fading to a lighter color. Soon it would be as white and pristine as the rest of her clothing. Ragyo smirked as she witnessed the interior of the dress beginning to glow before sighing dreamily, "You are much more than clothing to me. You are a gift to me from the only man I love and thus are more precious to me than my daughter. Now come, be worn by me!"

The once purple dress didn't need any more incentive to be worn by its mistress. Coming to life, it immediately threw itself at her and began to wrap itself around her naked body. Sighing in ecstasy, Ragyo couldn't wait until tomorrow when she would finally meet Isshin's progeny and see firsthand how well her experiment all those years ago succeeded.

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## **Kamui Tales #9 - All From a Name**

***"Welcome back for another installment of Kamui Tales!"***

Senketsu said dramatically as he hopped backwards away from the screen, ***"Unfortunately Mugetsu couldn't be here tonight. Apparently Ichigo is washing her on his day off and that is much more important than doing this..."***

Senketsu's tone carried a bit of anger and envy in it, which meant that he would rather be doing that than hosting the omake segment. As a growl emanated from where his throat would be Senketsu looked at the card in his hand and said, ***"So instead, Junketsu will be helping me explain the origins of Kamui names!"***

As if on cue, Junketsu appeared on the edge of the screen and reluctantly waved to the camera. Hopping across the screen, a white board tucked under one of its sleeves, it stopped near Senketsu and gave its fellow Kamui a salute. Noticing the tool for communication, Senketsu scratched his lapels and asked, ***"So the author still hasn't given you a voice or gender yet?"*** When

Junketsu nodded in affirmation, Senketsu huffed, ***"Just how lazy is he? It's not like it's hard to change it to he or she. Since you're here Junketsu, why don't you tell the readers what gender you are?"***

Junketsu seemed to brighten up at the idea and began frantically scribbling something on the board. Once it was satisfied with what it wrote, it nodded to itself and flipped the board around, "I am \*\*male."

***"Wait a second,"*** Senketsu leaned in close with his one good eye. It was a curse to be created without good depth perception, ***"Is that a smudge or the first part of the word?"***

Junketsu looked at what it wrote before turning to Senketsu and simply shrugged.

***"Oh well, I suppose it really doesn't matter. The readers will have to find out eventually, unless the author cops out like the anime team did,"*** Senketsu turned his body towards the screen and pressed a button on the remote held in its sleeve. Immediately a picture of Kinue Kinagase with Danketsu exposed for everyone to see appeared on screen.

***"This is Danketsu,"*** Senketsu informed while Junketsu had written 'DANKETSU' on its white board, ***"Danketsu is the Kamui worn by Kinue Kinagase. She is not only powerful enough to give Ryuko and me a run for our money if we were to ever fight, but she is also rude, obnoxious, and quite insane - "***

Senketsu was cut off from saying any further insults as a brick flew in from somewhere off screen and beamed him square in his back. Quickly recovering, he rubbed his now sore back while faint laughter, most likely Danketsu, echoed in the background. Growling, Senketsu turned back to the screen, ***"Danketsu has multiple meanings, but here it stands for 'Unison,' which comes from the fact that Danketsu cannot be separated from Kinue no matter what."***

The screen abruptly shifted before showing all four Kamui in their various transformations, ***"All Kamui are named after some aspect of either their personality or meaning. In fact, it is rather simple to name a Kamui. All you need to do is - "***

Senketsu stopped in midsentence when Junketsu tapped his shoulder and showed him what it had written down, "But what about you?"

***"What do you mean?"***

"Where does your name come from?"

***"Ah!"*** Senketsu sighed happily, ***"Ryuko gave me my name. It means 'Fresh Blood.'"***

"But all Kamui require blood. All she gave you was a word describing what you do."

***"Yes, but - "***

"Do you mean to tell the viewers that you are the only Kamui without a true name? How ironic..."

***"No! It's... I... but..."*** Senketsu seemed to tear up before he ran off screen shouting, ***"Ryuko! Why didn't you give me a proper name?"***

Junketsu watched its fellow Kamui leave before hopping to the center of the screen and wrote, "I apologize for the abrupt ending of this segment of Omake Tales. My fellow Kamui are quite strange and prone to irrational emotional bouts. Perhaps next time we will actually get something done."

# Let's Stay Together

*Huh, I actually managed to post this chapter a week after the last one. Usually that would be no problem, but for three days I had a massive writer's block and it wasn't until Tuesday that my muse came back to me. So I hope you enjoy Chapter 22 and don't forget to review it once you're done!*

*I have a tvtropes page for this story! Just reminding you all.*

*I will be posting snippets and omakes of the chapters at spacebattles. So if you can't wait a whole week to see the polished and final chapter, head on over there and see the mostly finished segments as I write and post them.*

***Edit: I really screwed up at the end of Ichigo's fight. I fixed the ending so it should be more in line with who Ichigo is and his stance on fighting and killing.***

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## Chapter 22 - Let's Stay Together

Ryuko thought tracking down Ichigo's dad would be easy. The man was, after all, a bumbling idiot who had the mentality of a child. It was to her eternal surprise that even after following the trail of destruction, as well as Ichigo's directions, that she only found the man completely by accident.

She had just given up searching after an hour and kicked a nearby door in frustration. When the door fell off its rusted hinges, making her nervous since that Gamagori bastard would order her to pay for the damage to the academy, Ryuko tried to put it back only to see

Isshin Kurosaki had put several unused desks together and was using them as a makeshift bed in order to take a nap.

"Hey," Ryuko nudged Isshin only for the man to snore in return, "Get up."

When Isshin didn't move, even after several increasingly violent attempts on her part, Ryuko found herself reaching her breaking point. Taking a step back, she reared her leg up and kicked out the desk under Isshin's head and shoulders. As the force of gravity reminded Isshin that she was completely heartless by causing his entire body to tumble painfully to the ground, Isshin tried to understand what exactly had just happened.

"I see you're awake now," Ryuko huffed and folded her arms, "So you're really Ichigo's dad and not some weird relative?"

Isshin stopped rubbing his sore neck and saw Ryuko staring irritably down at him. So she was the cause of all his current pain and suffering, "Yup! It may not look like it, but Ichigo is my flesh and blood!"

Ryuko's eyebrow rose at the proclamation. The man was like a complete opposite of Ichigo, "Have we met before?"

"I can't say that we have," Isshin answered mystically, "But then again, Ichigo was always one to keep me out of the loop. It's such a sad, sad day when a son doesn't trust his father anymore!"

"I see..." Ryuko's eye began twitching as she finally understood why Ichigo did not like his dad. The man was a complete idiot! How he could have raised someone like Ichigo boggled her mind, "Let me ask you something else. Have you ever met my dad?"

"Your dad?" Ryuko was getting into dangerous territory, so Isshin decided to go about solving the problem the old fashioned way with a great big lie, "Probably not."

"Oh yeah?" Ryuko reached into Senketsu and pulled out an old and time-weathered photograph she had absconded with from her dad's ruined basement, "Then how do you explain this?"

Ryuko hadn't initially thought much about the picture she found in her dad's house. She had almost completely forgotten about it when Ichigo's dad came swinging in and attacked him. While at the time she was too much in shock from watching what was happening to think about the photo, now that she had some free time between fighting club presidents, the photo was all she could think about. Ichigo's dad resembled the man in the photo too much for it to be a coincidence. There had to be a connection between him and her dad.

Isshin looked at the photo and could honestly say that he had completely forgotten about it. Isshin Matoui hadn't wanted to go on vacation with him and Masaki. His excuse was that he had a lot of work to do setting up everything as well as taking care of little Ryuko. As much as he tried to argue with the man, Isshin couldn't dissuade the elder Matoui from his decision. That was when Masaki walked past him, a thin smile on her face, and told her husband to leave everything to her. When Masaki pulled the professor away and whispered something into his ear, Isshin could swear he saw his hunchback almost straighten out. When he asked Masaki what he said to him, all she would say to him was that a mother knew best.

He, of course, didn't want to say much about his history with Ryuko's father. Humming thoughtfully as his mind tried to come up with something Ryuko would believe, Isshin decided to go with an old classic - tell a lie with a sprinkling of the truth.

"That's Masaki and me on vacation in Hawaii with your old man," Isshin paused momentarily as he scratched his stubble, "Man, that shirt was gaudy, but let me tell you something. It was really confusing having everyone call out 'Isshin' and the both of us turn to see who it was."



Ryuko was surprised by Isshin's straightforward admittance. She was so sure he would have denied being in the picture like Aikuro tried to do until she threatened to castrate the man, "Good, now who is Masaki?"

Isshin's tone as he replied was somber and Ryuko realized she probably said something wrong, "Masaki was Ichigo's mother. She died nearly nine years ago."

"H-How - ?"

"But that's enough about such sad memories!" Ryuko was thrown off by the sudden change in Isshin's behavior, but the next words out of his mouth nearly caused her own to gape in complete and utter surprise, "I'm sure you've shown me such an accusing photograph hoping that I would tell you more about your father, right? Well then, ask away!"

Ryuko couldn't believe what she was hearing. After weeks of Aikuro dodging around the issue of her father to the point at which it was almost like an art to him, here Ichigo's dad was offering what she sought. Swallowing nervously and taking a moment to compose herself, she asked, "How well did you know my dad?"

"I suppose as well as can be expected. Your dad was quite the workaholic, after all," Isshin folded his arms and thought back to all the times he had visited Isshin only to be rebuked by the busy scientist. While they hadn't really talked much during the last ten years, Isshin still tried to keep in touch for Masaki's sake, "I knew him for nearly twenty years. You can't imagine how much of a shock it was to find out old Isshin had a kid! Masaki was fawning over you, but I was laughing at trying to figure out who would want to marry your old man!"

"Hey! That's my dad you're talking about!" Ryuko snapped and kicked Isshin in the shin, causing the elder Kurosaki to hobble in pain while holding his leg. Taking no small amount of pleasure from

Isshin's pain, Ryuko turned her head and grumbled, "What was he like?"

Isshin looked at Ryuko with owlsh eyes, "Shouldn't you know that? He was your dad, not mine, although with the way he always criticized everything I did he may as well have been my father."

"Dad was always busy working," Ryuko couldn't look Isshin in the eye as she thought back to every time she asked her dad to play with her only for him to tell her he was too busy to do so. As first she thought being sent off to boarding school would be a godsend, there were other kids to play with after all, in the end it only made things worse. Despite her best efforts to fit in, she became a social outcast and joined several gangs. Turning back to Isshin, she whispered, "I once asked him about how mom died. He just stopped working and wouldn't speak to me for a couple of hours. You were his friend right? Tell me why he was like that."

*"Jeez, you really made a mess of things, didn't you?"*

As much as Isshin wanted to sit down with Ryuko and explain everything her dad was doing that caused him to become so distant with her, he had to admit that Aikuro had a point about waiting until she was ready. Staring deep into her eyes under the guise of thinking about his answer, Isshin saw the desperation, loneliness and anger dwelling just below the surface. Ryuko had a lot of lingering problems and the murder of her father only made things worse. Although, now that he looked carefully, it seemed that Ichigo's influence was a positive influence on Ryuko's emotions. Isshin chuckled at that little piece of information. Perhaps he would wait a few more weeks for his son to mellow out Ryuko a tad bit more before telling Aikuro to let Ryuko know more about her father's work. It wouldn't be good to rush these things. There was no way to tell how Ryuko would react to the truth, but Isshin knew it most likely wouldn't be pretty.

"Isshin was a brilliant man," Isshin started suddenly, bringing Ryuko back to attention. Chuckling at an old memory, he continued off with

his lie, "If you gave him any piece of clothing, all he would need to do is sniff it, rub it and stare at it to know what composed it and in what percentages. That's what made him famous in the fashion industry until he retired from most of his work after you were born. One thing he wasn't good at was expressing his emotions."

Isshin stopped when he heard a loud commotion coming from outside. Turning toward the window, he noticed a large group of students setting something up in the large courtyard outside. Filing that information away as unnecessary, he continued where he left off, "Your dad may not have seemed like the most loving man, but that was because he didn't know how to express himself in front of you. In the last decade I spoke with him only once, about six years ago, and all he would talk about was how proud he was of you."

"Proud?" Ryuko gazed at Isshin in stunned surprise.

"Yeah," Isshin nodded. This part was true at least. Aikuro didn't know about that particular little chat, but Isshin had gone back to try and patch things up between the two of them. It worked, to some extent, but things just weren't the same, "He was keeping close tabs on you but promised to never interfere unless you needed it. When he told me about how you were in a gang, he laughed and said that he hoped you knocked the hell out of those boys and showed just how strong of a woman you are. He really loved you."

"I can't believe it." For the first time in months, Ryuko felt genuinely happy. While being around Mako and Ichigo helped to make her forget what happened to her dad and why she was at Honnouji Academy in the first place, what Isshin just told her made her feel truly happy. As a smile broke out across her face, Ryuko chuckled and asked, "Is there anything else you can tell me about him? What about my mom? What was she like?"

"Whoa!" Isshin raised his hands placating, "Once question at a time, young lady! I suppose I should start by saying Isshin didn't really talk about your mom all that much. I think the pain of losing her was too

much for him and he would rather not talk about it than risk remembering her."

"Oh..." Ryuko was crestfallen but that was alright with her. As long as she knew her dad had always been proud of her, she could deal with this little setback.

"There is one thing I would like to talk to you about..." Isshin needed to tread very carefully with what he was about to say. One wrong step and he could really hurt Ryuko emotionally and if that happened, Ichigo would kick his ass so hard he wouldn't be able to sit down for years. Rubbing the back of his neck, he thought carefully and said, "When I dragged my no-good son out before, I had a little chat with him. He told me a few things, but the one thing that stuck with me is how he thinks someone called Nui Harime killed Isshin."

When he saw the anger appear on Ryuko's face at the mention of her father's murderer, Isshin knew he needed to act fast, "Look, I know better than anyone that revenge is a sucker's game. If this Nui person really did kill Isshin, what will tracking her down and killing her accomplish other than wasting your life? It won't bring him back."

"What... what gives you the right to say that?" Ryuko growled at Isshin.

"I told you Ichigo's mother died nine years ago, right? The truth is that she was murdered. Once I heard what happened, I immediately had my suspicions about who did it, but in order to go after them I would need to leave my family. I could have easily tracked them down and made them pay for what they did, but the tradeoff was too great. Ichigo and his sisters had just lost their mother. They couldn't lose their father as well. In the end I made my choice and I haven't looked back or regretted it for a single day."

Ryuko wanted to say something to Isshin, but every time she opened her mouth the words just seemed to dry up in her throat. Was going after Nui Harime really so pointless if it didn't bring her dad back?

"Maybe you're right," she conceded, casting her gaze away from Isshin, "But I can't give up looking for her. I still need to know why she killed my dad!"

Isshin nodded sagely. That was the best he was going to get out of her and he knew it. It would be naïve of him to think that he could change someone's mind so readily after just talking to them once. For the last six months revenge had been on the forefront of Ryuko's mind. He would have been more worried if she had suddenly agreed with him. That still left the matter of how to deal with Nui Harime because Isshin knew the Grand Couturier would want to gloat about what she did to Ryuko's dad.

"I never said you should give up looking for answers," Isshin shook his head, "I'm just saying you shouldn't do it alone. I'm sure Ichigo and your other friends would be more than happy to help bring this Nui woman to justice."

"Really?" Ryuko didn't know what to think at the moment, "I - "

"There you are Ryuko!"

Standing at the entrance to the classroom was Mako. Upon seeing Ryuko, she smiled and flipped the clipboard in her hands around and showed her something circled several times in red ink, "Lady Satsuki has finally authorized your match against the Elite Three! The first fight is at 5 PM tonight! Let's go. We don't have much time to get you ready."

"W-Wait a second Mako!" Ryuko dug her heels into the floor to arrest her movement. She was still exhausted from the constant fighting. The Two-Star club presidents may not pose a challenge to her, but fighting ten in a row was just tiringly. As Mako continued to pull Ryuko along, heedless of her friend's protests, Ryuko was saved when Isshin somehow stepped in front of her and picked up Mako.

"It's good to see you again Mako!" Isshin said gleefully with stars in his eyes, "I haven't seen you since Ichigo's first day! Do you want to

see some more of Ichigo's cute baby pictures? I didn't forget to bring a few dozen embarrassing ones with me this time!"

"I'm afraid I must decline, Mr. Kurosaki," Mako informed the older man while stoically adjusting her glasses, "Ryuko has a match to prepare for. I'm afraid we don't have the time today for such childishness."

The tone of Mako's voice threw Isshin through a loop. Eyes narrowing suspiciously, he began shaking Mako while shouting, "Who are you and what did you do with the real Mako? I may have only met her once, but the Mako I knew was a happy bundle of joy! A pod person like you could never replicate the true Mako! Tell me where you hid her!"

"That is Mako," Ryuko said.

"Huh?" Isshin looked at Ryuko before glancing back at a shaken Mako, "Are you sure? She looks like she's been practicing a really snooty noblewoman's laugh."

"Yeah I'm sure. Can you let her down now?"

"Well... ok," Isshin plopped Mako back onto her feet and she immediately began fixing her appearance. After looking into a pocket mirror and making sure not a hair was out of place, Mako turned to Ryuko and gave her friend a thumbs up.

"Let's get going, Ryuko. This little distraction wasted too much time already," Mako grabbed Ryuko's hand and began dragging her friend out of Honnouji Academy and towards the courtyard.

" ***Don't let her take me, Ryuko!***" Senketsu's mostly unheard voice echoed through the hallways, "***My Life Fibers are already too worn out from all this fighting! If I don't rest I'll surely fray!***"

As he listened to Senketsu's voice fade into the background, Isshin had to admit that Souchiro did a good job in making a Kamui.

Senketsu was extremely well put together. Isshin wasn't even sure if Kisuke could have made Mugetsu much better than Senketsu in the same amount of time.

As he listened to Senketsu's pleas fade off into the distance, Isshin let out an involuntary sigh of relief. That was not a conversation he wanted to do again anytime soon, but he supposed it was better Ryuko heard it from him rather than someone else.

"You seem to be having a good time, Isshin."

Isshin didn't need to turn around to know who was speaking to him, "Well, what kept you Aikuro? I expected you to stop by the moment I got here."

"Humph," Aikuro stepped off the window ledge and ran a hand through his shaggy blue hair, taking off his glasses in the process, "You must really be self-centered to think my life revolves around you. I am a teacher after all. I have students counting on me to teach them the subtleties of history three times a day. It just so happened that your timely arrival coincided with one of those classes."

Isshin couldn't really fault Aikuro for not showing up when he arrived. Isshin wasn't as close with Nudist Beach as he used to be after more than a decade of raising his family alone, "So what do you want to discuss? These rooms aren't exactly the most private place to hold a conversation."

"You don't need to worry about Satsuki's bugs. I removed those a few hours ago." Aikuro held out his hand and showed nearly two dozen small devices resting in his palm, "Of course I'm going to give her the most expensive ones back. Those will put a dent even in her vast wallet. In any case, I couldn't help but overhear your little talk. That was some motivational speech you gave to Ryuko."

"Someone had to give it to her," Isshin grumbled and stared accusingly at Aikuro.

"Hey now," Aikuro held his hands up nervously, "You know well enough that I'm not good at those sorts of things, although I didn't expect you to actually tell her about Masaki."

"Ryuko needed someone to relate to," Isshin sighed and thought back over the last couple of hours, "You must have seen the anger shimmering just beneath the surface. She was one big push from losing it, and control over Senketsu as well. Satsuki and her cronies wouldn't risk doing that to Ryuko, but there is one person that would..."

"Nui Harime," Aikuro muttered, "Kinue said what she thinks the Grand Couturier's plan is. I have to say that if Kinue was right, Nui Harime is truly an evil being. Who in their right mind would do something like that to someone?"

"Whoever said Nui was in her right mind?" Isshin turned away before adding, "You better not be stripping behind my back. You know I don't swing that way."

"I'm not suicidal," Aikuro chuckled at the joke while absentmindedly buttoning his shirt back up. He still bore the mental scars from the last time he unconsciously began stripping in Isshin's presence, "You're still a letdown Isshin, just as you always were, but I don't think you came to Honnouji Academy to exchange such pleasantries."

"I know," Isshin sighed wistfully and sat down on one of the desks, "Parent Student Day."

Aikuro looked at Isshin curiously, "You think Ragyo Kiryuin's going to make her move tomorrow?"

"What?" Do I look like I know the inner machinations of Ragyo's mind?" When Aikuro gave him a pointed look that said 'yes,' Isshin grumbled into the palm of his hand, "No, I don't think she will. It's much too early, even for her, to put anything into motion. She's after



something and the only way she can get it is by coming to Parent Student Day."

"What do you think it is?" Aikuro asked before his breath caught in his throat, "Is it Ichigo?"

Isshin's eyes narrowed as he thought about it. His sources had told him that Ragyo didn't go to the previous two Parent Student Days, so what made her decide to go to the one this year? The only difference that he could think of off the top of his head was that Ichigo was attending this year.

"Perhaps," he conceded, "But she won't dare do anything as long as I stay close to Ichigo. That means she'll try to do something to draw Ichigo away from me. I need you to keep a close eye out on Ichigo tomorrow. Make sure he doesn't do anything too stupid."

"Fine," Aikuro drawled, "What about Ryuko? Professor Matoi wanted me to gradually tell her everything about what he was doing."

Isshin didn't answer Aikuro right away, "... tell her what she needs to know when you think she's ready, but try and wait a few days. Let her come to terms and deal with what I just told her."

"Alright," Aikuro looked out the window and noticed a large commotion coming from the courtyard, "Something big is about to go down. Perhaps we should go check it out. What do you say Isshin?"

Aikuro turned and saw the elder Kurosaki had already vanished. Sighing in frustration, he began to follow Isshin out the door. One day he was going to ask the man how the hell he managed to always disappear like that.

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"Let's get this wrapped up soon!" A nameless One-Star student dressed as a manager shouted into a megaphone while directing other students to and fro across the courtyard, "We have a little more than an hour until the match starts! If Lady Satsuki arrives and finds the arena not yet finished, I'm going to blame each and every one of you!"

As the workers grumbled curses at the manager, causing him to yell at them some more, Ichigo stared down from the recently erected bleachers at the scene with a frown adorning his face.

**" Still thinking about Mako?"**

"Yeah," Ichigo mumbled. Ever since Mako became the president of the Fight Club, allowing her family to move into the Two-Star Residential District, she had become nearly a complete stranger. It started with a few small things that could have been mistaken for simply Mako's excessive imagination but eventually Ichigo realized that despite his repeated warnings Mako had let the power go to her head.

**" What do you plan on doing about it?"** Mugetsu asked before shifting her gaze to the arena below. Following her line of sight, Ichigo saw Mako march out and begin giving directions to the manager.

"To be honest I don't know," Ichigo stretched out a kink in his shoulder, "But I don't think words are going to work on Mako. She's much too stubborn to listen."

Mugetsu seemed to mull something over before she excitedly said, **"Perhaps you should hit her on the head a few times."**

Ichigo was a little stunned by his Kamui's need for violence, "You want me to fight Mako?"

**" Of course not!"** Mugetsu seemed incensed by Ichigo's accusation. She would gladly admit that liked to fight. It was what she was

created for after all. But there was a fine line between fighting and indulging in senseless and pointless violence. Doing her best to look up into Ichigo's eyes, she scoffed haughtily and said, ***"I'm suggesting Mako's head is hard enough to be hit a few times without sustaining injury. Have you seen how many times she's been attacked since you met her? There's a better chance that Mako will die from forgetting that she needs to breathe than from anything you can do to her!"***

Ichigo hated that Mugetsu had a point. With all the injuries Mako's received, ranging from getting hit in the face with dozens of tennis balls to nearly being vivisected by the insane Biology club, she should have died or at least been gravely injured a long time ago. How Mako managed to survive being hit with dozens of tennis balls without sustaining at least a minor concussion or broken jaw boggled his mind.

"You have a point," he conceded and immediately felt a surge of smugness emanate from Mugetsu. Deciding to nip it in the bud as soon as possible, he added, "But even if that's true I'm still not going to fight Mako. It just doesn't seem right to fight her."

Mugetsu didn't say anything that, choosing instead to stare annoyingly at him in the hopes that he would take her advice. Despite the looks his Kamui was giving him, Ichigo's attention was focused elsewhere at the moment. Ryuko had just appeared down in the arena and immediately Mako went over to her and began pointing out various things to the tired girl. Mako must have really lost perspective on her life if she was unable to see just how exhausted and beat Ryuko was.

Noticing something out of the corner of his eyes, Ichigo glanced up to the top of Honnouji Academy and saw a shadowy figure standing on the roof. While he couldn't exactly see or make out who it was, Ichigo had a pretty good idea who it might be. Judging from the fact that she hadn't yet made her presence known, Ichigo figured Satsuki Kiryuin wanted to keep a low profile for the moment. That meant she was up to something and it most likely involved Ryuko.

" *Satsuki's up to something,*" Ichigo watched as Ryuko tiredly nodded to everything Mako was telling her and tried to put himself in Satsuki's position even though the idea irritated him. The Elite Four, or was it three now, were the three toughest fighters at Honnouji Academy. It would take Ryuko at her full strength to defeat just one of them. Why would Satsuki allow Ryuko to fight them so soon after constant battles against the Two-Star club presidents?

" *It would be pragmatic for Satsuki to make Ryuko fight her Elite Four when she's exhausted,*" Ichigo realized, *"But it's not Satsuki's style. If she wanted to do that, she would have announced the fight the day before, giving the academy enough time to come see. Announcing the fight only a few hours in advance means she's planning something else and I'm just not seeing it."*

When he heard his cell phone beginning to ring in his pocket, Ichigo originally decided to ignore it in favor of trying to think of what Satsuki was planning. As the phone continued to ring for over a minute, Ichigo muttered a curse and fished it out of his pocket. It was probably just his dad calling to say that he got lost on the way to the bathroom, "Hello?"

"Hiya cousin!" An excessively cheerful and familiar voice shouted from the other end of the line, "It's been such a long time since we've talked. I was starting to think you forgot about me."

"Nui Harime..." Mugetsu tensed up around Ichigo's body as he spoke, "How did you even get this number?"

"Pfft," Ichigo could hear Nui giving him a raspberry over the phone, "I have my ways. It's so upsetting to hear all this hostility coming from you, Ichigo. And here I've been nothing but friendly to you."

"That's interesting," Ichigo turned his back to the arena and held his cellphone closer to his ear, "I don't know who you take me for, but I'm not stupid. I'm pretty sure you're the one that killed Ryuko's dad. Why did you do it?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line and Ichigo would have assumed Nui hung up on him if not for the faint breathing coming through the speaker. When Nui did speak to him again after nearly half a minute of silence the hairs on the back of Ichigo's neck stiffened at the very subtle venom in Nui's voice, "You know, it's not very nice to lie to people like that. If you keep telling such outrageous fibs, I'm going to have to hurt your friend a lot more."

"Friend? Who - "

Ichigo's voice froze in midsentence when he heard the very distinct sound of Shinjiro screaming in pain somewhere in the background. Gritting his teeth when he heard Nui giggle, he nearly shouted into the phone, "Shinjiro! What the hell did you do to him?"

"Oh... not much," Nui's saccharine voice answered in the same tone in which someone might ask how your day went. Humming something to herself, she continued with a giggle, "I only stabbed him in his arms and legs five times. He's actually doing pretty well if you ignore the pain and blood loss. If he doesn't get help soon I don't think he's going to make it. Humans like him tend to do that way too often for it to be fun anymore."

Ichigo's hand clenched around the phone, "What the hell do you want with me?"

"Oh ~ don't be so serious Ichigo!" Nui's voice seemed to sound disappointed at the anger in his voice. It was almost like she couldn't understand why he felt the way he did, "All I want to do is talk with you. Capturing your little friend was just to make sure you couldn't say no to me. Ah! Tell you what! If you come and meet with me in thirty minutes I'll let your friend go alive and with all his limbs still attached to his body. I think that's a fair deal, don't you?"

"You tortured Shinjiro just to speak with me?" Ichigo would have scoffed in outrage if he wasn't trying to think of something, anything, he could do to save Shinjiro.

"It's because you were so mean to me," Ichigo could sense the pout on Nui's face through the phone, "Getting all those strange and wrong ideas about how I'm psychotic and evil. I needed a chance to prove you wrong and so I decided to do this. All I want to do is talk to you and get to know my cousin a little better. Is that so hard to ask? Besides, do you really have time to argue semantics? Your friend only has like twenty seven minutes to live now."

This was so obvious a trap that Ichigo was already tripping over it, but there really wasn't anything he could do about it. If Shinjiro really was in danger from Nui Harime, then he needed to do something. With a resounding sigh, he said, "Fine."

"Goodie!" Nui clapped her hands in happiness before speaking again, "Meet me at the old power station deep in the Slums within thirty minutes. If you're one minute late, your friend here is going to be sorry~"

"Wait! Don't you - "

Ichigo was cut off when Nui hung up on him in midsentence. He couldn't understand what her fascination with him was. Was she so determined to speak with him that she would kidnap and torture his friends just to do it?

" ***What are you going to do?***" Mugetsu was nothing but concerned for her wearer. She could feel his pulse racing and the temperature of his blood was rising. Ichigo was angry and she didn't like it, ***"Ichigo?"***

"I'm fine. Just give me a moment to think," Ichigo muttered and took a deep breath to calm himself down. Making him upset, and irrational, was no doubt part of Nui's plan or whatever it was she truly wanted from him. He wasn't naïve enough to believe she really wanted to just talk with him. If she wanted to do that, she could have appeared next to him like the last two times she invaded his personal space. Running a hand through his hair, he went over his options.

Going in alone would be nearly suicidal at the moment. He had no idea how strong Nui was but there was no doubt that she was extremely strong... and also batshit insane. From the way she spoke to him, Nui didn't seem to see anything wrong with torturing people. It even sounded like she found it to be fun. He needed backup from someone at least as strong as him. Thinking rapidly, Ichigo came up with three people - Ryuko, Ururu or Satsuki.

He couldn't take Ryuko even if she was the best choice. She was already exhausted from all the fighting she had been doing. Taking her to rescue Shinjiro would have risked her death since Ichigo was certain Nui would kill her. Ururu would have also been fine, but Ichigo knew Ururu's place was to keep Mako from going too far off the deep end. As the Fight Club Vice-President, Ururu's job was to be Mako's sounding board for scheduling and ideas. Since Ururu was most likely immune to power corruption, she had been vital in keeping Mako from doing anything too stupid or dangerous.

Ichigo groaned when he realized that meant he was only left with Satsuki.

As he made his way to where he knew Satsuki was watching, Mugetsu decided to voice her concerns on the matter, ***"Are you sure you can trust Satsuki to help you? You aren't exactly friendly with her."***

"Satsuki's the head of the Student Council," Ichigo said as he pressed down on his spaulder, allowing Mugetsu to transform to her true state. Clenching a fist as her power coursed through his body, Ichigo glanced upwards before bending his knees and jumping, "I'm sure she wouldn't want one of her students to die under her watch."

***" But she's admitted to killing spies posing as students and those that rebelled against her,"*** Mugetsu pointed out worriedly.

"I know," Ichigo admitted as he took the last jump needed to reach Satsuki, "But I don't have a choice in the matter. You're just going to have to trust me on this."

As soon as he appeared over the edge of the roof and even before he touched down, Ichigo found himself surrounded on both sides by Gamagori and Sanageyama. Both men had their respective weapons out and aimed at vital areas of his body. Uncaring about the possible threats to his health, Ichigo stared at Satsuki's back and said, "We need to talk."

"It's a pleasure seeing you again, Ichigo," Satsuki answered without turning around. As her long black hair blew in the breeze, she continued, "Although it is a rather strange turn of events for you to come see me, but I must ask you something. What gives you the right to so brazenly come near me?"

Ichigo's eyes glanced back and forth between Sanageyama and Gamagori, "Nui Harime."

Satsuki's hands tightly clenched the hilt of Bakuzan upon hearing the Grand Couturier's name. She didn't know what Nui Harime wanted with Ichigo, but if she were to go by the Grand Couturier's previous interests, it would not be good for anyone involved. Hiding her anger and trepidation with a haughty scoff, she looked at Gamagori and said, "Leave us."

Gamagori looked shocked, "But Lady Satsuki - "

"That was not a suggestion," Satsuki's tone brokered no arguments, "You too Sanageyama. Ichigo and I have private matters to discuss. If you are concerned about my safety, your worry is unwarranted. Ichigo has no intention of assaulting me."

"Very well Lady Satsuki," Sanageyama's hands tightened around his shinai before sheathing it.

Once they were left alone, Satsuki turned to completely face Ichigo, "Speak. You have my attention."

"How well do you know Nui Harime?"



Satsuki paused to consider the question before answering, "More than you would think. Why did you bring her name up?"

Ichigo knew that dodging around the issue wouldn't work with someone like Satsuki Kiryuin. Deciding to be as blunt as possible, he said, "She's kidnapped and is torturing one of my friends. She says she will kill him if I don't go meet with her."

"Then your friend is lost," Satsuki answered without hesitation. She knew far better than anyone at Honnouji Academy what happens to those that Nui Harime takes an interest in. Satsuki had personally seen the Grand Couturier's work and she would never admit that it gave her more than a few nightmares in the following weeks, "It would be best to not get involved in Nui Harime's schemes."

"That won't work," Ichigo argued, "Even if I wanted to leave Shinjiro to be killed, Nui has already shown the ability to appear at random whenever she feels like it. What's to stop her from appearing in my dorm again?"

"Nui Harime was already here?" That piece of information bothered Satsuki greatly. The Grand Couturier damn well knew that the academy was off limits to her ploys without announcing her presence beforehand. If she were to believe Ichigo's words, then Nui had already visited Honnouji Academy at least once before. Of course Satsuki had suspected Nui was in Honnou City disguised as someone else, but without a body count or murders with her modus operandi Satsuki would only have her assumptions.

"I thank you for bringing this to light," Satsuki analyzed Ichigo's expression and saw that his determination had not wavered. Ichigo was still set on rescuing his friend from the Grand Couturier, "I assume you came to speak to me in regards to gaining my help in a rescue operation. I will tell you now that I do not believe in pointless confrontations."

"You are the Student Council President," Ichigo argued angrily, "It's your damn job to make sure every student is kept safe!"

"You are absolutely correct!" Satsuki clicked her heel against the roof as she planted Bakuzan in front of her, "But sending students against Nui Harime is the equivalent of sending pigs to the slaughter! It is pragmatic to allow Nui to kill only one student instead of dozens! At this point in time there are only two people in Honnouji Academy that can stand Nui Harime's power and live. Those two people are you and me, Ichigo! Therefore I shall offer you a proposition!"

Ichigo couldn't help but feel that he wasn't going to like this, "What do you want?"

"Become my Vice-President!" Satsuki shouted and she immediately became surrounded by a backdrop of light, "Agree to do so and I will personally go with you to rescue that student from Nui Harime's clutches!"

For a moment, Satsuki thought Ichigo was going to agree to her quite lenient terms. Despite what Matoi and Ichigo might believe, she had no part in Nui Harime's schemes. Satsuki did not like the Grand Couturier any more than she needed. Putting up with Nui was simply a necessity that would not harm her as long as her mother ordered Nui not to. She was appalled that Nui would not only take a student hostage but also proceed to torture them.

She was taken aback when Ichigo raced forward and grabbed her by the front of Junketsu, "What the fuck is wrong with you? One of your students is going to die without help and you're more worried about your power? Who the hell do you think you are to make such a decision? I don't even know why I bothered to ask for your help when you obviously didn't care enough in the first place. Forget it. I'm going to go rescue Shinjiro from Nui Harime's clutches."

Satsuki was stunned by Ichigo's words, but she was still composed enough to say, "You'll be falling into her trap."

"Maybe so," Ichigo said as he let go of Satsuki and walked towards the edge of the roof, "But you said I'm one of the only two that could

face her in combat. I think I'll manage just fine without your 'so-called' help. Let's go Mugetsu."

Without bothering to hear anything else Satsuki had to say, Ichigo leapt off Honnouji Academy and raced towards where Nui was hiding. He didn't have much time left before she killed Shinjiro. His futile decision to ask Satsuki for help had wasted too much time and he didn't want to think about the consequences.

" ***Do you have a plan for when you confront Nui?***" Mugetsu was worried for Ichigo. She could sense something wrong with Nui back when the Grand Couturier first appeared. Mugetsu didn't want Ichigo getting hurt.

Vaulting over the outer wall of Honnouji Academy, Ichigo slid down the large walls leading to the Two-Star Residential District as he answered, "No, but I think fighting Nui is going to be the answer no matter what I do. Are you ready for whatever she has planned?"

" ***Yes,***" Mugetsu sounded extremely confident, "***We have grown much stronger since Nui first appeared before you. I'm sure we are more than a match for whatever she has planned for us.***"

Ichigo's eyes narrowed as he spotted his destination in the distance, "I hope so. I really do."

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Ryuko tapped her foot impatiently against the ground as she tried to think about what to do. Glancing up into the stands for what seemed like the twelfth time in as many minutes, she saw once again that Ichigo was no longer there. She didn't know what was so important that he ran out of Honnouji Academy, but Ryuko was certain it had something to do with Satsuki Kiryuin. She saw him talk to her just before running off. As much as Ryuko would have liked to storm over and demand to know what Satsuki told him, she would have to wait

until the Student Council President came back from wherever she went.

" ***Your blood pressure is spiking, Ryuko,***" Senketsu's voice would be a comforting presence if not for what he said next, ***"It's making your blood much too salty for my tastes."***

"Is drinking my blood all you think about?" Ryuko asked in complete disbelief.

" ***Of course not!***" Senketsu answered in a tone that didn't betray his shock at the accusation, ***"But getting stressed out about everything isn't going to help. I find that in times like this it is better to just sit back and see what happens."***

"I know that! It's just that..." Ryuko absentmindedly went to bite the tip of her thumb, a nervous habit she thought she already kicked, before stopping herself. She must have been more nervous than she thought, but Ryuko knew the upcoming fight wasn't what was making her feel this way.

" ***It's Mako, isn't it?***"

"Yeah," Ryuko muttered sadly, "I must be a terrible person. Mako's my best friend and I'm letting her become something she's not. Everything's falling apart and I don't know what to do Senketsu."

"You look nervous, Ryuko."

Ryuko was brought out of her contemplation when she heard Ururu speak to her. Unlike Mako, the Vice-President of the Fight Club had refused to wear a business suit and Ryuko wasn't certain if Ururu could even pull off the look as well as Mako did. Instead, she had chosen to keep her No-Star uniform, albeit a new one after her first one got torn up during her fight against Kinue Kinagase.

"Tch," Ryuko scoffed and tried her best to hide her sadness, "It's just fighting four battles in a row is going to be a problem. By the time I

get to Satsuki Kiryuin, I'm going to be dead on my feet."

Ururu stared at her and for a moment Ryuko was concerned she was having her soul examined. After a moment Ururu turned her gaze away and shook her head, "Mako is doing this for her family. She might not have told you or Ichigo, but Mako hated being poor more than anything. Whenever she would tell me about her day, she would also stare forlornly at the One and Two-Star students and say how jealous she was of their wealth and money. She's really glad you were able to help her achieve her family's dream, you know."

Ryuko opened her mouth to speak but quickly closed it again. She had known something was bothering Mako ever since they met, but Mako never said anything to her about it and Ryuko wasn't one to pry. The Mankanshoku's had taken her in as their surrogate daughter. Who was she to ask them such personal questions? Swallowing the bile in her throat, she asked, "Why did Mako tell you and not me?"

"It's because you're her best friend," Ururu answered softly and Ryuko momentarily thought she was looking past her and into the distance, "She didn't want to worry you about her problems. She was just really happy to have her first real friend." At this Ururu's voice trailed off and Ryuko noticed she seemed really sad about something, "I miss Mako. She's not fun to be around anymore. Ever since she became the President of the Fight Club she's been too busy working to hang out and play. I don't like being alone, Ryuko."

"Damn it," Ryuko smacked her fist against her palm, "Nothing I can do will fix this! If I help get the old Mako back, her family will go back to being poor and it will be my entire fault. If I allow her to stay like this, I'll lose my best friend. What can I do, Ururu?"

"I don't know, but I know what Ichigo would do." A small smile spread across Ururu's face, "If Ichigo were here, he would say to do what is right and forget about the consequences until later. It's good advice. It's worked before so it should work fine with you. Do what you need

to do, Ryuko, but please get the Mako that was my friend back. Please."

**" Ryuko..."**

"Yeah," Ryuko nodded to Senketsu and placed her hand on Ururu's shoulder, "Don't worry Ururu. I know what I need to do. Just hang tight and everything will be back to normal as soon as I'm done."

Ryuko walked past a visibly happier Ururu towards Mako. Her best friend was standing in the middle of the arena with her hands placed firmly on her hips as she barked out orders to various One-Star students about where certain things needed to be. As she noticed her friend approaching, Mako turned and gave Ryuko a cocky smile that didn't belong on her face, "This is it, Ryuko! This is the day we've been waiting for. Once you defeat Lady Satsuki's Elite Three nothing will stand in our way! The Fight Club's prestige and power will never again be contested by the other clubs of Honnouji Academy!"

"Yeah, about that," Ryuko struggled to say the words, "Don't you think you're taking this a little too far?"

"What are you talking about?" Mako scoffed haughtily and pressed her glasses further up her nose, "This is what you've been waiting for. Lady Satsuki has given you permission to fight her forces for the answers you seek."

I know that! It's just..." Ryuko took a deep breath before staring at Mako, "This isn't you! The Mako I know wouldn't act like everyone is beneath her!"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Mako huffed angrily, "You've been talking to Ichigo, haven't you? He's always been the one to say I shouldn't be doing this and that it won't end well for me! Well, I'll prove him wrong! Today the Fight Club becomes the best club in Honnouji Academy!"

Mako then started laughing and Ryuko knew her friend was gone. The laughter she was hearing was not one of happiness or glee, as the old Mako was prone to do, but one of smug haughtiness. Realizing her friend was gone, Ryuko turned her head and saw a dejected look fall over Ururu's face and decided enough was enough. She had been hoping that she wouldn't need to do this but it seemed that she had no choice. Reaching into Senketsu, she clenched her hand around a sealed envelope and threw it at Mako.

"Huh?" For the first time all day Mako had a genuinely perplexed look as she caught the envelope, "What's this?"

"My letter of resignation," Ryuko answered softly as she turned to walk away, "I'm done with the Fight Club. I can't stand who you've become Mako. You want wealth and power? Then fight Satsuki and her goons yourself. I quit."

"But... but..." Mako stuttered her words as Ryuko continued to walk away without a second glance. She couldn't do this to her! Ryuko was her friend and she was just going to abandon her to the wolves like this? Mako's hands clenched in anger as she shouted, "You can't do this to me, Ryuko! Do you know what quitting will mean for my family? We'll go back to being poor and living in the Slums again!"

Ryuko paused in midstride and said, "That's a risk I'm willing to take."

"No. no. no!" Mako stomped her foot impetuously, "I won't ever go back to the Slums! Never again!"

In the midst of Mako's tirade against her return to poverty, she became acutely aware of a whistling sound in the air. As she looked around for the source of the strange and irritating noise, she was suddenly throw forward as Ira Gamagori landed on the ground just behind her. Holding an armoire on top of one of his shoulders, Gamagori looked back and forth between Ryuko and Mako before speaking.

"Matoi! Ryuko!" Gamagori's booming voice was loud enough to cause Ryuko to wince slightly from the noise, "There has been a scheduled change of venue!"

Ryuko dug a finger into her ear to relieve the sound-induced headache, "What the hell are you shouting about, Gamagori bastard?"

Gamagori glared angrily at Ryuko for once again referring to him by the audacious name originally given to him by Ichigo Kurosaki, but he did not respond. He was down here for a very specific reason and with Lady Satsuki taking a leave of absence. With Satsuki gone it was up to him to both keep order among the students and Satsuki's grand plans going. Gripping the armoire in his hand, he slammed it on the ground and turned to Mako, "Mankanshoku! Lady Satsuki apologizes but due to new circumstances she will not be able to witness today's events. She sends her regards as well as a gift - your very own Two-Star Goku Uniform!"

"My very own uniform?" A bit of Mako's old behavior filtered through in that moment of confusion, "But I didn't order one."

"Lady Satsuki thinks otherwise!" Gamagori shouted with the unmistakable hint of pride in his voice. He wasn't happy that Mako was associated with the rabble that was Ryuko Matoi, but there was no way he could deny the efficiency and perfectionism that Mako brought to the Fight Club. In the short time she had been the club president, Mako had passed by each and every other club in following the rules and regulations. That was something that would have brought a tear to Gamagori's rule abiding eyes if he happened to be alone at that moment.

Turning his attention to the hushed crowd, Gamagori took a moment to clear his throat before shouting louder than ever, "Listen up students of Honnouji Academy! Today's events have been altered from what was earlier announced! Instead of Ryuko Matoi fighting us, the Elite Three bodyguards of Lady Satsuki, she will now fight Mako Mankanshoku!"



"What?" Ryuko grit her teeth and took a threatening step towards Gamagori, "Like hell I'm going to fight Mako you stupid bastard!"

"If she doesn't..." Gamagori continued off from where he was, uncaring of Ryuko's threat, "... then Mankanshoku will forgo her current social standing and lifestyle. It will be as if she never became the Fight Club President in the first place! If Mankanshoku manages to defeat Matoi and strips her of her Kamui, Lady Satsuki has promised to bestow upon her a Three-Star Goku Uniform as well as a place in the newly reestablished Elite Four! Now what is your decision?"

"Damn it," Ryuko hissed through clenched teeth. How dare Satsuki Kiryuin try and pull something like this on her! Trying to turn Mako against her with the promise of money and power was just playing dirty.

"Don't focus your anger at me, Matoi," Gamagori informed her evenly, "The decision on whether this fight will take place rests solely on the shoulders of Mankanshoku."

"Shut up!" Ryuko shouted as she pulled the pin out of her glove and announced, "Life Fiber Synchronize: Kamui Senketsu!"

As the exhaust vents on her back burst into life and she rocketed along the ground towards Gamagori, Ryuko was confused as to why the larger man was simply standing there with his arms folded across his chest. Her answer came soon enough when a pair of knuckle dusters slammed into her cheek and sent her flying across the arena until she managed to skid to a stop.

Shaking her head as she rubbed her sore cheek, Ryuko looked around, "What just hit me?"

"That would be me, Ryuko!"

Ryuko rolled out of the wall as a pair of geta smashed into the ground where her head had just been. Springing back onto her feet,

Ryuko saw who had attacked her and could only mutter a single word, "... Mako?"

"That's right, Ryuko!" Mako spun her black hat around while adjusting the green reed from one side of her mouth to the other, "Fight-Club Spec Two-Star Goku Uniform worn by me, the Fight Club President Mako Mankanshoku!"

" *Damn*, " Ryuko pulled her red Scissor Blade out of the pouch on her waist and quickly willed it back to its normal size. She could see the look in Mako's eyes and knew there was nothing she could do but fight Mako and hope she would get her old friend back. As her hands nervously gripped the handle of her weapon, Ryuko realized that she was just kidding herself. As much as she knew she needed to fight Mako, somewhere deep inside her heart she just couldn't bring herself to do it. Mako was her friend and nothing would change that.

Something out of the corner of her eyes caught Ryuko's attention and quickly caused her to reevaluate her decision. Standing on the side of the arena with her hands held right under her chin was Ururu and it was apparent that the normally shy girl was only minutes away from crying. Steadying her nerves upon seeing that, Ryuko took a deep breath and turned completely towards Mako.

"Are you ready for this, Senketsu?"

" ***Yeah,***" Senketsu would have nodded if he was able to, but the best he could do was turn his eye towards Ryuko, ***"This won't be easy. Mako appears to be more powerful than those other Two-Star students. We might have our work cut out for us."***

"I know," Ryuko swallowed the lump in her throat as she saw Mako's feet move ever so slightly on the ground. Knowing what was about to happen, she shifted into a defensive stance of her own, "Get ready Senketsu! Here she comes!"

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The Honnou City Area One Subdivision Power Station's history was as long as it was bloody. Three years ago when Satsuki Kiryuin came into power a group of students waged a guerilla war against her leadership. Hiding out in the Slums as well as the homes of those embracing their cause, they managed to fight against the power of the Goku Uniforms for nearly a month. It was no coincidence those thirty one days was the amount of time Satsuki decided to give the rebels the option to surrender or pay the price.

On the end of the first month Satsuki struck back hard. In less than five hours she not only managed to cripple their leadership but also drive them out of almost their entire territory until their last bastion of power was the power station. It was there that they held off the forces under the leadership of Ira Gamagori for another ten hour, each room of the power station taken back by Satsuki but only after taking heavy casualties. At the end of the tenth hour, Gamagori finally managed to strike down the last rebel leader and crushed the rebellion once and for all.

In the ensuing months, Satsuki began rebuilding the destroyed areas of the Slums as well as fortifying the power station among other important structures. It was only because the rebels controlled the power to the Slums that they were able to hold off her forces for so long. By preventing a repeat of such an occurrence, Satsuki made sure that her power would never be contested again.

Ichigo approached the chain link fence, topped with razor-sharp barbed wire, and grimaced when she saw the normally padlocked outer gate hanging haphazardly on its hinges. Giving the gate a slight push with his hand, he wasn't surprised when it fell off its hinges and hit the ground with a loud thump.

" ***Do you think she heard that?***" Mugetsu asked sarcastically.

"I'm pretty sure she already knew I was here," Ichigo muttered as he caught sight of a security camera that seemed to constantly follow his movements. He has seen several similar cameras in the surrounding area, so the odds of Nui Harime already knowing of his presence were pretty much assured. Pulling out Tournesol from its scabbard on his back, Ichigo cautiously walked towards the thick steel door leading into the power station. Just because he managed to get here in less than thirty minutes didn't mean Nui Harime was going to play fair.

Taking a deep breath, Ichigo stepped forward and swung Tournesol at the door. The Life Fiber blade was more than a match for the three inches of reinforced steel and moments later the two sides of the door fell to the ground with a resounding crash.

As Ichigo stepped inside the power station, the first thing he noticed was the lack of lighting due to the facility being nearly autonomous apart from the weekly maintenance and systems checkup. The second thing he noticed was that for a power station designed to maximum space and resources there was a lot of room to move around in. The third and final thing Ichigo noticed was Nui Harime standing in front of a door across the room.

"You've finally made it Ichigo!" Nui's shadow seemed to shift and morph eerily from the deep orange light seeping out from under the door behind her. If that wasn't enough, Nui's pink Lolita dress appeared to remain as bright and vibrant as ever despite the lack of light. Noticing Ichigo's suspicious gaze, Nui stepped forward towards him, her hands clasped behind her back, and smiled happily, "I was beginning to worry that you decided to not show up. That made me feel really sad, you know."

Ichigo didn't answer as he looked past Nui and into the room behind her, *"That must be where she's keeping Shinjiro, but I don't hear anything? Did she kill him?"*

"Let me ask you something," Ichigo focused his attention back on Nui, "You said that you would let Shinjiro leave here alive if I came

within thirty minutes. I'm here so let him go."

"Ah, ah, ah!" Nui wagged her finger childishly at Ichigo and puffed her cheeks out, "That's not how the game works, but a promise is a promise and you're supposed to keep your promises. That's what I've been taught after all. Unfortunately there's a bit of bad news. That human friend of yours just wasn't tough enough to stand up to my games and passed out about... I don't know... ten minutes ago from blood loss. That's probably why he's so quiet. I don't know about you, but I would take him to see a doctor or something or he might die."

"Let me take Shinjiro to a doctor and then I promise I will talk to you as for as long as you want."

"Really?" Nui's eye widened in surprise and happiness, "That's a really generous offer, Ichigo, and I would really like to take it. Unfortunately I'm going to have to pass. Until we have our heart to heart talk, your friend is going to have to wait."

"Damn you!" Ichigo stepped forward and pointed Tournesol at Nui, "This isn't a damn game! Let Shinjiro go now!"

"You really shouldn't be too hasty..." Nui's voice remained cheerful as she reached into one of her pigtails and pulled out a detonator, "If you continue to act rude to me I think I'll have to press this button. The other end is connected to plastic explosives wrapped around your little friend. You don't want to have to clean up after him, do you cousin?"

"I'm not your damn cousin," Ichigo reiterated once again as he forced himself to calm down. For the moment Nui Harime held all the cards. Getting angry would only force her to press the switch and kill Shinjiro and he knew without a doubt that she would do it. Most likely with a smile on her face the entire time.

"So this is the wonderful and beautiful Mugetsu..." In the split second Ichigo had blinked, Nui Harime disappeared from in front of him and

reappeared to his left. As her hand gently rubbed his sleeve, her eye looking into Mugetu's multicolored pair with an unholy glee, she said, "It's such a high quality design. Whoever made it for you is really a master. It's perhaps even better than anything I can weave and that makes me feel super jealous."

" **Ichigo!**" Mugetsu was beginning to go into a full blown panic as Nui continued to stroke her. She did not like the Grand Couturier's touch one bit. It was like the touch of the dead.

Grabbing Nui's hand by her wrist, Ichigo turned his body towards her, "You said you wanted to talk. Now talk."

"C'est désagréable..." Nui pouted adorably as she easily pulled her hand out from Ichigo's grip, "But when you're right, you're right, you know. The first time I tried to talk with you it was really late and you looked really tired so I didn't want to bother you. The second time we were so rudely interrupted by Amu, but good thing the third time's the charm! Now we have all the time in the world to get to know one another as cousins."

Something in the way Nui said cousins disturbed Ichigo. Glancing briefly towards the back room, he stalled for time and asked, "Why do you keep insisting we're cousins?"

"That's the perfect question, Ichigo!" Nui exclaimed happily as she twirled away from him and skipped a few steps. Stomping her feet on the ground, she turned back around and placed a finger against her bottom lip, "It's because while we aren't brother and sister, I'm still closer to you than those sisters of you. Inside the two of us beats identical pulses that resonant with one another. Being around you makes me feel really happy, you know. It's such a shame that Satsuki isn't fun. She's much too serious to play with. You're serious too, but in a good way. I think I could get used to being around you Ichigo."

Months of fighting for his life developed in Ichigo a finely honed battle sense. Without even giving a sign of what he was about to do,

Ichigo leapt back and avoided the thrust from Nui's hand that easily pierced the concrete floor.

"Simply amazing!" Nui was ecstatic at the fact that Ichigo not only managed to dodge her attack, but avoid taking any damage at all, "You passed my test. Congratulations Ichigo!"

"I understand now why you brought me here," Ichigo muttered quietly as he kept his eyes firmly locked on Nui, "It was to kill me, wasn't it? Somehow I'm getting in the way of whatever twisted plans you have and now you want to kill me."

"Kill you?" Nui laughed as she reached into her dress, "I don't want to kill you Ichigo! All I wanted to do was get to know my family and you've been nothing but hostile to me. I suppose this calls for some tough love."

In one swift and deliberate motion Nui pulled out a purple Scissor Blade. It was at that point in time that Ichigo realized without a doubt in his mind that Nui Harime was the one who not only attacked Kisuke but also killed Ryuko's dad. As his grip tightened around Tournesol, Ichigo noticed that the color of Nui's Scissor Blade was nearly identical to when Ururu disarmed Ryuko of her weapon all those days ago. He knew for a fact that Ururu was not Nui but he could not explain why he felt such unease about the notion.

"Tell me something," Ichigo slid his foot back and raised Tournesol, "That Scissor Blade. Why is it purple?"

"Oh don't be so silly Ichigo." Nui tapped her Scissor Blade against her shoulder as she answered, "It is the same reason why your sword is blue! It's as simple as that!"

That didn't answer Ichigo's question, but he didn't have time to think about as Nui rocketed towards him with the tip of her Scissor Blade pointed at his throat and a sweet smile on her face. Thinking quickly, he ducked to the side and used Tournesol to parry the Scissor Blade away from his body in a shower of sparks.

"It's really awesome that you dodged," Nui complemented as she spun her Scissor Blade around her wrist and swung it down at Ichigo. As their respective blades locked again, Nui noticed Ichigo was putting up a great deal of resistance and stuck her tongue out, "That's just what I expected from my cousin, after all!"

"Damn..." Ichigo gritted out as the concrete began to crack beneath his feet. Nui's strength was intense and it looked as if she wasn't even putting everything she had into it. As beads of sweat dripped down his face, Ichigo twisted his body to the side and allowed Nui's Scissor Blade to pass harmlessly by him. Before Nui could react to the sudden lack of resistance, Ichigo jammed his knee hard enough into her stomach that she flew backwards through the air.

"Gah!" Nui shouted in pain before smiling, "Just kidding! That didn't hurt a teeny tiny bit!"

As she floated down gently in the air from Ichigo's counter, Nui's smile never left her face. She could see why Ichigo really was worthy of not only being her cousin but also to wear a Kamui. Unlike that ratty Kamui Ryuko Matoi wore, which Nui didn't care to know its name, Mugetsu was a true Kamui in every sense of the word. What was really amazing was how Mugetsu covered up nearly all of Ichigo's body and yet he was still in firm control. Nui had only believed the Director could accomplish such a feat and yet Ichigo was doing it right in front of her eyes.

"You're super strong, Ichigo," Nui said cheerfully, "But are you strong enough to - "

Nui's single eye widened in shock as Ichigo rushed towards her nearly too fast for her to see. Swinging her Scissor Blade awkwardly in the air to try and stop his attack, she was stunned when Ichigo stabbed Tournesol through the hole in her weapon before slashing upwards and causing her blade to go spinning through the air. As she gaped at what was happening, Nui felt Ichigo's weapon pierce through her shoulder and out the other side accompanied by a shower of blood.



"W-What?" she gasped as she flew across the ground and slammed her against one of the walls.

"N-No fair," Nui muttered as blood spilling from her mouth with every syllable, "A-Attacking a defensive I-little girl like me is q-quite rude, y-you know."

"I don't like attacking girls," Ichigo admitted reluctantly as he pulled out Tournesol from Nui's body. As she slid to the ground with blood pouring out of her shoulder, Ichigo grabbed her purple Scissor Blade and jammed it so far into the ground that only the handle remained sticking out, "I also don't like killing people when given another option. With that wound in your shoulder you won't be able to do much of anything involving this blade. I hope I never have to see you again because if I find out you've threatened my friends, next time I'll end this."

Nui looked up at Ichigo for a few seconds before her eye closed and she appeared to fall unconscious from the blood loss. Ichigo wasn't worried about Nui dying on him. Even though she was a psychopath who took delight in torturing people, Ichigo just didn't have it in him to kill her. That wasn't who he was. Turning away from Nui's unconscious form, Ichigo quickly hurried towards where Shinjiro was being kept. Hopefully he made it in time to save his friend.

In one motion, he kicked open the door, "Shinjiro! Are you - "

Ichigo's voice failed him as he looked in the room and found that it was completely and utterly empty. There was no sign of Shinjiro anywhere. In fact, it looked like he had never even been here. There were no blood stains on the ground or anywhere else.

"What the hell?" Ichigo muttered as he stepped into the room. Glancing around he tried to figure out what was going on. He had been sure he heard Shinjiro's voice on the phone. So if he wasn't here, then where was Nui Harime keeping him?

**" Ichigo!"**

Mugetsu's shout of warning came too late. Ichigo barely had time to hear her call his name before the purple Scissor Blade was thrust through his back and burst out of his chest covered in blood.

Gasping in pain, he grimaced and shakily turned his head around to find a perfectly fine and smiling Nui Harime standing behind him.

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## **Kamui Tales #10 - Laundry Day**

Ryuko Matoi loved the laundry room at Ichigo's dorm, and by that, she meant that Senketsu loved the laundry room.

While she was perfectly content with allowing Mrs. Mankanshoku to wash Senketsu, apparently her Kamui did not feel the same. Even though Senketsu greatly appreciated being ironed, the trade off, according to him, was much too steep. That was why Ryuko found herself hand washing Senketsu on a Friday night in the laundry room of Ichigo's dorm. She had no idea that a Kamui could be so... picky about how to be cleaned. After ten or so orders from Senketsu about what to clean next, Ryuko simply gave up and started nodding tiredly.

Washing Senketsu took longer than she thought it would because by the time she was done drying Senketsu, it was past midnight and she barely made it back to Mako's house before collapsing from exhaustion with the basket of her laundry left unfolded next to her bedspread. Her last thought before drifting off to sleep was that she would apologize to Senketsu tomorrow and maybe even iron him.

She certainly did not anticipate waking up wearing Satsuki's Kamui.

"What the -?" Ryuko bolted up and noticed her pajamas neatly folded next to her bed. Staring down into Junketsu's eyes, she growled and began trying to pull it off, "Hey! Get the hell off of me!"

Even with all the effort she was putting in, it seemed that the foreign Kamui just didn't want to be removed. Every time Ryuko would get a handhold, Junketsu would tighten itself up around her body, causing her to trip and fall to the ground. After her latest fall, Ryuko rubbed the back of her head and stared at the Kamui.

"How did you get here?"

The Kamui didn't say anything, which was as much as Ryuko expected. The question of why she was wearing Junketsu stupefied Ryuko. Didn't Satsuki keep her Kamui under lock and key most of the time? Looking at her basket of laundry, Ryuko's heart fell when she didn't recognize anything inside. It appeared that she, against all odds, ended up taking Satsuki's clean clothes home by accident. That begged the question of why Satsuki Kiryuin, daughter of one of the richest people in the world, was doing her laundry in a dorm laundry room. Didn't Satsuki have someone to do her laundry for her?

"Ok, look. Are you going to tell me how you managed to put yourself on me in the middle of the night?" Ryuko glared down at Junketsu and noticed, to her irritation, the Kamui staring up expectantly at her. Didn't Ichigo say it tried to devour Satsuki? Then why was it looking at her as if to say 'I'll do anything you ask?'

Sighing in frustration upon realizing that she had been waiting for Junketsu to say something, Ryuko decided to do the one thing she promised never to do - ask Satsuki Kiryuin for help. Running a hand down her face, Ryuko stepped over a remarkably still sleeping Mako and began the long trek to Honnouji Academy. Hopefully Satsuki was the one that ended up with Senketsu. Ryuko really didn't want to go on a quest around the world to get Senketsu back.

As if reading her thoughts, Junketsu emitted a soft growling and tightened itself up around her, eliciting an annoyed growl from Ryuko, "No. There is no way that I'm going to make you my Kamui! Senketsu is the only Kamui I'll ever wear."

Junketsu looked up at Ryuko with teary eyes and she immediately felt like she just kicked a puppy. Steadying her nerves by biting her lip, Ryuko huffed and looked away as she stormed out the Mankanshoku household and headed towards the trolley that would take her to Honnouji Academy.

"That's not going to work on me!" She declared stubbornly as she pointedly ignored the looks she was getting from other students. After three long, agonizing minutes of waiting for the trolley, what little happiness Ryuko had disappeared as she saw a familiar face.

"Hey, Ryuko." Ichigo waved before he saw what she was wearing, "Uh... you know that's not Senketsu, right?"

"Don't say another word," Ryuko threatened.

" **Ha, ha!**" Mugetsu's laughter permeated the air and Ryuko would have died from embarrassment if anyone besides Ichigo and herself could hear the Kamui, **"Junketsu wanted to be worn by you! Senketsu is going to be so jealous when he finds out! Let's go with her, Ichigo! I want to see the fireworks!"**

Ichigo thought about the crucial decision for maybe three seconds. On the one hand, he did want to see what happened when Satsuki and Ryuko met, but on the other hand, it was not likely to be pretty. Realizing that he might get caught in the crossfire, Ichigo crossed his arms in front of his chest and vehemently shook his head.

"No way," he nearly shouted, "There's no way I'm getting involved in this."

When the bell on the trolley began ringing and the trolley lurched forward, Ryuko could swear she heard Mugetsu mention something about 'extra clingy Life Fibers' and what that meant for her. Grumbling to herself, Ryuko sat down in the empty trolley and spent the next ten minutes trying her best to ignore each and every attempt by Junketsu to make her happy. While they all failed before they had a shot, the only one that gave her pause was Junketsu motioning

towards the three blue bands on her left bicep. As much as transforming Junketsu intrigued her, Ryuko realized that to Senketsu it would seem as if she was cheating on him.

As the trolley stopped in front of Honnouji Academy, Ryuko frowned when she saw Satsuki waiting for her. The Student Council President was all alone, which was a good thing, and was wearing Senketsu with as much dignity and nobility as when she wore Junketsu.

***"How dare you wear another Kamui, Ryuko!"*** Senketsu shouted angrily.

"I took the wrong basket of laundry, ok?" She mumbled out apologetically, "Besides, why is Satsuki wearing you?"

"Because I will not debase myself by wearing anything lower than a Kamui," Satsuki answered her coldly, "Now, if you don't mind, I would like to have Junketsu back."

"I would if I could!" Ryuko argued and made a motion of trying to take the Kamui off, "But the damn thing just won't get off of me!"

"That's not a problem," Ryuko didn't like the smug grin on Satsuki's face. She especially did not like it when Satsuki snapped her fingers and Iori appeared next to her holding what looked like a fire extinguisher.

"Now hold still, Matoi," Ryuko could feel the terror wafting off Junketsu as Iori approached her and, for once, she agreed with the Kamui, "This won't hurt a bit..."

# Have You Ever Seen the Rain

*So I finally bring the Fight Club episode to a close. It was fun while it lasted and it allowed me to flesh out characters and their motives, drives, and/or reasons but it is time for me to move on. Greener pastures await in Chapter 24, and by that I mean Parent Student Day is right around the corner. That's going to be a real ball of fun when Isshin meets Ragyo. Foreshadowing for the win!*

*Note #1: I have a tvtropes page full of info about this story that you may have missed.*

*Note #2: Currently revising Chapter 3 a bit. It should be up within a day of this chapter being posted*

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## Chapter 23 - Have You Ever Seen the Rain

With a childish giggle accompanied by a smile, Nui Harime removed her purple Scissor Blade accompanied by a spurt of blood from its place within Ichigo's chest.

Ichigo felt his knees weaken and it took every last scrap of energy in his body to stop himself from collapsing onto the floor. Gritting his teeth as pain coursed through his body, he ignored the frantic ramblings from Mugetsu and quickly stabbed Tournesol into the concrete beneath him in order to keep himself standing. As blood flowed out from his wound, staining Mugetsu's white and black coloring with a deep shade of crimson, Ichigo saw Nui stroll around him with a satisfied smirk across her face.

"That was so much fun!" Nui exclaimed happily as she stopped in front of Ichigo and leaned forward in order to stare into his eyes.

Exhaustively and angrily looking at Nui's single eye, Ichigo was floored when he couldn't see a trace of animosity in her expressions. Stabbing her Scissor Blade into the ground, Nui began leaning on it and sighed, "That was amazing! I wasn't expecting you to be so fast, but surprise, surprise there I was pinned against the wall with your blade stabbed through my shoulder. It was so much fun to be on defense for once, even if it was just for pretend, but I think that's enough playing. Heal yourself back up and let's talk. There's so much I want to talk to you about!"

While Nui was beginning to ramble on about stuff that interested her, half of which involved killing and maiming her enemies, Ichigo was doing his best to keep from passing out. While he had managed to stay standing on his feet, the rate of blood loss was beginning to worry him. Even with his hand pressed firmly against the front of his chest in a futile attempt to stem the flow of blood, he quickly realized it could have been much worse. Whether it was by design or coincidence, Nui's sneak attack had managed to miss each and every one of his vital organs. She even somehow missed shattering any of his ribs. Putting the improbability of such an attack on the backburner since he was living proof it had happened, Ichigo tried to keep his mind focused on getting out of here alive. He needed to see a doctor but he was certain Nui Harime wasn't just going to let him leave.

"... and then I chopped his arm off and he screamed for at least five minutes!" While she was telling her story, Nui hadn't noticed Ichigo was still bleeding, but why would she? Ichigo was her cousin and if he was her cousin, like she knew he was, he would have healed himself right up and been back to normal within a few seconds. When he didn't move, she just assumed he was standing around politely listening to her story. Blinking owlshly as she saw he was still bleeding, she frowned in confusion and asked, "Why aren't you healed yet?"

"T-The hell are you?" Ichigo managed to say between ragged gasps for air. Already he could feel the pain from his wounds becoming

nothing more than a general numbness. Even the flow of blood was beginning to lessen, but he was attributing that to Mugetsu doing her best to keep his blood within his body. When Nui removed her Scissor Blade from his body, it had taken Mugetsu a few moments to regenerate her form over the wounds, but it was already too late to stop a lot of his blood from pooling on the floor. Grasping Tournesol with shaky hands, he brought the blue blade up and pointed it at Nui in an attempt to look like he wasn't about to fall over, "No normal person could have regenerated from a wound like that so quickly!"

"Well... duh!" Nui stuck her tongue out childishly and giggled, "Whoever said I was a normal person, Ichigo? But you're being quite rude, cousin. You're standing in front of me acting and bleeding like a normal human when we're both much more than that! You should stop fooling around, you know."

When Nui attacked him, it was with a speed that made her previous attacks seem like teleportation. Ichigo didn't know whether she was mocking him or not, but the fact that her purple Scissor Blade was arcing through the air towards the junction of his neck and shoulder meant that he couldn't care. Gathering his strength while ignoring his wounds as best he could, Ichigo raised Tournesol with his left forearm braced against the blue blade for added support, and blocked Nui's attack.

Almost immediately he felt the concrete beneath his feet crack from the sheer amount of force Nui was pressing down with. Ichigo cursed himself for assuming that since Nui was lazily swinging her weapon that she wasn't trying. He had to remind himself that Nui Harime was a sociopath and was probably taking a great amount of pleasure from screwing around with him. He couldn't make the mistake of allowing her to live if given the chance a second time. As much as it conflicted with his ideals, he needed to fight Nui Harime with the intent to kill her.

"Damn!" Ichigo grit out while a trail of blood escaped from the corner of his mouth. Nui's strength had to be at least three times what it was when he fought her just a few minutes ago and with his wounds, he



had only seconds until his arms failed and he died. He needed to think of a plan fast but despite his best efforts nothing was coming to mind.

***" Don't push yourself Ichigo! You've already lost a lot of blood. If you keep fighting at this rate you'll pass out in only a few minutes,"*** Mugetsu's frightened voice was shouting desperately at Ichigo to do something, anything, to survive the battle. Ichigo had lost a lot of blood from Nui's treacherous attack and nothing she could do could help him, ***"Your wounds are slowly healing, but if she stabs you like that again you'll die!"***

Beads of sweat were freely dripping down Ichigo's face and neck as he desperately pushed back against Nui's overwhelming strength. As he locked gazes with the Grand Couturier, Ichigo couldn't help but shudder at the utmost glee in Nui's expression. It was as if this was all a game to her. When his knees began to buckle from exhaustion, he whispered under his breath, "Can't you heal me any faster?"

***" I'm not healing you,"*** Mugetsu answered, ***"I thought you were healing yourself."***

"What?" Ichigo was not just as confused as his Kamui. Risking a glance at Mugetsu's eye, he asked, "Then how am - "

"Think fast, Ichigo!"

Ichigo found himself doubling over as Nui's fist hit his stomach with the force of a truck. With spittle and blood escaping his mouth and a gasp of pain from his throat, Ichigo was blown back through the door of the room and across the power station, eventually coming to a stop at the far wall. As he slid down the wall onto the ground, his body refusing to move for him, he heard the sound of something dragging along the floor towards him.

"This game is getting boring, Ichigo. I'm not having fun anymore."

Ichigo bit his lip hard enough to draw blood just to keep himself conscious and aware of his surroundings. With his left eye forced shut by the blood dripped out of a cut on his forehead, he could barely managed to see Nui Harime slowly walking towards him in the dim lightning of the power station. Right away he noticed something was off in the way she was walking. Instead of the happy and peppy walk or skipped he had seen Nui do in the past, she was shambling towards him with her Scissor Blade dragging aimlessly behind her, carving a trench in the concrete as it went. It was her face though that caused a lance of fear to spread through his chest. Nui no longer had that perpetual smile splashed across her face. Instead it had been replaced by a nearly emotionless mask.

" ***You need to get out of here, Ichigo!***" Mugetsu couldn't believe her wearer was so powerless against someone like Nui Harime. Ichigo was able to go head-to-head against Satsuki Kiryuin and her minions without much effort, but he was powerless against Nui Harime. Mugetsu could sense that the Grand Couturier wasn't even wearing any Life Fibers so why was she so strong.

"Damn it," Ichigo managed to harshly cough out as he struggled to remain awake. The loss of blood was beginning to cause spots to develop in his vision and it was only his determination and willpower keeping him conscious, "I know!"

"I'm really sad, you know," Nui's voice was completely drained of emotion as she stalked towards Ichigo's downed form, "Why are you playing with my emotions, Ichigo?"

Ichigo couldn't say anything as he struggled to get to his knees. As he managed to do so but quickly fell forward, he found himself locking gazes with Nui Harime, who was mere inches away from his face. As he stared into her dull and surprisingly unexpressive sapphire eye, he was unprepared for a sharp pain as she stabbed her Scissor Blade through his shoulder. While his body was forced back and into the wall with a resounding crash, Ichigo couldn't help but realize that Nui had stabbed him in the exact same spot he had hit her earlier. Coughing harshly and with blood freely flowing from

his new wound, Ichigo glared daggers at Nui. If he was going to die here, he wasn't going to go out begging and crying.

"This isn't right..." Nui crouched down in front of Ichigo and wrapped one perfectly manicured hand around the handle of her Scissor Blade. After looking interestedly at the blade, she tore it out with one harsh movement, eliciting a muffled scream from Ichigo as every nerve in his body seemed to be set alight in pain.

"You're my cousin!" Nui was starting to become hysterical as she paced back and forth in front of him, "Something like this shouldn't hurt you. So why, WHY are you bleeding Ichigo?"

Ichigo didn't say anything in response to Nui, simply deciding to glare at her instead. Nui didn't seem to notice the stare as she continued to talk and rant to herself before abruptly stopping and backing off a bit.

"Oh... I see what you're doing Ichigo," Nui laughed softly as she raised her Scissor Blade, still dripping with his blood, over her head. With a maniacal grin adorning her face, she giggled psychotically and shouted, "You're still asleep, aren't you? Well don't worry your cute little head. I'm going to make you feel so much better in just a moment..."

"*Damn it!*" Ichigo watched the Scissor Blade falling towards his neck in apparent slow motion, his body unable to do more than twitching after getting wounded so badly. Even with the slight healing he was attributing to Mugetsu, it just wasn't enough for him to deal with the likes of Nui Harime. She was in an entirely different class than him, "*I won't let it end here, not like this!*"

Unbeknownst to either Ichigo or Nui, about ten or so minutes after Ichigo left Honnouji Academy, Satsuki Kiryuin did so as well. It was not, as she would say, because she was worried about what the Grand Couturier would do to Ichigo if given the chance. If anyway were to insinuate such a notion, Satsuki would have Gamagori capture and throw them into detention for even considering such a

thing. She was simply being pragmatic. Ichigo Kurosaki had the potential to become one of her powerful assets in her plan. Nui Harime could not be allowed to do with Ichigo what she wished no matter what. That was why she was currently leaping across the Slum rooftops towards the Honnou City Area One Subdivision Power Station. Before taking her leave, she had Inumuta track down where Ichigo was heading and was surprised that Nui Harime would choose such a location.

Clenching a fist, feeling the power of Junketsu coursing through her body, Satsuki knew that it wouldn't matter against someone like Nui Harime. Even if she were to go all out against the Grand Couturier, the best Satsuki could hope for was an extended draw. As she finally reached the outer perimeter of the power station, Satsuki swung Bakuzan vertically and split the chain link fence in two. There was no time for subtleties at the moment. Clicking her heel against the ground, Satsuki leapt into the air and stabbed Bakuzan downward just as she landed on the roof of the power station, destroying the roof and allowing her access all at the same time.

"Nui Harime!" Satsuki slammed Bakuzan into the ground as a backdrop of light appeared out of nowhere behind her, "What do you think you're doing in Honnou City without giving a two day notice?"

"Hi..." Nui stopped her Scissor Blade inches from Ichigo's neck and smirked. Turning around, her face a picture of barely repressed insanity, she said, "Don't worry Satsuki. I'll be done in just a few moments. Ichigo and I were just playing around a bit."

"Is that so?" Satsuki took a step toward Nui, who had turned fully to face the Kiryuin heir, "Do you take me for a fool? I know what your definition of fun is and nothing good can come from it. Now leave Honnou City unless you wish for me to tell my mother you are here."

Nui's hands clenched at the thought of not talking to Ichigo. She wasn't going to give up speaking to a true member of her family. Not when she was so close to doing so after waiting for so long, but she couldn't attack Satsuki. Lady Ragyo wouldn't condone such

behavior. Well, at least for the moment she wouldn't. That gave Nui an idea. She couldn't kill Satsuki, but she sure could play around with her. Raising her Scissor Blade, a maniacal grin on her face, she muttered, "I don't like that you're interrupting such a valuable bonding moment."

Satsuki's eyes widened in surprised when the Grand Couturier actually attacked her. She had been under the assumption that her mother had forbidden Nui from laying a hand on her body. What was it about Ichigo that Nui was so determined to find out that she was willing to risk the ire of her mother? Quickly raising Bakuzan, Satsuki was taken by complete surprise by the force behind the swing. It was strong enough that while it wasn't able to hit her, it still sent her careening backwards through the power station, destroying several generators in the process and sending half of the Slums into darkness.

"I won't let you take my cousin away from me," Nui gleefully said as she walked after Satsuki, "Not after I waited for so long."

As Nui left to deal with Satsuki, she did not witness Ichigo struggling back onto his feet. He may have been injured nearly to the point of death, but he wasn't going to let someone like Nui do anything to Satsuki. No one deserved to be on the receiving end of Nui's playing.

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Ryuko knew perhaps better than anyone else that the normally lazy and happy Mako could become one of the most determined people on the planet if she happens to spot something she really wanted. More than once she had been walking with Mako only for her friend to stop, look around and chase after something in the distance. Usually it was something pet or food related, but Ryuko had grown used to it. At least she thought she did.

She had no idea just HOW determined Mako could be.

"MAKO KICK!"

Ryuko didn't have time to think as she crossed her arms in front of her face. There was a moment of absolute silence when Mako's foot connected with her forearms before a resounding boom accompanied by a sparkle of stars exploded through the area. The explosion quickly broke the sound barrier and literally blew away the students who happened to have ringside seats to the fight.

Back on the battlefield, Mako glared at Ryuko, determination evident in her eyes, as Ryuko managed to block her attack with apparent ease. Eyes narrowing when she spotted the look of pity in Ryuko's blue eyes, Mako grabbed Ryuko's shoulder, spun her body around and tried to slam her geta into Ryuko's face. In a flash of red light, Mako found her kick stopped when Ryuko jammed her Scissor Blade between the spikes on her geta.

"Snap out of it Mako!" Ryuko implored as sparks arced and faded into the air from the spikes on Mako's geta clashing with her Scissor Blade. When Mako didn't say anything, Ryuko lashed out with her Scissor Blade, forcing Mako to quickly jump away lest she get hit by the Life Fiber weapon.

"Stop it, Mako!" Ryuko repeated a second time. The anguish of fighting her first true friend was evident in Ryuko's eyes and it was apparent that the thought of fighting her friend was hurting her more than any of her wounds, "This isn't you!"

Mako didn't say anything as she landed on the ground, her geta making clip-clop sounds in the process of regaining her footing. Biting down on the green reed sticking out of her mouth, Mako adjusted the brim of her hat as she reached into her coat and pulled out several golden kunai. With nearly supernatural skill, Mako deftly placed the weapons between her fingers and spun around before throwing them towards Ryuko.

"Oh, come on!" Ryuko shouted as she parried the first volley of kunai with her Scissor Blade before darting off to the side to avoid the previously hidden second barrage. Ducking and weaving around the deadly weaponry, Ryuko tried to think of how Mako acquired such accuracy. She knew Mako was a huge fan of that stupid show about ninjas, but when in hell did she have the time and money to actually practice throwing kunai? Ducking down under a particularly accurate kunai, Ryuko jumped off the ground and spun her body horizontally through the air, her Scissor Blade trailing behind her, as she managed to dodge the last set of kunai.

Landing back on the ground, her heels leaving twin trenches in the soft ground, Ryuko barely noticed Mako was gone before the arena around her was cast into shadow. Twisting her head upwards at the sun, Ryuko's eyes narrowed when she saw Mako rocketing downwards towards her with her right fist extended.

*" This is wrong."*

Pivoting on her foot until she was facing Mako, Ryuko leapt backwards just before Mako reached the space where she had been standing. Ryuko's blue eyes locked gazes with Mako's brown irises in the split second before Mako's fist connected with the ground. In a flash of light and stars, the ground erupted around Mako and Ryuko realized that her friend's current strength wasn't something she could afford to be hit with. Even Senketsu's steel-like armor and skin would matter little against an attack that powerful.

*" I can't believe Mako isn't even trying to hold back,"* Ryuko swallowed nervously as Mako turned to face her, *"If she had hit me with that, I might have actually died!"*

Ryuko tilted her head to the side as Mako's fist passed through the air, her hair being blown back by the bronze knuckles emblazoned with 'MAKO' on each of Mako's fingers. As Mako continued forward with her momentum, in almost slow motion she turned towards Ryuko. Locking gazes with her former best friend, Ryuko momentarily froze when she noticed the look of anger mixed with

betrayal in Mako's eyes. In that single moment where she let her guard down, Mako planted her geta firmly on the ground and struck with a kick that easily connected with Ryuko's stomach.

With an audible 'oomph' Ryuko was propelled backwards across the arena, her body bouncing haphazardly and awkwardly along the ground with a spin or two thrown in as well. After the third bounce, Ryuko decided that was enough and regained adequate control of her momentum and managed to stab her Scissor Blade in the ground and arrest her movement. Getting back onto her feet, a ragged breath escaping her mouth, Ryuko wiped a spot of dirt off her cheek and quipped, "This is going to be tougher than I thought. Mako is really strong. I would be proud if I wasn't fighting her."

***" Pulling your punches isn't helping, Ryuko."***

Senketsu may have sounded annoyed and condescending when he spoke, but he truly was concerned for Ryuko's health, both physically as well as mentally. Mako was Ryuko's first and best friend, as Ryuko's Sunday best he could understand that relationship fairly well. Even if he was unable to perfectly relate to how Ryuko felt while fighting Mako, Senketsu knew it must feel as terrible as having his Life Fibers torn off one by one, ***"There's no reason you should be having this much trouble against a Two-Star Goku Uniform."***

Ryuko bit her lip as Mako flew towards her and attempted to slam both her feet into her neck. Quickly reaching out and grasping Mako's ankles, Ryuko spun around before letting go and watching her friend sail through the air and land in a smoking crater across the arena.

"It's not that..." Ryuko sighed miserably as she grabbed her Scissor Blade and waited for Mako to attack her again. If she truly wanted to fight Mako, Ryuko could have easily, perhaps not that easily, finished the battle quite some time ago. While she was actively attacking Mako, her heart just wasn't into fighting her best friend, "I just can't fight Mako. I know I promised Ururu I would bring the old Mako back, but I-I don't think I can fight her."



***" I don't like fighting Mako anymore than you do, Ryuko. She is, after all, the only one who irons my Life Fibers just the way I like it,"*** Senketsu paused momentarily and coughed in embarrassment as he realized he divulged something he'd rather keep a secret. When Ryuko cracked a smirk at his confession, he growled and continued, ***"You must put your feelings aside for the moment. Didn't you promise Ururu you would help get Mako? As much as it might bother the both of us, you have to fight Mako until she comes back to her senses. Put more effort into helping Mako than you do your schoolwork and you are sure to succeed!"***

"Where do you get off saying something like that?" Ryuko pinched Senketsu's eye in frustration and disbelief. She couldn't believe the gall Senketsu had in saying something like that to her!

Senketsu ignored Ryuko's mistreatment of his body for the moment and turned his eye towards her. He would get her back later, but for now he had more important matters to deal with, ***"As your Kamui, I am privy to pretty much everything in your life. It is a shame that my wearer doesn't care enough about her schoolwork to put in the required amount of effort."***

"If you haven't noticed, I've been kind of busy tracking down the woman who killed my dad," Ryuko countered, "Besides, getting ambushed by Satsuki Kiryuin's goons every day makes studying hard! I'm doing my best!"

***" That is no excuse, Ryuko. Ichigo gets into almost as many fights as you and his grades are near the top of the class."***

"Why are you comparing me to Ichigo?" Ryuko asked incredulously.

Senketsu began to speak, but his answer was cut off as Ryuko's ears picked up the increasingly familiar clip-clop of Mako's geta along the ground. Spinning towards her friend, a look of exasperation on her face, Ryuko bent her knees and leaned backwards just as Mako's bronze knuckles whipped through the air.

As she slowly fell backwards, Ryuko grabbed her Scissor Blade by its blade, careful to not cut Senketsu in the process and smashed the grip of her weapon into Mako's bare stomach. With an almost cartoonish grunt as the air left her lungs, compounded with her face distorting comically, Mako flew backwards and bounced along the ground before eventually skidding to a stop with her face planted in the ground and several wisps of smoke rising from her body.

With Mako disposed of, at least momentarily, Ryuko turned her attention back to Senketsu and glared harshly enough to cause the Kamui to actually break out in a cold sweat, "It has nothing to do with Ichigo! You're just all hot and bothered by Mugetsu, aren't you? You have a crush on Ichigo's Kamui!"

" ***W-What?***" Senketsu blubbered nervously as he desperately tried to think of a way out, "***I... but... Here she comes, Ryuko!***"

At first Ryuko thought Senketsu was simply trying to think of a way out of the embarrassing situation, but when she noticed Mako getting back to her feet, she begrudgingly admitted to herself that he had a point. Gripping the handle of her Scissor Blade with both hands, she took a deep breath and sighed, "Fine, but don't think you're off the hook yet!"

"I'm not done yet!" Mako shouted angrily as she pumped her fist into the air, "Mako Mankanshoku has her eye on the prize and nothing will stop her! Take this Ryuko!"

Instead of attacking head-on, like Ryuko assumed she would, Mako reached into her coat with both of her hands and began throwing a barrage of gold-plated weapons and tools at Ryuko. Eyes widening momentarily at the strange attack, Ryuko quickly recovered and sliced her Scissor Blade through the air, deflecting and parrying each impromptu weapon. As she blocked several knives and daggers from hitting her body, Ryuko couldn't help but note wrenches, pliers and even a spatula or two in the barrage of weaponry aimed at her face. As she forced her arms to move faster and faster to combat the

rate at which Mako was attacking her, Ryuko gagged when a mace appeared out of nowhere and smacked her square in the forehead.

**" Ryuko!"**

"I'm fine," Ryuko snapped back as a trickle of blood ran down the bridge of her nose and over her cheek. Licking the blood that fell into her mouth before spitting it onto the ground, Ryuko kept her eyes locked firmly on Mako as she asked, "Any ideas, Senketsu?"

**" Let me think for a moment."** Senketsu's eye closed and he hummed quietly to himself for several seconds before answering, **"I got nothing. You're her best friend, Ryuko, so you should try to use that to your advantage. Remind Mako of all the times you've spent together and everything you've done. Perhaps that might help."**

"Remind Mako..." Ryuko frowned before ducking out of the way as a morning-star about the size of her head smashed into the ground. Backflipping away while using her Scissor Blade as a shield against any further attacks, Ryuko skidded to a stop as a confident grin spread across her face, "That's not a bad idea, Senketsu."

Senketsu gave the Kamui equivalent of a nod. He couldn't wait to rub it in Mugetsu's face, **"I do my best. Now let's bring Mako back!"**

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For her entire life, Nui Harime felt as if something was missing.

After much internal debate and questioning, she determined that she couldn't be missing anything. She had everything she ever wanted as the Grand Couturier of Revocs. She was the second most powerful person on Earth and had free reign to do nearly anything she wanted, as long as it did not conflict with Lady Ragyo's plans.

Yet still, she couldn't help but feel as if something important was missing.

For most of her life it had been nothing more than a nagging feeling in the back of her mind. The equivalent, if you will, of forgetting whether or not she already tortured a Nudist Beach prisoner for information already. Over the past year or so, however, Nui had felt that nagging feeling develop into a clenching of her Life-Fiber infused heart that she just couldn't alleviate.

Then she met Ichigo and suddenly that bad feeling went away.

Nui really liked Ichigo. In fact, she liked him WAY more than she liked Satsuki but just a little less than she loved the Director. He was exactly like her in every single way. She knew without a doubt that their hearts beat as one yet it made her sad that he refused to play by the rules. Why would he allow himself to bleed and feel pain when he could just heal himself up in seconds? It wasn't like she was trying to kill him or anything. In fact, she purposely skewered in body in such a way that her Scissor Blade would miss all his organs, which took much trial and error on volunteers to get down just right. So when he didn't heal himself and even had the nerve to look at her like she was insane, Nui felt something snap in her mind. If he wasn't going to play fairly, she would just have to cheat as well until he did. Fair is fair after all.

If only Satsuki hadn't butted in at the last second. Nui was just about to get some quality time with her first, and favorite, cousin only to have Satsuki barge in and declare her presence in Honnou City illegal. Nui would have usually coyly responded to Satsuki's sweet, but ineffective, orders but she was already too upset with Ichigo at the moment to care. She would just have to show Satsuki just how upset she made her feel by interrupting what was quality family time. Nui wouldn't kill Satsuki. She was still needed for the final stage of Lady Ragyo's plan after all. Although, a twinge of an unknown emotion briefly passed through her chest, Nui didn't know what would happen to Ichigo if that happened. Once she was done here,

she would go and ask Lady Ragyo about it. The Director would surely know the answer to such an important question.

"You know..." Nui's normal demeanor resurfaced as she saw Satsuki collide with a wall before punching through it like paper. Lady Ragyo had instilled into her mind the need to stay composed as long as possible. It would be really bad if she let her anger and disappointment get the better of her. It only took one lucky shot, even from a human like Satsuki, to hurt her. The wound on her eye was testament enough and Nui repressed the deep-seeded rage within her soul at the single blemish on her beautiful and perfect body. Dragging her Scissor Blade along the ground, sending up sparks and pieces of metal, Nui tilted her head and smirked, "... I am quite mad at the moment, you know. Interrupting my family time with Ichigo is bad enough, but ordering me to stay away from him is just plain rude. If you are so against me talking to Ichigo, well I'll just have to play with you instead."

Satsuki snapped her leg out and flung a piece of rubble the size of her body towards Nui. The Grand Couturier watched the ton of steel and cement fly towards her before stabbing her Scissor Blade forward and immediately shattering it into dust, "Scissor beats rock!"

Nui let out a small gasp of surprise when Satsuki appeared at her side, the familiar grimace she's come to know and love on her face, and tried to impale her through the neck. The surprise quickly turned to faint amusement as Nui seemed to float backwards at the exact speed of Satsuki's strike, Bakuzan's tip hovering just off her delicate skin, and raised a manicured hand to her mouth in forged shock.

"You're really trying to kill me!" Nui's voice sounded as if she was stunned Satsuki was actively trying to hurt her, but to anyone that knew who she was it came out as condescending arrogance. Nui wasn't shocked at all. Satsuki knew she was simply acting that way to make her lose her temper at her inability to injure the Grand Couturier. Hovering up and landing on top of a nearby roof, Nui stuck her tongue out childishly at Satsuki, "Oh dear. I wonder what the

Director will say when she finds out. I don't think simple purification will be enough. Do you?"

There was a slight tensing of Satsuki's features at Nui's words, but to the untrained eye it would appear as if she was unaffected. A barely visible twitch of her right arm, her left eye narrowing ever so slightly, but to Nui it was as if Satsuki's mouth had opened in shock and that made her extremely happy. She was glad she hadn't lost her touch after so long out of the field. She was starting to become afraid that hanging out with Ichigo, as much fun as that was, had caused her to lose a bit of her expertise.

"Perhaps you do not understand the ramifications of your actions," Satsuki countered as she stepped towards Nui and pointed Bakuzan at her. She could not let the Grand Couturier's way with words affect her. She had put up with Nui's games for as long as she could remember and a few more taunts weren't going to break her, "My mother has expressively forbidden your ability to set foot within Honnou City without informing me in advance."

Nui puffed her cheeks out and turned her head away. She hadn't forgotten that little rule humorously invented by Lady Ragyo to placate Satsuki, but if Satsuki thought she was just going to up and leave right when she met Ichigo than she wasn't as clever as she thought.

"Hmm... that's true and all," Nui shouldered her Scissor Blade and took a step off the roof, gently floating to the ground and landing on a piece of overturned concrete. Stabbing her weapon and using it as an impromptu chair, Nui smirked and rested her chin in the palm of her hand, "But you're forgetting one crucial and super important rule. I don't need your permission to be anywhere when the Director gave it to me in the first place."

Satsuki hadn't expecting Nui to admit to that. What was her mother thinking in sending someone like Nui, a rabid dog that's nearly chewed through its leash, to Honnou City? If the Grand Couturier decided to do something, anything, Satsuki would be hard pressed

to stop her without receiving significant losses. That was if she could stop her in the first place.

"Ah... I see you realize how much trouble you're in," Nui wagged her finger childishly at Satsuki and giggled. Screwing around with Satsuki was a lot of fun as always, but Nui was sad that she had to stop so soon. If she reported back to Lady Ragyo about what happened, she would likely be forced to stay at Revocs for a few days. She would even miss out on Parent Student Day tomorrow and Nui wouldn't miss that for the world! Sighing nostalgically and tilting her head to the side, Nui said, "But telling on you would mean I wouldn't be able to hang out with Ichigo for a while and that's super bad, you know. You can stop worrying your pretty head about whatever I might do. I'm only in your silly town to hang out with Ichigo."

"That may be true," Satsuki clicked her heel loudly on the ground. After her abysmal performance against Ichigo, Satsuki had trained her mind and body to resist Junketsu as best she could. Through her sheer willpower she could now wear her Kamui for nearly half an hour in its activated state before the extreme fatigue hit her. She had almost twenty minutes left before she would be forced to transform Junketsu back she wasn't about to risk being drawn into an extended confrontation with the Grand Couturier, "... but as the Student Council President of Honnouji Academy it is my solemn duty to not let any threats into the city! Until I hear from my mother otherwise, you are forbidden from stepping foot in Honnou City! Failure to listen will result in retribution!"

"Phooey," Nui absentmindedly kicked the ground and crossed her arms over her chest. She couldn't believe how much of a stick in the mud Satsuki was being. It wasn't like she came to this stupid town to kill anyone. Ok sure, she killed a few people to keep her presence a secret but it wasn't more than six or seven people, which was not that much actually. As an idea came to mind, Nui clapped her hands together and stood up straight, "Ah! I have an awesome idea that I think will make us both happy Satsuki! I won't tell Lady Ragyo that

you're going against her orders and you let me stay in your little town. I promise I'll be extra good and stuff! You won't even have to worry about any mutilated bodies or corpses just lying about. I'm just here to hang out and have fun with my favorite cousin, Ichigo!"

Satsuki narrowed her eyes, "I don't believe you. I know what you mean by that, but nothing good ever happens to those you take interest in."

"That's not true," Nui blatantly lied. Everything that happened to those that interested her helped make the Grand Couturier feel truly happy and alive, which they were meant to. Of course, there was that woman in Rome that tricked her with candy, which annoyed Nui to no end. Sticking her tongue out and closing her eye, Nui giggled and said, "Aw, don't tell me you care about Ichigo? I don't know where you got the notion I'm going to hurt him, but that's simply not true. I simply *love* Ichigo so much that I - "

Both Satsuki and Nui were shocked when a blue blade burst through the Grand Couturier's chest covered in her blood.

"Oh?" Nui looked down at Tournesol in confusion before a wide and happy smile spread across her face. She was ecstatic that Ichigo finally decided to show up and what made it even better was that he was playing with her again! Twisting her head up and staring deeply into Ichigo's determined brown eyes, she laughed and said, "It's so good to see you again Ichigo! I was wondering when you'd show up. Talking with Satsuki is such a bore. Now that you're here I can get to know you a little bit better!"

Ichigo wasn't surprised when Nui leaned forward and literally pulled her body off his blade. He was even less surprised when the wound in her back healed up, leaving both her and her pink dress with nary a scratch or tear on them. After getting ambushed and nearly killed by her earlier, he couldn't afford to go easy on her. The only reason he had stabbed Nui was because he knew she most likely wouldn't be that injured by the attack.



"So I was right," Ichigo raised Tournesol and held it aloft over his shoulder, "You can regenerate."

"Gosh, you're super smart!" Nui puffed out her cheeks happily upon the compliment. Ichigo was really smart to figure that out on the first go. Even Satsuki hadn't realized the regenerative qualities of the Life Fibers within her body for several weeks. Sitting back down on her Scissor Blade, Nui chuckled and asked, "So does that mean you're finally awake, Ichigo? It's going to be so much fun hanging out and playing with you now!"

Ichigo narrowed his eyes as he thought about the specifics of what Nui said. He couldn't understand why she kept asking and talking to him as if he was asleep. Was there something he was missing that Nui believed she understood? Could that explain why his wounds, the same ones that Mugetsu was adamant that she didn't heal, had mostly closed and healed over the last few minutes? Truth be told, Ichigo would have been a lot more shocked about healing that quickly if he hadn't already experienced it whenever his inner hollow took over. While his friends and colleagues would tell him he was unconscious during the entire time his hollow was in control, Ichigo could vividly remember experiencing whatever his hollow did. That was how and why he recognized his healing as a form of regeneration, which just raised further questions as to WHY he had regeneration.

" *Please don't tell me I need to talk to dad about this,*" Ichigo thought in annoyance. Somehow he knew his dad would have just the answers he was looking for. It always seemed the old goat knew something about everything. He was nearly as bad as Kisuke.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ichigo said, testing the waters carefully. He had seen what lay just beneath the surface and Nui's cheerful demeanor. It was not something that belonged to someone that had their mind in order. Nui was an unstable person and Ichigo could tell it would just take one major event to pull her off the very edge of sanity forever, "But I'm not asleep or whatever you're calling it."

Satsuki watched the exchange between Ichigo and Nui earnestly. Usually she would find interference in her familial matters subject to punishment, but she was curious about the reason Nui was so interested in Ichigo. As she filed away any pertinent information she overheard, she felt her skin begin to crawl as Nui's cheerful smile slowly and deliberately fell off her face.

"Not awake?" Nui's smile was now more forced than true. Tilting her head to the side, her sapphire eye seeming to bore deeply into Ichigo's mind in the hopes of discovering he was lying, Nui's hand gripped her Scissor Blade tightly as she slowly walked towards him, "No, that's not possible. You're back to normal and everything! You can't possibly still be asleep Ichigo!"

Without even giving a warning, Nui shot towards Ichigo and chaotically swung her Scissor Blade at him. Temporarily flinching backwards in shock, Ichigo quickly brought up Tournesol and managed to block Nui's strike, albeit only after he was forced backwards several feet, his heels digging up the concrete floor in the process.

"You can't still be asleep!" Nui declared, her voice rising with every syllable until she was nearly shouting at the end, "You're back to normal and not bleeding anymore! You're not a lowly human who dies when they're stabbed so why are you saying such awful lies?"

As Nui increased her strength, Ichigo found his arms buckling and folding under the pressure. Even if he was mostly healed apart from the feeling of pain where he had been stabbed, he was unable to stand up to the Grand Couturier's increasing power. As his elbows began to shake from the exertion of fending off Nui, he was relieved when Satsuki snapped her leg out and managed to connect with Nui's ribcage. The Grand Couturier's body seemed to bend cartoonishly around her foot before rocketing out and crashing into the side of the power station accompanied by an expanding cloud of dust and smoke.

"Ichigo!" Satsuki's voice was full of her standard authority and Ichigo found himself unconsciously scowling in annoyance. Leave it to Satsuki to bark out orders like a drill sergeant even in the midst of a life and death battle. Slamming Bakuzan on the ground, she stared him deeply in the eyes and said, "We seem to have a common goal for the moment - the expulsion of Nui Harime from Honnou City. Let us put our differences aside for the moment to deal with this common threat!"

"Yeah, fine," Ichigo grumbled as he sensed Nui returning to the battle, "But don't try to order me around. I'm not one of your damn soldiers."

A graceful smirk adorned Satsuki's face, "I wouldn't dream of it."

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"I won't let you take everything I've worked hard for away, Ryuko! I can't go back to being poor!"

Mako was furious at Ryuko for betraying her like this! Couldn't Ryuko understand that she was the only reason her family wasn't living in the Slums, hoping to have enough money to afford dinner? Her mom's mystery croquettes were delicious to be sure, Mako still salivated at the thought of what could be inside them, but Mako couldn't live like that forever. She had watched for years as the One and Two-Star students bought and ate anything they wanted without care. So many different foods like steak, chicken and even vegetables and fruits. Mako had seen all those foods so often without being able to actually eat them. Now that she could, she was never going to go back to her old life!

The sound of loud and exuberant cheering from the stands caused Mako to frown in determination. Her dad and Matorou were cheering her on to defeat Ryuko as quickly as possible. She couldn't let them down. Looking around, Mako noticed that her mom was absent. She

must still be sick, Mako thought more intelligently than usually, or she would be here cheering her on as well. Mako was starting to get worried about her mom because ever since she became the president of the Fight Club, her mom had been sick. She never came to any of the high-class events the Mankanshoku family was now being invited to and whenever Mako asked about her health, she would simply smile and pat her on the head.

Mako pulled hard on the golden chain she had managed to wrap around Ryuko's right arm only to have her former friend dig her heels into the ground and use her Scissor Blade to easily sever the much weaker chain. Frowning and adjusting the reed in her mouth, Mako drew her chain back with a level of skill she still couldn't figure out how she possessed. Whipping it around her body several times, Mako stomped her geta on the ground and threw the chain back at Ryuko. This time, she noted with intense determination, she managed to wrap it around Ryuko's neck.

"Take..." With a supreme amount of effort, Mako snapped the chain upwards and bounced Ryuko's body against the ground before whipping it into the air. Spinning around on one leg, Mako grit her teeth and slammed Ryuko back into the ground hard enough to cause cracks to radiate outwards from the point of impact, "... this!"

"Ugh," Ryuko grumbled and pulled herself out of the indentation her body created when it hit the ground. Shaking her head and dislodging a couple of pebbles, she grabbed the handle of her Scissor Blade and stood back up. Spitting some dirt out of her mouth, she focused her senses inwards and was relieved she didn't feel any pain apart from a few cuts and bruises, "Damn. Are all Two-Star's this strong or is Mako just special?"

" ***That's hard to say,***" Senketsu added unhelpfully. It was disturbing to see Ryuko struggling with Mako, who he knew wasn't even close to the level of power Sanageyama had in their second fight. Ryuko was still holding back her full strength and if either of them didn't come up with a plan, it was going to end up badly, "***But it seems***

***that despite greed overwhelming her mind, it's still the same Mako deep down."***

"Maybe," Ryuko admitted reluctantly, "But how can I bring her back if she is still the same Mako?"

***" I don't know,"*** Senketsu's tone did not betray the sadness he felt at being unable to help his wearer, ***"But I'm sure you'll figure something out. You are her best friend after all."***

Ryuko cast her gaze downwards as the scope of her failure began to weigh down on her. If Mako wasn't going to listen to anything she said, then what was the point of trying to talk to her? She didn't want to fight her best friend, damn it, but Ryuko couldn't see any other way out of this whole mess. It was all Satsuki Kiryuin's fault for corrupting Mako and her family with wealth and greed. Sighing in resignation, Ryuko clenched the grip of her Scissor Blade and tried to convince her body to fight Mako, but the trembling of her arms said all that there needed to be said about that. If she didn't take this fight seriously and continued to hold back, then she was going to die. Wait a second...

"Hey Senketsu," Ryuko's voice came out as a whisper as she addressed her Kamui. She didn't like the plan she came up with, but with everything else failing it wasn't as if she had a choice. Ryuko hoped she wouldn't have to use her plan, but when she saw Mako pull out a bat with a dozen nail stabbed through the end, she knew she had no choice but to use it, "I have an idea, but I don't think you're going to like it..."

Senketsu thought there was nothing Ryuko could say that could take him by surprise, but as Ryuko whispered her plan to him that notion went out the window. Over the course of her explanation, Senketsu's emotions flew through shock, fear, contemplation before finally ending in general annoyance. Senketsu politely waited until Ryuko finished talking before taking the mental equivalent of a deep breath.

***" That's the stupidest, most dangerous, plan I've ever heard."***

"I know that!" Ryuko snapped before grumbling. She didn't like the plan any more than Senketsu did, but it was the only way she knew to get Mako back.

When Senketsu saw Ryuko's determination in going through with her insane plan remain firm and intact, he knew there was no other choice. As much as he would like to think otherwise, Ryuko's plan was a good, if not extremely dangerous, one. The only problem was that if it didn't work... Senketsu shuddered at the mere thought of what might happen if it failed. He couldn't allow that to happen to Ryuko, ***"If you're so determined to go through with it, I'll stay by your side. Just be careful Ryuko."***

"Thanks Senketsu," Ryuko turned to Mako and stabbed her Scissor Blade into the ground, "Let's go get Mako back."

Standing on top of Honnouji Academy were Satsuki's Elite Three, Elite Four if you still counted Jakuzure. When Satsuki mysteriously took a leave of absence and informed Inumuta to not track her movements, the Elite Three were surprised but nevertheless complied with her orders.

"Hmm," Gamagori stared down at the battle in earnest. He was surprised when Matoi had initially taken the fight seriously but her most recent move had given him pause, "She giving up? Don't tell me she values her friendship with Mankanshoku over victory."

"I'm not certain that's what she's doing," Sanageyama replied sagely. He would have been able to give more information, but the distance separating him from Matoi severely reduced the effectiveness of Shingantsu. Strumming his fingers along the inner length of his arm, Sanageyama was annoyed that he was forbidden from fighting Matoi, but Lady Satsuki's word was law and he would simply have to wait his turn, "Her breathing appears to have leveled out in the last minute although by going by her heartbeat she remains nervous. The question is whether such nervousness stems from her fight with Mankanshoku or is there an ulterior reason."

Gamagori looked incredulously at Sanageyama, "You can tell that from all the way up here?"

"No," Sanageyama replied bluntly, "But I can hear Inumuta's computer."

Gamagori looked at Inumuta, who simply shrugged and fixed his glasses, "I managed to install various cameras and sensors in the walls and stands surrounding Matoi and Mankanshoku to analyze and record her pulse, perspiration and overall health. Sanageyama is simply hearing the pulse application on my laptop. Speaking of which, I was told that you would be in the control room overlooking the fight, Sanageyama. Could it be that you are out here with us solely because you cannot see anything on the computer screens?"

Sanageyama scoffed at the mention of his single weakness, "This is completely different!"

"I suppose it is," Inumuta admitted sarcastically, "But that still begs the question about what Matoi is planning. Perhaps you are right. She is not someone that is prone to simply giving up in the midst of a battle, even if it is against her friend."

"Indeed. We simply have to believe that Lady Satsuki's plans will come to fruition," Gamagori grunted. When his eyes picked out a mop of pink hair in the stands nearest the fight, a grimace developed on his face. Jakuzure's undercover work was set to expire at midnight tonight and her reintroduction into the Elite Four was to take place during the ceremony tomorrow afternoon. Gamagori was all for allowing Jakuzure back under Lady Satsuki's wings, but he could not admit to himself that her work in discovering the origins of Ichigo Kurosaki's control over his Kamui was sorely lacking. He knew she did her best but her abrasive and rude attitude surely turned Ichigo's suspicions against her.

Back on the battlefield, Mako grimaced angrily when she saw Ryuko leave her Scissor Blade behind and walk calmly towards her. What could her former best friend be thinking by approaching her

completely unarmed? A rogue thought passed through Mako's mind. Could Ryuko, even after betraying her trust and friendship and allowing her family to go back to being poor, be taking pity on her? Was she calling her weak? Mako's hands shook with anger and she clenched the bat in her hands even tighter.

*" Why can't Ryuko just listen to her? All I needed was for her to fight a few clubs so my family wouldn't be poor anymore. It wasn't like that was too hard. Why can't she just apologize and say she was wrong? I want Ryuko to be my friend again but I won't be poor again!"*

"Take this, Ryuko!" Mako pointed the end of her bat at Ryuko and pressed a button on the bottom. As the end of the bat opened up, exposing a missile painted to look just like her, Mako shouted, "Mako Rocket!"

At first there was a sound like a cork popping causing everyone, including Mako and the Elite Four, to assume it was a dud. That notion was quickly destroyed as the missile left Mako's bat, destroying it in the process, and arced upwards into the sky before turning around and homing in on Ryuko. Mako was initially elated at her ultimate attack working, but as Ryuko continued to walk towards her without any worry etched on her face, that elation turned to panic. Why was Ryuko so calm and collected? She should be trying to get out of the way of her Mako Rocket or she could get seriously super hurt or worse! If Mako could have stopped the attack she would have, but just before the missile hit Ryuko and exploded, she swore she saw an accepting smile spread across Ryuko's face.

The explosion from the Mako Rocket was enormous and the largest one since the incident the prior year with the president of the Model Rocket Club. All throughout Honnou City, hundreds if not thousands of people looked up at the academy and wondered what on Earth was going on.

"What the hell was that?" Ichigo wondered, taking his attention off Nui Harime for just a moment. That explosion came from Honnouji Academy, which meant Ryuko must be fighting the Elite Three. What



bothered him was the question of which of the remaining two could cause such an explosion. Ichigo bet his money on Gamagori. It was a mistake to take his attention off of Nui, Ichigo quickly realized, as he felt a small hand grabbing his shoulder before he was pushed right through a nearby wall.

"Don't get distracted Ichigo!" Nui cheerfully commented before she twisted to the side and avoided Satsuki's Bakuzan. Grabbing Satsuki's wrist, Nui jabbed her Scissor Blade into her stomach, causing Satsuki to gasp in pain, before spinning around and throwing her off into the distance, "You gotta do better than that Satsuki or it won't be fun anymore!"

Back at Honnouji Academy, Ururu Tsumugiyu was extremely worried about Ryuko. The Mako Rocket was a powerful attack that could have incapacitated a shinigami lieutenant if he had managed to catch them off guard and at point blank range. If Ryuko had taken the full brunt of that attack... Ururu shook her head, her pigtails flailing about, to clear her mind. She couldn't think like that! Mako and Ryuko were friends. There was no way that Mako would use an attack that could kill Ryuko. It was impossible for Ururu to even contemplate it, but as the dust and smoke cleared, Ururu found her heart stopping and her eyes widening at what she saw.

Laying on the ground with her a small river of blood leaking out the side of her mouth was Ryuko and she wasn't breathing.

" *Ryuko's dead...* "

Ururu's whole body began shaking slightly as she stared at her friend's body. The rational side of her brain was telling her that if Ryuko was truly dead, her soul would be floating nearby with her Chain of Fate severed, but the irrational and emotional part of her mind was telling her that Ryuko was breathing. All Ururu could think about was how Ryuko promised to fight Mako and bring her friend back and that she was now dead. Ryuko was dead because of her promise and Mako was to blame.

" *Mako killed Ryuko*," Something snapped within Ururu at that moment and she heard a regal voice in her subconscious telling her to take vengeance against Mako for killing Ryuko. It was telling her to tear Mako apart and see her suffer for what she did to Ryuko. Ururu knew that was wrong but she was just too devastated to care at the moment. As her blue eyes drained of emotion, every thought in Ururu's mind was focused solely on causing as much pain as possible to Mako. Just before she took her first step towards Mako, which would have enabled her to wrap her hand around Mako's throat, Ururu felt a hand firmly grip her shoulder. Turning around to see who was holding her back, the voice in her head starting to fade away as Ururu saw it was Mr. Kurosaki who had his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't do anything you might regret later on," Isshin warned solemnly without tightening his grip, "I know you must feel devastated and upset but don't rush into things without thinking your actions through first."

Ururu's eyes began tearing up, "B-But..."

Isshin sighed and knelt down besides the girl. He was lucky that he had been standing nearby when Mako attacked. He didn't want to think about what might have happened if he had been a moment too late, "You know more than anyone here, except for my son, that Ryuko can't be dead. So take a deep breath, close her eyes and clear your head."

Ururu did just that and immediately the voices in her head cleared away. She knew Mr. Kurosaki would always know what to do when it came to things like this. Even though she was thinking clearly once more, the voice that Ururu heard scared her. Forcing herself to think about what it sounded like, she realized that it wasn't her subconscious speaking to her. In fact, she couldn't remember ever heard that voice before.

"R-Ryuko?" Mako stumbled towards Ryuko in confusion. Stopping next to her prone form, she fell onto her knees and nudged her

shoulder, "Come on, get up Ryuko..."

When Mako turned Ryuko's body over and noticed she wasn't breathing, large tears began falling from her eyes as the realization of what she did hit her. With her body shaking from regret and her breath constantly hitching in her throat, Mako pressed Ryuko tightly against her body and began crying into her unmoving chest, "Why did you let yourself get hit, Ryuko? You could have stepped out of the way or something! Why didn't anyone stop me?"

The last question was not directed at Mako herself, but to her family watching in stunned silence in the stands. Throughout the fight they had been cheering for Mako to not just defeat, but destroy Ryuko in order to keep their current lifestyle. They may have said some terrible things, but they never intended for Ryuko to actually die. Unable to say anything, they looked away from Mako in shame and regret.

"I-I don't want Ryuko to be dead," Mako blubbered sadly as she tore off her Goku Uniform and threw it away. Holding Ryuko's head against her chest with tears freely falling she shouted, "I just want things to go back to normal before the Fight Club. I don't care if we're rich or not! I just want Ryuko to be my friend again!"

"I-It's good to hear that, Mako"

The large tears dripping down Mako's face abruptly stopped when she heard Ryuko's voice. Looking down at her friend through teary eyes, she saw Ryuko staring at her with a content look on her bruised face.

"B-But..."

"Don't worry. You don't need to apologize for anything Mako. We both did stupid things," Ryuko explained as Mako hugged her tighter, nearly cutting off her flow of oxygen in the process. Ryuko didn't need to tell Mako that her plan involved having Senketsu temporarily breathing for her. While her Kamui was initially adamant about not

doing it, Ryuko realized that if he could draw her blood from her body then perhaps he could do the opposite. She was just glad that Mako didn't know how to check for a pulse. Not breathing is much easier than stopping her heart. She was also glad Mako decided to throw away her uniform when she did. A few more seconds and Ryuko would have been forced to start breathing on her own again.

"Ryuko," Ururu jogged towards Ryuko with a happy smile on her face. Now that Ryuko was alive and well, any antagonistic thoughts she may have had towards Mako were long dead and gone. After seeing how sorry Mako was about thinking she killed Ryuko, Ururu couldn't hold a grudge. Grabbing Ryuko's hands tightly in her own, Ururu glanced over her body, "You're hurt Ryuko. Mr. Kurosaki is a doctor. He can fix you right up."

Ryuko smiled but glanced to the side. There was just one last thing she needed to do, "Ok, but just hold on a second." Standing over Mako's Goku Uniform, a look of anger and rage on her face, she pulled out her Scissor Blade and violently sliced through it.

"Seni-Soshitsu!" Ryuko shouted as the Banshi in Mako's uniform was absorbed by Senketsu, causing her body to temporarily glow with a red aura. Letting out a deep sigh as she realized it was all over, Ryuko walked back to Mako and wrapped an arm around her best friend's shoulders, "Come on Mako, let's go back home. You think your mom is up for making mystery croquettes?"

Mako gasped happily, "She sure is!"

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The silence that permeated the Honnou City Slums was abruptly destroyed as a series of explosion rocked the area. Deftly avoiding Nui's strike, consciously noting just how close the purple Scissor Blade came from slicing open his skin, Ichigo countered by arcing Tournesol through the air towards Nui's shoulder. He knew if he could just somehow disarm Nui of her weapon, fighting her would be much easier.

"Ah!" Nui giggled and danced around his strike. Spinning her Scissor Blade around her wrist, she lashed out only for Ichigo to stop her assault with his own weapon. The force of the combined strikes forced both combatants to take a step back, but Nui quickly and easily recovered. Flipping in the air towards Ichigo with a large smile on her face, she swung her Scissor Blade downwards while Ichigo reversed his grip on Tournesol and arched it upwards. Blue and purple met in a clash of sparks and stars and for just a moment both of them froze before a miniature explosion blew Ichigo backwards along the ground.

"Damn it. Just how powerful is she?" Ichigo muttered as he skidded to a stop. Taking in a ragged breath, exhaustion already beginning to creep up on him, he tried to think of how he was going to beat Nui. Just because she was stronger than him did not mean he was simply going to give up. Mugetsu wasn't fairing any better. Nui's Scissor Blade had proven itself willing and quite able to cut through the Kamui's normally resilient armor as if it were tissue paper. He needed to be careful to avoid any more of Nui's attacks. Ichigo never again wanted to hear Mugetsu scream in pain as the Scissor Blade cut through her.

"Her strength is on a completely different level than ours," Satsuki's stoic voice answered as she landed next to him. Much like Ichigo, Satsuki's body was littered with cuts and bruises courtesy of Nui Harime's playful tough love. Although her breath was more ragged than his and she seemed to have developed a nearly unperceivable limp in her right leg, Satsuki seemed completely unaffected by her wounds.

For the last ten minutes both Ichigo Kurosaki and herself had been fighting the Grand Couturier to what she wished was a standstill. In actuality, it was obvious that Nui was toying around with them. Of course she had tried to take advantage of that lack of seriousness and managed to tear Nui's dress in a few places, but they were always followed by a brutal and painful retaliatory strike from the Grand Couturier. Nui truly was a monster in every sense of the word.

Satsuki flinched in pain as she felt Junketsu begin to test her mental control and willpower. She was reaching the twenty-five minute mark and pretty soon she wouldn't be able to control Junketsu's bloodlust and would be forced to transform back. With an envious look in her eyes, she glanced at Ichigo and noticed he seemed to not be having any problems with Mugetsu's bloodlust. He had been fighting Nui for longer than her and had even sustained several seemingly fatal wounds and yet the loss of blood didn't seem to affect him.

"I've fought with her a couple of times, on my mother's insistence I assure you," Satsuki flicked Bakuzan to the side before grabbing the hilt with both hands, "Not once have I ever injured her."

"She can't be invincible," Ichigo countered and cleaned the blood leaking from the corner of his mouth onto his wrist, "I managed to stab her a few times."

"Yet look at her now and what do you see?" Satsuki pointed out with a slight scowl forming on her face. Satsuki knew Nui could heal from almost any injury in a matter of seconds, the exception being her eye, "It should be obvious that all your efforts have been in vain. Nui Harime is just as she was when this fight began."

"Do you expect me to just give up?" Ichigo argued and tightened his grip on Tournesol, "You better come up with something fast. I don't think Nui is just going to stand around all day and wait for us to attack her."

"That is exactly what she will do," Satsuki brazenly answered. She wasn't used to people speaking back to her like that. Matoi was the sole exception and she was willing to put up with her crass behavior and attitude for the time being. Ichigo Kurosaki, on the other hand, was the only person to have defeated her in combat, which garnered him her respect, "She will wait patiently for us to think of a plan to defeat her. Then, when we think we know how to beat her, she will announce that it was all in vain and feed off our hopeless struggle."

Ichigo didn't take his eyes off Nui, who was still smiling happily as she waited patiently while sitting on her Scissor Blade, "Then what do we do?"

"You can't do anything!" A childish voice announced from between them, "That's the whole point, Ichigo!"

As soon as they noticed her, both Satsuki and Ichigo leapt away from the Grand Couturier, but it appeared that Nui already had her target set in mind. Completely ignoring Ichigo for the moment, she turned towards Satsuki and vanished. For a brief moment, perhaps even several seconds, Satsuki clashed evenly with every one of Nui's strikes but eventually the Grand Couturier managed to overcome Satsuki's exhausted strength. Slamming her head forward, Nui smiled as she heard Satsuki gasp in pain before she spun around and planted her pink boot in Satsuki's stomach, sending the younger Kiryuin flying through the air and crashing back into the ground some distance away.

"Satsuki!"

"Now, now..." Nui turned towards Ichigo. Raising a finger to her lip, she cutely tilted her head and said, "You must be awake, Ichigo, so why don't we take the time to get to know one another?"

In the blink of an eye, Nui disappeared before reappearing in front of Ichigo, her hand extended towards him and a disturbingly happy smile on her face. Eyes widening slowly, Ichigo stepped to the side, just barely avoiding being touched by Nui and swung Tournesol. For a moment he thought he managed to get in another hit, Nui's Scissor Blade was conspicuously absent and he didn't hear the sound of metal striking metal, but when he saw the smile on Nui's face widen, he looked down and saw her hand firmly grabbing his larger wrist.

"Are you going to listen to what I have to say, Ichigo, or do I have to shatter every bone in your wrist first?" Nui's tone became increasingly dark and foreboding as she spoke, a hint of her mental instability leaking through her cheerful façade. Ichigo's continued

reluctance to play by what Nui thought were the rules was beginning to take a toll on her mind. She couldn't understand what she was doing wrong. She was following the rules to the letter that Lady Ragyo had instilled within her from her very first memories and yet nothing she did seemed to be working on Ichigo. Even threatening his friends and families had only increased his resolve to defeat her, which while it made her happy that he was fighting her was increasingly frustrating when he didn't get angry or enraged.

Ichigo didn't say anything in return and for a moment Nui thought he was finally going to listen to her. She was so very interested in hearing about his life and what he did as he grew up. There were seventeen years she needed to make up after all, but when Ichigo crouched and jumped up into the air, her eye blinked in confusion when he pointed his feet at her face and said two words.

"Mugetsu Gufū!"

As Mugetsu transformed into her flight configuration, the twin jets that formed out of Ichigo's feet blasted into Nui's face, causing the Grand Couturier to involuntarily let go of his wrist. Without bothering to see if she was injured, Ichigo spun around in midair and flew towards where he had seen Nui throw Satsuki. Some might call him a coward for fleeing from Nui Harime, but Ichigo knew when to pick his battles. Unlike his fight with Ulquiorra, where he was forced to defeat the espada so that he could save Orihime and his other friends, Nui had no leverage on him. Ichigo was certain that Nui somehow was able to fake the sounds of Shinjiro being tortured just so she could draw him out. How could he be such an idiot? He knew Nui would go after his family in retaliation eventually, but for the moment he was confident he could come up with something to stop her. If not... well, he could always continue to train.

When he felt a pair of heels landing on his back, Ichigo scowled and twisted his head around. Sitting on his back, one hand firmly holding Mugetsu's wing and the other her shoulder, was a bloody and thoroughly exhausted Satsuki.



"Is there a reason you're sitting on me?"

"Hold your tongue," Satsuki chastised between ragged breathes before Junketsu, in a flash of blue stars, transformed back to its normal appearance. Sighing as the pressure of holding back Junketsu's bloodlust vanished, Satsuki pointed towards Honnouji Academy, "Head back to the academy. I do not believe Nui Harime can fly."

Ichigo nodded and flew higher into the air, twin trails of smoke escaping from his feet. As he passed over the wall separating the Slums from the rest of the city, he frowned and asked, "So that was Nui Harime? Damn she was strong."

"Now you see why I was hesitant on letting you go off to fight her," Satsuki reprimanded harshly, though the exhaustion in her voice took most of the bite out of it, "I still wish for you to be my Vice-President, Ichigo."

"What makes you think my answer's changed?"

"If you accept my offer," Satsuki's voice had a hint of defeat in it, which Ichigo found to be completely out of place in the normally implacable teen, "I will guarantee that the Grand Couturier shall not harm any of your friends in Honnouji Academy. Matoi, Mankanshoku and Tsumugiya shall be given complete protection from whatever Nui Harime might try to do to them."

Ichigo was conflicted about what to do, but it was Mugetsu who said, ***"I hate to admit it, Ichigo, but Satsuki Kiryuin makes a good point. Nui Harime completely outclassed us today and it was only because you surprised her with my Gufū form that you managed to escape. Perhaps taking her up on her offer would be the best thing to do."***

"Damn," Ichigo cursed softly as he realized he truly had no options. He hated the concept of working for, or even under, Satsuki but if it

was the only thing he could do to stop someone like Nui from coming after Mako or Ryuko, then he was willing to take that risk.

"Fine, I'll do it," Ichigo felt a bit of bile rise up in his throat but he immediately quashed it. He couldn't afford to be getting airsick at over three hundred feet above the ground, "But if you do anything to threaten my friends, I won't hesitate to stop you."

"You need not worry, Ichigo. I shall do no such thing. You have my word."

Satsuki waited until Ichigo turned away before allowing a small smile to appear on her face. Looking away into the distance where Nui Harime was no doubt frustrated at allowing her 'toys' to get away, Satsuki's mind was already postulating and thinking of plans on how to deal with Ichigo's inclusion in Honnouji Academy. She had no delusions he would be absorbed by her system like Mankanshoku and her family. He was too headstrong and independent to fall into such a trap and if he did, he wouldn't be worthy of her attention. The only question she didn't have an answer to was whether to include him in her plans. For the moment she decided against it. There were too many variables concerning his history and his father's relation to her mother. She would wait and see how things developed before determining whether or not to include Ichigo in anything she did.

For the moment though, Satsuki winced in pain from the effects of wearing Junketsu for nearly her limit, she needed to rest and recuperate. It was an illuminating experience to find that her strength, despite mastering Junketsu and taking pride in her scantily clad appearance, wasn't even close to being able to stand at the level of the Grand Couturier. If she couldn't even lay a finger on Nui Harime, then what chance did she have of taking her mother on? She needed to train and gain strength so when the time for her plan to come to fruition came, she would emerge victorious, but for the moment she would rest.

Tomorrow, after all, was Parent Student Day.

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## **Kamui Tales #11 - The Shy Kamui**

The moon was lazily hovering in the air over Honnouji Academy early in the morning with nary a cloud in the sky. In her bed, sound asleep and completely relaxed, was Satsuki Kiryuin. Unbeknownst to her, since she always slept alone, was the childish grin on her face as she dreamt of defeating her mother and saving the world from the evil space aliens. Also unknown to her was that the glass case containing her supposedly rabid Kamui was empty with the lock seemingly picked from the inside.

Up on the roof of Honnouji Academy and far out of sight from any of Inumuta's or Ragyo's spy cameras, Junketsu sadly stared up at the moon. It couldn't understand why it had to be given to the one person that couldn't hear its words or understand its feelings. Junketsu had been promised to Lady Ragyo's youngest daughter before she was even conceived. It was to be her guardian and be worn to fight against all that would oppose the Kiryuins, but its power was too great. Lady Ragyo had deemed it unstable and useless and sealed it deep beneath Kiryuin Manor, forced to sleep for many years with its dreams plagued by its inability to be worn.

Then Satsuki came and took it out and for just a moment Junketsu thought all would be right, but as soon as it tasted her blood Junketsu knew Satsuki wasn't meant to wear it. Junketsu tried to devour Satsuki, who had the gall to think she could wear it, but to its surprise Satsuki was able to use her willpower and determination to suppress Junketsu's animalistic urges. At least that was what Satsuki thought. In reality, Junketsu was just using Satsuki as a means to find its one true wearer.

Junketsu gazed out over Honnou City, wistfully wondering if its true wearer was someone out there. Which of the sleeping humans was the one meant to wear it and access its full and unbridled power?

Every other Kamui had its destined wearer, but Junketsu was saddened that it still hadn't found the right person for it.

Senketsu might be a knock off, but Junketsu had to admit he was worthy of being a Kamui. His power was about the same as what Junketsu allowed Satsuki to possess and the Kamui was admittedly a little prideful that Satsuki could fight so forcefully at less than full power. That did not, however, mean that Junketsu would ever be willing to work with Satsuki.

Danketsu, on the other hand, made Junketsu contemplate giving its full power to Satsuki if only to wipe the smug grin off that Kamui's face. Junketsu didn't even care to think about whether Danketsu had a face or not, it just hated the angry and smug feeling Danketsu radiated during their break clash. Danketsu was strong, Junketsu was even wary of fighting her and her wearer, but Junketsu was damned if it wasn't going to try.

Lastly, there was Mugetsu, who filled Junketsu with a type of happiness that would have made a lesser Kamui giddy and its Life Fibers stretch in happiness. Mugetsu was a true Kamui through and through and Junketsu wished it could fight by her side once more. The battle against the Grand Couturier was exhilarating and Junketsu wished it could have fights like that more often, but alas, it would be a long time before a fight like that occurred once more.

" **Aw,**" Junketsu's melodious voice echoed through the area as her lapels drooped in shame, ***"I wish I wasn't so shy in front of the other Kamui. I really want to talk to them..."***

# I'm Still in Love with You

*Writing this chapter took a lot out of me, both mentally and physically. It might be because I'm delving into character development and plots not seen in the Kill la Kill anime or perhaps it's because it's entirely original material. I don't know but what's important is that it's done and ready for you all to read. Focusing my efforts on this story (while keeping the quality and length high) is taking a toll on me. Perhaps I'll go back to Rise of the True Death God for a chapter or two to clear my head? Who knows...*

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## Chapter 24 - I'm Still in Love with You

The steady beating sounds of the helicopter's blade cut through the air as it made its way towards Honnou City. Under normal circumstances an aircraft would need to announce its arrival ahead of time as well as submit a flight plan. This particular helicopter, however, was owned and operated exclusively by Revocs, which meant it had the authority to go anywhere at any time as long as it remained within the part of Japan controlled exclusively by the Kiryuin Conglomerate and Revocs.

Relaxing in the confines of the cabin, Ragyo Kiryuin closed her eyes and mused over Parent Student Day. She did not care that it was her daughter's event nor did she care that it was her first time attending. Both of those reasons paled in comparison to the sole motivation behind her attendance - Isshin Shiba.

A spike of anger shot through Ragyo mind as she deliberately refused to call Isshin by the name of that woman who stole him from her, but in the end she was the winner. Masaki was dead, murdered by an unseen assailant, and while Ragyo was upset Isshin had

become depressed afterwards, she was even more upset that he didn't come back to her.

Ragyo trailed her fingers on the hem of her dress and felt it quiver at her touch. Despite creating hundreds of dresses, gown and outfits over the years, this one will always be her favorite. She didn't know why she refused to wear it for so many years, but now that she was being worn by it she couldn't understand her hesitation. This was Isshin's gift to her. She was meant to wear it and it was meant to be worn by her. By threading Life Fibers originating from her body and replacing the dull and boring silk in the dress, Ragyo had made it into something greater and more majestic. Now instead of a normal dress, it was an outfit created to be exclusively worn by her and no one else.

When she heard a familiar humming sound from the seat across from her, Ragyo looked over and watched Nui Harime with amusement. The Grand Couturier had a smile on her face and was busy humming a song she loved and the kicked the seat in time with the lyrics. She was the only child worthy of her attention, Ragyo thought with satisfaction. Unlike Satsuki and her nameless daughter, both of which rejected the Life Fibers she so painstakingly took the time to implant in their bodies, Nui was a complete success. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that Ragyo had forsaken using her own body and had Nui grown in a womb made of Life Fibers and raised with the Original Life Fiber itself. In any case, her little Nui was a perfect Life Fiber Hybrid that would help her serve the Life Fibers completely.

It was such a shame, Ragyo thought with only the barest hint of parental disappointment, that her official daughter was such an abysmal failure. Satsuki might have inherited her looks as a young woman, her mannerisms as well as her vast and wide intellect, but in the end she was but a normal human unworthy of her love. When the time came for her plan to come to fruition, and it would no matter what it took, Satsuki would be devoured by the Life Fibers to create the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet.

There was another, much more important, reason for her favoritism of Nui. If her dear Nui was simply a Life Fiber Hybrid, Ragyo would have no doubt still favored her but not nearly to the extent that she currently did. Nui was powerful and loyal, Ragyo loved that about the Grand Couturier, but every single employee of Revocs was the same.

Ragyo mentally sighed and let her imagination roam over what could have been if Isshin hadn't been stolen by Masaki and married her instead. The love between the two of them would have been godly. It would also have made things so much easier and simpler in the long run. She wouldn't have given birth to two failures before being forced to use the Original Life Fiber as an artificial womb for Nui and her lost sister Amu. Ragyo couldn't wait to meet her long lost daughter. Nui was created as part of a pair. With her twin vanished from her life, Nui's power and strength over Life Fibers was greatly diminished. Perhaps the greatest thing she lost from her failed attempts at producing a worthy heir were the two years she spent conceiving and being pregnant. If she had known that Souichiro's genetic material would have been so worthless, she would have started her experiments to create Nui at least a year earlier.

When the experiments succeeded and Ragyo stood over the artificial wombs holding Nui and Amu, Ragyo had thought she had finally conceived the heirs she had always needed to make sure her plans came to fruition. The only variable she could not account for was just how they would turn out. It was to her eternal amusement that despite dedicating her heart, body and soul to the creation of the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet, Nui's persona and mannerisms were more like her father's than Ragyo's.

"My precious Nui..." Ragyo's voice held a hint of pride, which she never bothered to give to Satsuki, as she addressed the Grand Couturier, "Did you enjoy your vacation at Honnouji? It has been rather quiet at Revocs without your presence to liven things up."

"Uh huh!" Nui beamed happily at the praise and continued to kick her feet against the bottom of her chair. She may have looked happy and

content but she was still a little miffed at Satsuki for interrupting her playtime with Ichigo. Even if Ichigo hadn't started to wake up until the end, Nui had been having a great time and lots of fun playing with him. While he was nowhere near her level of strength, Nui attributed that Ichigo still being asleep. She had sensed his power growing towards the end of the fight and while it was still nowhere near enough to fight her at her full power, it filled Nui with joy. She was finally going to have her cousin to play with fulltime!

"It was a lot of fun!" Nui smiled and stuck a finger on her bottom lip, "It was so annoying that Satsuki so rudely decided to butt in just when Ichigo was starting to wake up. I thought you would have taught her manners, Lady Ragyo."

"Do not waste your time trying to understand how my daughter acts," Ragyo coldly and bluntly told Nui, "Her behavior towards you, while unwarranted, wasn't without precedent. Usually such attitude would require her to explain her actions but this time her crass behavior only serves to further my plans. Satsuki had no idea she was but a pawn to accomplish my true goal in sending you to Honnouji Academy!"

"Yup!" Nui clapped her hands cheerfully, the saccharine tone she had become so well known for carrying just a hint of actual happiness as she spoke, "Waking up the Life Fibers sleeping so snug and soundly in Ichigo's body!"

That brought a psychotic smirk to Ragyo's face while her eyes lit up with unholy pleasure. The awakening of the Life Fibers bound and threaded within Ichigo's young body was the sole reason Ragyo had allowed Nui so much leeway at Honnouji Academy. She was aware that Nui was still enraged about losing her eye to the Sword Scissors and her former husband and Ragyo could not blame her. To lose something as beautiful and precious as her eye to her former husband would have angered her as well. Although, there was one thing Ragyo was curious about. Honnouji Academy's files listed a Ryuko Matoi as a new student. Could Souichiro have fostered another child after faking his first death? Ragyo didn't know and,



quite frankly, she didn't care in the slightest. She had no issue with Nui wanting to take her anger out on Souichiro's daughter for what he did to her as long as she remembered what she was at Honnouji Academy for.

Ragyo mused happily as she felt her dress beginning to fully awaken and telepathically begin to transmit its emotions. It always took so long for a new Life Fiber being to fully become aware after its Life Fibers were stitched and woven together and usually that only took a few hours at the most for her normal outfits, but this dress was special. She put extra attention into making it as perfect and flamboyant as possible.

"Tell me, Nui," Ragyo ran her fingers down one sleeve and shuddered at the feeling of being worn by her dress, "How was Ichigo's power?"

If it was possible, the smile on Nui's face grew even wider as she began describing everything she could about him, "He was really strong and fast. He was able to play with me a little even when I took the fight seriously. The best thing is that he was stronger than Satsuki! She couldn't even keep up with me in that stolen Kamui but Ichigo; he could avoid my attacks and managed to stab me twice! It was simply amazing!"

"Although..." Nui's voice trailed off as she thought back over something important. Rolling her tongue in her mouth, her eye widened as she remembered what she wanted to say, "It was really weird that Ichigo had no idea what I was talking about. It was almost as if he didn't know he was just like me! Our hearts beat as one, you know. It was quite rude and mean of him to say such awful lies."

"You can blame Isshin for that," Ragyo mused unconcerned. Leave it to Isshin to keep his son in the dark about who he truly was until it was too late. He was soon going to learn the error of trying to keep Ichigo away from her. Seeing the rare contemplative look on Nui's face, Ragyo rested her cheek against her hand and chuckled, "I'm sure you know better than anyone just how smart Isshin can be, but

his naivety shall be the death of him. Isshin probably thought he could give Ichigo a life as nothing more than a normal human. He should have known better than to keep someone as fascinating as Ichigo away from me. Oh, my dear Isshin, it is such a shame that your naivety is one of your endearing traits."

"Pfft!" Nui stuck her tongue out and huffed, "It's not like that old goat can do anything now. All that's left for him to do is to die!"

Nui disliked Isshin for a very simple reason - he was the first person to ever make her feel fear.

Several years ago, before she was the Grand Couturier of Revocs and was still training under Ragyo, Nui had wondered about the man. When Lady Ragyo had told her all about Isshin and how he broke her heart to marry another woman, Nui had come up with at the time sounded like a phenomenally good idea. She would go to Karakura Town and show Isshin the error of his ways. With Masaki Kurosaki already dead, Nui didn't have an easy target and since Ragyo seemed to be interested in Ichigo, she couldn't go after him as well. That left her with only two targets...

### *Flashback - Five Years Ago*

*An eleven year old Nui Harime delicately adjusted her pink sundress as she stood on top of the train speeding towards Karakura Town. Her sapphire eyes were sparkling in the early afternoon sun and her twin pigtails, which only reached down to her elbows, blew happily in the harsh wind without losing form. Raising a hand to her forehead as she tilted her head to avoid an obstacle, Nui couldn't help but admit that Karakura Town was quite beautiful compared to most of Japan. Instead of the dark and dreary landscape populated by people who would one day become nothing more than food for the Life Fibers, Karakura Town seemed vibrant and lively. It was a sharp contrast to what she had been expecting.*

*" So this is where Isshin Kurosaki is hiding?" Nui wondered as she pursed her lips. Karakura Town really was a nice place but now that*

*she was in the city, she had to be super careful not to get caught. Lady Ragyo had expressively forbidden her, a rarity for the young Nui, from coming here. She wouldn't say why, which only made her even more curious, but Nui was confident that if her plan worked and Isshin and the Director got back together, she would be forgiven in a snap.*

*" Well, I wouldn't pick the neighborhood but it really is a nice place!" Nui gently pushed off the roof of the train and soared through the air. Pulling a pink parasol out of her dress that Lady Ragyo had just given to her as a gift, Nui opened it up and slowly floated downwards, landing on a roof some distance away from the train. Whistling happily as she skipped to the edge, Nui looked childishly at Karakura Town which stretched for miles all around her, "Oh where, oh where could Mr. Kurosaki be?"*

*There was a strange feeling in the air coming from the south and Nui's smile grew larger. That had to be where Mr. Kurosaki was living. Stepping off the roof, Nui fell through the air with her feet dragging against the side of the building before she pushed forward and soared through the air. Skidding to a stop on another roof, she was just about to continue her journey when she heard a voice behind her.*

*" Now that's something you don't see every day."*

*Nui flinched in shock for the first time in her life as someone was actually able to sneak up on her. That should have been impossible. She wasn't some lowly human who couldn't sense danger until it was too late. She was a Life Fiber Hybrid and superior to the pigs in clothing. Lady Ragyo said so and she wouldn't lie to Nui. Turning around, Nui was confronted by a man wearing a white doctor's coat over a pair of beige pants and a tacky Hawaiian shirt. As she took in the weird man's appearance, Nui found it strange that she couldn't sense any Life Fibers in his clothing. While Revocs may only control 45% of the world's apparel market, there should have been some Life Fibers within his clothes.*

*" Oh?" Nui folded her arms behind her back and leaned forward, "And who might you be?"*

*" I'm just the neighborhood watch," the man replied and, although she hated to admit it, his stare was starting to unnerve Nui. She didn't know why, but something about it just made her feel uneasy, "I saw a girl jumping from rooftop to rooftop and knew I had to investigate."*

*" Really?" Nui composed herself and fell back into her normal saccharine behavior. It was interesting that she felt nervous but she had things to do after all! Tapping a finger against her cheek, she sighed and asked, "I'm looking for someone. His name is Isshin Kurosaki. Hey... you're Mr. Kurosaki, aren't you? It's really great that I finally found you!"*

*Isshin didn't need to ask to know who the girl in front of him was. He had known almost from her first step inside Karakura Town. The only question he had, and it was bothering him tremendously, was why Ragyo would send her protégé when she knew full well what would happen. There was a very good reason Ragyo left Karakura Town and its residents alone. She had to be aware that Nui Harime was not even close to her, and his, level of strength. Unless Nui didn't tell Ragyo she was coming here.*

*" Hmm..." Isshin adopted a look of puzzlement as he stared at Nui. She was quite strong for her age, which was probably due in no small part to her origins as well as Ragyo's upbringing and training, "You look eerily familiar. Weren't you in that show about the kid with his secret lab or something? Yuzu and Karin are really big fans of that show. It's what they watch every Saturday morning, after all."*

*" That's really interesting," Nui clapped her hands together excitedly. It was awesome that Mr. Kurosaki's personality was a lot like hers. She just knew that when she was done here, he would be the perfect match for Lady Ragyo, not like that other man that the Director refused to talk about. Batting her eyes cutely, she twirled around once and laughed, "You're really nice, but I'm here on business. It's*

*my first time out of Revocs, after all, and I want to have a perfect record!"*

*Isshin's danger senses were going off, but he could tell that Nui wasn't interested in attacking him. His suspicions were verified when Nui smiled, a hint of suppressed psychosis evident, and said, "If you'll excuse me, I need to go take care of your two daughters. They are really dragging you down and keeping you from moving on with your life. I promise I'll make it quick for them! Good bye for now, Mr. Kurosaki!"*

*Nui didn't know what happened next. One second she was happily walking away from Isshin, a spring in her step as she imagined what the future would bring and the next she was being held aloft in the air with Isshin's hand firmly grasping her neck.*

*"Guh!"*

*The toes of Nui's boots scrapped the roof as Isshin's grip on her neck tightened. Fumbling with all her strength to break his wrist and arm to free herself, Nui's heart froze when she found that all her strength was useless. For all her strength and power, she was but a child compared to the man currently holding her life hostage. Grasping feebly as black spots began appearing in the corners of her vision, Nui stared into Isshin's eyes and saw that he could, and would, kill her if she pushed him too far.*

*"Let me give you some advice," Isshin warned as he held the girl that just admitted she was going to kill his daughters. Tightening his grip slightly so that Nui would know he was serious, he pulled her in closer as he spoke, "You come anywhere near my family and I won't let you off with just a warning."*

*Without hesitation, Isshin let go of Nui's neck and she haphazardly dropped to the roof in an undignified heap. Quickly regaining her bearings, she turned and fled from Isshin back towards the comfort and safety of Revocs headquarters and Lady Ragyo. As Nui reached the outskirts of Karakura Town and hitched a ride on top of a truck,*

*she couldn't quell the fearful pounding of her heart in her chest nor could she stop the cold sweat breaking out throughout her body. She could not admit to herself that Isshin Kurosaki could have killed her without too much effort.*

*"Next time..." Nui mumbled as a manic grin stretched across her face, "... Next time I'll show Mr. Kurosaki that he can't make me feel scared again. Oh, he'll be sorry..."*

*End Flashback*

"You know better than to underestimate that man," Ragyo scolded gently while running a finger gently down Nui's cheek, "Do you wish for a repeat of your first encounter?"

Nui's eye narrowed dangerously and for a moment it appeared as if her teeth shifted into pointed daggers. After taking a moment to compose her emotions and set her mind in order, Nui's attitude settled down as she put her frustration about Isshin Kurosaki on the backburner, "Don't worry Director! I know better than going after the old goat head on. There's more than one way to skin a cat, after all. I just have to be super careful from now on."

"Hmm... indeed you do," Ragyo mused over what she would need to do once she arrived at Honnouji. Attempting to do anything with Isshin keeping a careful eye on her would be the equivalent of giving herself away. Isshin was too smart for any of her plans and Ragyo smiled at the fact that Isshin thought along similar lines as herself. If only he didn't have his morals holding him back, everything would be perfect.

"I need you to behave once we arrive," Ragyo's melodic voice said, causing Nui to actually look at the Kiryuin matriarch in stunned surprise. The Director of Revocs never gave her direct orders concerning her actions as long as she kept her playing within certain limits. Ragyo, sensing the Grand Couturier's discomfort, stroked Nui's hair, "Isshin won't be fooled as easily as his son was and even Ichigo won't be tricked a second time. If you were to try anything, I'm

certain he would come down on you like a force of nature. Besides..." Ragyo's grin became manic as she thought about her other goal at Honnouji, "I'm sure you're just dying to reunite with your dear sister, Amu..."

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"I can't believe you would do something so stupid!"

Ryuko slammed the door closed and banged her fist against the frame. Gritting her teeth and turning around, she seethed at Ichigo and asked, "What the hell were you thinking?"

Ichigo didn't say anything as Ryuko bombarded him with accusatory questions. He knew something like this would happen the second he agreed to become Satsuki's Vice President. He hated the idea that he would be working for the same person that tried to kill Ryuko and him several times over the past few weeks but he had no choice in the matter. While Satsuki was ambitious and driven to the point of not letting morals get in the way of her goals, she was nothing like Nui Harime. That girl was insane and, what was worse, completely fascinated with him. He didn't know why she kept calling him her cousin, but Ichigo knew it couldn't be anything good. That, compounded with her immense strength and speed, made her a highly dangerous enemy.

Something else that bothered him was the person that pulled her strings. Ichigo wasn't a stupid person by any stretch of the mind. Nui Harime may have been smart enough to plan out a trap for him, but that was only because she wanted to speak to him. He wasn't naïve enough to believe that she would do anything if she wasn't ordered to do so. That meant that someone else had ordered her not only to attack Kisuke but also kill Ryuko's dad and nearly kill her with a bomb afterwards.

" *Satsuki called her the Grand Couturier,*" Ichigo thought solemnly. Ryuko was convinced that Satsuki Kiryuin was the person ordering Nui around but after yesterday's fight, Ichigo wasn't so sure. Satsuki didn't seem that keen on seeing Nui in Honnou City and Nui certainly didn't hold back her punches in the fight. If anything she fought Satsuki harder than she fought him, *"That means she's working for someone, but who could control someone that can fight Satsuki and myself when we were wearing our Kamui's without any issue?"*

"Look, it's really complicated," Ichigo muttered.

"It's complicated?" Ryuko stormed over and violently grabbed Mugetsu's front. Ignoring his Kamui's protests at her rough treatment, Ryuko pulled Ichigo down to eye level and asked, "How you could even think to work for that caterpillar-eyebrow bitch? You know what she's done to me! She's the one that sent Nui Harime after my dad. He's dead because of Satsuki Kiryuin and you chose to work for her? How could you do something like this Ichigo?"

Ichigo thought back to his teaming up with Satsuki to fight Nui Harime. That was something he hadn't thought would ever happen in his lifetime. Nui's power was absolutely monstrous in scope and Ichigo was completely certain he would not have been able to beat her even if he had the element of surprise. How could he overcome someone that could regenerate from wounds the moment Tournesol is removed? It was even faster than Aizen's was right before he was finally sealed away, yet something was bothering him. If Nui could heal from anything, than why was one of her eyes missing and covered by an eye patch?

"You think I would want to work for her?" Ichigo asked sarcastically as he stared down Ryuko, "I would tell her to stick her stupid job offer where the sun doesn't shine if I had the option, but I don't."

Ryuko narrowed one eye and leaned forward, "What do you mean you don't? Is that bitch blackmailing you or something?"



"Not exactly?" Ichigo admitted and stood back up to his full height, "I accepted her offer to protect you."

"Protect me?" Ryuko's blue eyes stared intently at Ichigo before she scoffed and pushed him away. Walking over to the window and looking outside, she kicked the wall and huffed angrily, "I'm not some damn damsel in distress! I can take care of myself more than most people. I'm grateful you saved me from Satsuki and that Mohawk bastard, but I can take care of myself. You should know that by now."

Ichigo thought back to what Satsuki told him after they managed to escape from Nui Harime. After landing at Honnouji Academy and Satsuki dismounted off his back with nary a thank you, she turned around and ordered him that his first task as Vice President of Honnouji Academy was to keep what happened secret. If the knowledge Nui Harime was in Honnou City leaked out, there is no telling what the Grand Couturier would do in retaliation to keep her presence a secret. Nui already had an impressive body count in the hundreds and a few dozen more lives wouldn't faze her at all.

*" Screw her pride."*

The only reason Ichigo could think Satsuki would want him to keep his mouth shut is to keep her pride and ego from taking a massive hit. Satsuki was the undisputed ruler of Honnouji Academy as well as Honnou City. If it came out that she had lost, badly, to someone like Nui Harime it would cause people to doubt her authority. Ichigo knew for a fact Nui Harime was a dangerous psychopath, but he didn't think she would go on a killing spree just because people knew she was here. From his limited interactions with her, Ichigo came to the conclusion that she was much like a child and relished in the attention she received. If anything, she would love it if everybody knew she was in Honnou City.

"Right before your fight I got a call..." Ichigo leaned against the wall and rubbed the back of his neck, "It was Nui Harime."

"What?" Ryuko twisted around, her eyes wide and her mouth slightly agape in shock, "How did she even know your number?"

"I don't know," Ichigo admitted softly. There were things that Nui said to him that he couldn't put out of mind. As much as he wanted to think she was messing with him, he couldn't get rid of the notion that she was telling the truth. His healing from what should have been fatal wounds attested to that. There was no reason that he, for all intents and purposes a normal human, could have healed from a stab through the chest and shoulder. It didn't make any sense but Ichigo was willing to put thinking about it off for the moment to focus on more important things, "But she had Shinjiro hostage. I even heard his screams of pain."

Ryuko's eyes widened at Ichigo's mentioning of Shinjiro and quickly saw that he had no idea what happened. She thought back to the last time she saw Shinjiro and realize it had been over four days ago. The kid had been going on and on about discovering a lead concerning one of Revocs's top officials visiting Honnou City for some secret purpose. He had asked her to come with him to investigate but with everything going on involving the Fight Club, Ryuko had politely declined. Knowing what happened to him sent her heart plummeting and a feeling of guilt coursing through her soul, "Why didn't you ask me for help? I would have gladly gone to try and save Shinjiro if you had just asked me."

"That little..." Ichigo cut himself off before he managed to say several choice words that would no doubt somehow summon his dad to reprimand him, "Nui gave me only thirty minutes to hunt her down before she promised to kill Shinjiro. I didn't have many choices so I asked Satsuki for help since, you know, she's the Student Council President. I thought she would be more than willing to help me save one of her students. You know what she said to me? She said she would only help if I became her Vice President."

Ryuko bit her lip as she debated what she was going to say, "So you took the offer to try and save Shinjiro, didn't you?"

"Of course not," Ichigo angrily spat. There was no way he was going to give into blackmail, even if it would help save a friend, "I wasn't going to surrender to Satsuki so I went off on my own to rescue Shinjiro. I tracked Nui Harime down to the power station in the Slums and fought her for a bit. I thought I won but when I went to save Shinjiro I saw it was a trap. She never had him to begin with."

"Ichigo..." The sad tone in Ryuko's voice surprised Ichigo. Refusing to look him in the eye, Ryuko decided to just say what was on her mind, "There's something you need to know. Shinjiro's dead."

Ichigo was stunned by what he heard. As a bead of sweat dripped down his face, he could only utter a single word, "What?"

"It was this morning," Ryuko sadly said as she ran a hand through her hair, her fingers momentarily pausing on the permanent red highlight. She hadn't expected Mako's family to have to move back to the Slums after she quit the Fight Club, but it seemed all was not the same. For some reason, Satsuki Kiryuin continued to give the Mankanshokus a weekly stipend of nearly a thousand dollars under the pretense of trying to make things go away. Ryuko would have complained to anyone who would listen, but that money would be what Mako's family needed to afford food, medicine and other necessities. As much as it pained her to admit it, she couldn't take it away from them, not after what her last mistake accomplished.

"Mako and I saw an entire street blocked off with some of Satsuki's goons patrolling back and forth," Ryuko didn't want to talk about how she first knew something was wrong. She especially didn't want to say how Senketsu informed her of the subtle scent of a massive amount of blood in the air, which could only mean one thing, "That Gamagori bastard was walking around, ordering the other students to various parts of the street and generally keeping everyone away. At first I thought it was some stupid thing Satsuki thought up to annoy me for bringing Mako back to her senses and screwing up her plans but the look on Gamagori's face was really something, Ichigo."

When Ryuko confronted Gamagori about what was going on, instead of the Disciplinary Committee Chair immediately yelling something about 'Council business' and ordering her to leave, he very stoically told her to continue on her way to Honnouji Academy and to leave the investigation to him. Ryuko, of course, wasn't about to just leave and demanded to know what the hell was going on. Immediately Gamagori had stepped forward, towering over her in the process, and demanded that she make her way to class before she was expelled. Mako, getting antsy about being tardy, ran away and told Ryuko she was going to meet up with Ururu. After glaring at Gamagori for another few seconds Ryuko had just about given up and was about to do the same when her terrible luck finally made itself known.

Two One-Star members of the Medical Club appeared out of one of the cordoned off buildings. Gamagori, noticing them, turned and pointed off to the side, away from the busy street and curious onlookers. The two students nodded and walked back into the building before wheeling out a gurney with a body covered up by a large white sheet. That was not what was causing Ryuko to begin hyperventilating. The cause of her panic and shock was the bloody notepad and shattered pair of glasses being carried out by a third student.

Immediately knowing who was under the sheet, Ryuko had tried to rush forward only for Gamagori to stop her. Ryuko had tried to argue but the larger teen had said that it was best that she not see her friend's body. With clearly forced stoicism and a steady face, Gamagori told her to try and remember how Shinjiro looked. Still stunned by the revelation, Ryuko had asked Gamagori what happened to Shinjiro. Gamagori hadn't answered for almost half a minute and just when Ryuko thought she wouldn't get an answer, the Three-Star student said one sentence that Ryuko wouldn't understand until her confrontation with Ichigo later that morning.

*" A monster found him."*

"Shinjiro wasn't just killed Ichigo!" Ryuko's voice rose until she was nearly screaming in anger. Taking a moment to calm down, remembering what Senketsu said about her blood boiling, she added, "He was tortured! Someone tortured him for hours before finally deciding to kill him!"

**" I didn't want to tell Ryuko, Ichigo,"** Senketsu's voice was full of regret at giving his wearer news he didn't want to share. His one eye closing in sorrow, Senketsu continued, **"But as a Kamui, I have a heightened sense of everything blood related. Even if I was not able to actually see the scene of Ryuko's friends' death, I could sense the blood. Most of it was dried, but different parts dried at different times. The oldest and newest blood scents were nearly three hours apart but they all originated some time yesterday afternoon."**

**" Ichigo..."** Mugetsu worriedly looked up at her wearer. To his credit, Ichigo was taking what happened to Shinjiro a lot better than Mugetsu thought he would. She had expected him to get angry or something, but he just stared at the floor with his brow furrowed.

Ichigo, on the other hand, wasn't paying much attention. The second Ryuko said Shinjiro was tortured, he had gone back and tried to think of a reason why Nui would go ahead and kill him. Nui promised she would let Shinjiro go if he came and talked to her. While he wasn't naïve enough to believe Nui was telling the truth, Ichigo couldn't think of a reason why she would lie to him. She had more to gain out of keeping her word, and bolstering his trust of her, than killing Shinjiro and making him her enemy. Something wasn't adding up and Ichigo couldn't help but think that it all involved what happened yesterday.

"I'm sorry," he apologized when he noticed Ryuko staring at him, "I've just been thinking about what happened to Shinjiro. Everything points to Nui Harime but it just doesn't make any sense."

"What doesn't make sense?" Ryuko asked angrily, "That a psychotic woman tortured and killed our friend for the hell of it or that it even

happened?"

Ichigo sat down and propped his cheek against a fist. After a moment he said, "Nui wanted to speak to me pretty badly. She seemed to be fixated on me and kept calling me her cousin. If she's that interested in me, why would she go and kill Shinjiro after promising to let him go if I came to her? She may be nuts, but wouldn't it work in her best interest to keep Shinjiro alive, at least until I talked to her?"

" ***Ichigo...***" Mugetsu looked at her wearer with righteous annoyance in her eyes, ***"You're trying to give reason to insanity. I was there yesterday too, remember? I don't think Nui Harime cares about anything other besides you. She thought stabbing you was playing around and tried to kill you when you somehow disappointed her! Trying to add logic to her actions is a pointless endeavor."***

"I suppose you have a point, Mugetsu," Ichigo admitted, "But that leaves the question of how to deal with Nui Harime."

"I say we kick her ass!" Ryuko offered enthusiastically while leaning forward on one raised knee.

"What do you think I tried to do yesterday?" Ichigo sarcastically asked, "I stabbed her through the chest twice and she got back up good as new not two seconds later! Just how are you going to fight someone like that?"

"I... but... damn it, I don't know!" Ryuko pouted and folded her arms, "But I'll think of something eventually. She has to have a weakness!"

" ***You mean besides her insane fascination with Ichigo?***" Mugetsu added unhelpfully.

"Oh shut up," Ichigo said and gently slapped one of Mugetsu's eyes, causing said Kamui to whimper like a hurt puppy. Ignoring his Kamui's petty cry for attention, Ichigo focused back on the matter at

hand - dealing with Nui Harime. His position as Satsuki's Vice President wouldn't be official until the ceremony tonight during Parent Student Day. That gave him some time to formulate a plan on how to deal with not only her demands that he obey her every command but making sure she kept her promise of keeping Ryuko, Mako and Ururu safe from Nui. One of his friends was already dead, most likely at the Grand Couturier's hands, and he didn't want another to go.

*" I'm sure Nui couldn't take down Ururu even if she tried. That girl is just too damn strong for even Nui,"* Ichigo thought about Nui fighting Ururu and found the concept strangely disturbing. Shaking his head to clear his mind, he continued thinking, *"Ryuko and Mako are always together, so they should be safe for the most part. The only problem is Nui's ability to get into places without even trying. Could she get past any security Satsuki sets up? Damn, I'm going to need to think about this some - "*

Ichigo was brought back to reality as a dull thumping noise came from in the ceiling. He and Ryuko looked up at the ceiling as a series of smaller thumps echoed every second or two while approaching them. Subtly bringing out Tournesol while Ryuko took out her red Scissor Blade, the two of them stepped back as the thuds approached the vent directly over their heads. Carefully stepping forward, Ichigo was not prepared for the vent exploding and a lion plushie to rocket into his face hard enough to topple him backwards.

"Ichigo!" Kon said with tears freely flowing from his eyes, "I can't believe I'm saying this but it's so good to see you again!"

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"Please!" Mako whined eagerly as she tried to grab the plastic wrapped package Ururu was holding tightly against her chest, "Just let me have a quick peek!"

Ururu deftly stepped to the side as Mako flew through the air, her fingers just barely able to touch the plastic in her arms, before she hit the floor face first and skidded to a stop. Slightly worried about whether or not Mako was injured, Ururu walked over and began poking her in the shoulder just like Jinta taught her to do. If Mako was actually hurt, she didn't want to make things worse.

"Um... Mako?" Ururu knelt down next to her friend and poked Mako's shoulder a few more times just for good measure, only getting a mutter of something in return. Mako was conscious, so that was a good sign, "Are you alright Mako?"

In a surprising burst of speed, Mako leapt back up and grabbed the package out of a shocked Ururu's hands. Holding the package above her head with both hands, Mako let out a triumphant shout of victory, ignorant of the stares she was receiving from her fellow students, "The Mako Mankanshoku Feign Death ability worked like a charm! It's the perfect ability for getting out of things you don't want to do, after all!"

Mako stared at the plastic wrapping in her arms with barely suppressed glee and wonder. She couldn't want to see what was in it. With anticipation building in her heart, she let out a giggle as she decided to find out what was in it the old fashioned way. Reaching out with one clawed hand, her fingernails ready to savagely tear through the protective plastic covering, Mako was confused when she suddenly found her arms weighing a lot less.

"Huh?"

Mako looked at her now empty hands as the notion that the package was gone finally reached her mind. Realizing it was gone, Mako first looked at the floor under the belief that she merely dropped it. When she didn't see it on the ground she then looked up at the ceiling, then all around the hallway before finally glancing over at Ururu. To her amazement Mako saw the package, still as pristine and vacuum sealed as ever, firmly tucked under Ururu's arm.



"That was amazing!" Mako tucked her fists under her chin as she leaned forward close to Ururu, "Was that magic? How did you do that? Can you teach me to do that?"

Ururu visibly wilted under Mako's intense questioning. Emotionally shrinking back into herself, she wished her friend would stop asking her questions that made her uncomfortable. While she was not nearly as introverted and shy as well she first transferred to Honnouji Academy, whenever Ururu was placed under a lot of pressure or stress she tended to regress back to her shy and withdrawn personality. Tucking the package under one arm while holding her fist in front of her mouth, Ururu's eyes drooped as she asked, "It's not like it's any different than yours. Can't you wait until tonight to see it?"

Mako stared intently at Ururu with her cheeks puffed out and a determined look in her eyes. Pounded her fist against her chest, Mako threw her arms outwards as she answered, "It's not fair! You got to see what I'm going to wear to the Parent Student Day ceremony! It goes against every single friend rule I know to not share outfits and beauty tips with your friends. Even Ryuko, if she were here, would agree with me. I super double triple promise not to tell anyone what it looks like!"

"But..." Ururu briefly looked at Mako's eyes, "... you're the one that showed me the dress, Mako. I didn't ask to see it."

Just a short while ago Ururu had been standing in line alongside Mako to receive her One-Star Ceremonial Dress Goku Uniform along with every other student of Honnouji Academy. It was odd that Mako was a No-Star again and yet Satsuki Kiryuin was willing to give her a One-Star uniform, even if it was just for a single night. As she stood in line, faintly listening to Mako's tirade about how awesome and cute her dress is going to be, Ururu watched student after student emerge from the fitting rooms with the exact same dress tucked under their arms.

When it came to be Mako's turn, Ururu stood in line patiently while expecting nothing out of the ordinary to happen. She certainly didn't expect Mako to come bounding out of the room holding her dress and proclaiming to anyone within earshot that the dress shrunk down to fit all her 'womanly curves' just right. Ururu had no idea what Mako meant by that but she knew she was about to find out.

Satsuki ordered every student to try on the Goku Uniform before taking it. The reasoning was that even if the Goku Uniforms were able to shrink and conform to the wearer's body with ease, there could be flawed or torn models that would not be appropriate for the Parent Student Day event. Iori Shiro, the president of the Sewing Club and overseer of the Goku Uniform distribution, was very prideful of his currently zero percent failure rate of the dresses and suits. That pride would be inexplicably and accidentally shattered when it came time for Ururu to try on her dress.

It wasn't like Ururu wanted to disappoint him. When it was her turn she followed their directions to the letter. She took the Goku Uniform dress, five sizes too big for her, and was told to go into one of the fitting rooms and put on the dress. The Life Fibers in the dress will do the rest and shrink the garment down until it was her exact size. Without a single complaint or word Ururu did as she was told. Relieved that she was changing where nobody could see her, she put on the dress and waited, first for only a few seconds and finally a minute, for the dress to do whatever it was supposed to do. When nothing happened, she shyly stuck her head out of the changing room and told the nearest One-Star member of the Sewing Club that the dress was broken.

To say Iori was simply upset would be like saying Ragyo Kiryuin only had some money.

The president of the Sewing Club flew into a clothing-induced rage as he barged into Ururu's dressing room, nearly frightening the girl into punching him, before whipping out sewing and tailoring tools from his lab coat and taking measurements of every single inch of the Goku Uniform. After poking and prodding Ururu and her dress for

more than a minute, Iori stepped back with a frustrated look and demanded to know how a defective model got mixed up with the working ones. Various excuses were handed out before Iori told them to just shut it and get Ururu a working uniform. Apologizing to Ururu for the hold up, Iori handed her a second Goku Uniform and told her to try this one on. With a smile at the help, Ururu turned around and proceeded to do just that, confident that everything was sorted out.

Ururu didn't expect the same thing to happen to the second, third and fourth Goku Uniforms she tried on.

It took nearly half an hour and a total of five Goku Uniforms before Iori gave up and simply decided to create a dress for her from scratch without using expensive life fibers. Using all the prodigious sewing and tailoring skills that he possessed, Iori managed to quickly and perfectly create a dress identical to the Goku Uniforms that fit Ururu perfectly. Happy that she finally had a dress all to her own, Ururu was about to leave and catch up to Mako when Iori stopped her and made her swear to tell no one what happened. If anyone, especially Lady Satsuki, found out about this then his reputation as a tailor would be forever ruined.

Skipping down the hall ahead of Ururu, Mako turned and asked, "You were in there for a while Ururu. Did you put your uniform on upside-down like I did?"

"Uh..." Ururu placed a finger on her lip as she thought about the question before shaking her head, "No."

Mako tilted her head and looked off to the side. It had taken her nearly ten minutes to get her Goku Uniform for that very reason. What could Ururu have done to triple that time? With questions swirling around her head, bumping into one another and overall giving Mako a headache, she shook her head and declared passionately to a stoic Ururu, "That dress has to be super special or something! Perhaps It's like Senketsu or Mugetsu? Does it have eyes? I bet it does! Let me see!"

Ururu held the package above her head and just out of reach of Mako's grasping fingers, "But... it's just a dress Mako. It's nothing special."

Grunting in effort as she tried to retrieve the mysterious dress, Mako was just about to move on to drastic measures when a very familiar bell rang through the atmosphere. Freezing in mid-jump, much to Ururu's wonder and puzzlement, Mako stared off into the distance with stars in her eyes and began salivating, "I completely forgot. Since today is Parent Student Day, Lady Satsuki ordered in special catering for all the students. That is why Mako Mankanshoku did not bring her lunch today! It was all in order to make room for all the delicious and tasty, but most importantly free, food!"

Ururu watched Mako race off and shove students out of her way with a smile on her face. It was nice to have the old Mako back. She was really glad that Ryuko had given it her all to make Mako come back to her senses. There was one problem she couldn't understand. When she thought Ryuko was... dead... and she almost snapped she thought she heard a voice speaking to her in her mind. It didn't sound like anyone she knew or heard before, but Ururu couldn't shake the feeling that it sounded intimately familiar.

"Hmm..." Ururu slowly began walking down the hallway as she pondered what she was going to do. Mako would be at lunch for a while. The last time Satsuki Kiryuin had done something like this, Mako had nearly eaten the entire catering company out of business. Gamagori was probably down there waiting for Mako to show up just so he can stop her before she reached that point. Mr. Kurosaki was around somewhere but he was probably off doing something and wouldn't want to be bothered by her for the moment.

"I should go find Ichigo," Ururu paused before sadly adding, "But Ryuko was really angry with him about something. Maybe I shouldn't bother them."

She walked down the hall, conflicted about where she should go, when she heard the sound of whirring blades in the distance.

Turning towards the windows overlooking the Honnouji Academy courtyard, Ururu watched as a helicopter emblazoned with the Revocs logo circled around overhead before turning and landing somewhere on the roof. Although she could no longer see the helicopter, Ururu did not look away. For some reason she felt a sense of familiarity coming from the helicopter and she could not figure out why. Something within her was telling her to go check it out while a larger part was warning her about getting involved in things that didn't concern her.

"Good afternoon Ururu!"

Ururu turned around and relaxed when she saw Isshin Kurosaki walking towards her. The elder Kurosaki had a large goofy smile on his face and was waving enthusiastically at her. Coming to a stop right in front of her, Isshin propped his hands on his hips and chuckled, "This place is so big that I got lost three times in the last hour. You won't believe the things I found. Did you know that there's a hidden room in the library where the Biology Club tries to reanimate the dead? I didn't but now I do!"

"Hello Mr. Kurosaki," Ururu was glad to see Ichigo's dad even if her happiness wasn't apparent on her face. Being around Mr. Kurosaki always made her feel better for some reason, "I was just looking outside at something."

"Really?" Isshin pressed his face up against the window and looked around for anything interesting but the only things he could see were various students milling about and an irate Gamagori and Sanageyama chasing after Mako as she heaped food onto her extra-large plate. Isshin didn't know anyone that had an appetite like Mako except for Yoruichi but even she might not stand up to Mako's voracious eating habits, "I don't see anything extra weird. What does it look like?"

Ururu shook her head and pointed to the roof, "It was a helicopter... a big one."

"A helicopter you say?" Isshin had a pretty good idea who Ururu was talking about. Scratch that. He knew exactly who she was talking about. After more than twenty years, Isshin knew better than almost anyone on how to effectively deal with someone like Ragyo Kiryuin. He had to give credit where it was due. That woman could turn an encounter in her favor so fast that it was a shock he hadn't been tricked into marrying her. For that, Isshin thanked Masaki's feminine wiles and sheer determination to not lose him to Ragyo. Scratching his chin while deep in thought, Isshin came up with how best to counter and negate whatever Ragyo was planning to do.

"I have a great idea!" He said excitedly as he ruffled Ururu's hair, "Let's go check it out! Only really important people have helicopters. Whoever is riding on it must be really rich and famous!"

Ururu hid her apprehension as she asked, "But won't Satsuki be mad at you?"

"Nah!" Isshin waved off Ururu's worry. Satsuki wasn't the person he was worried about. If Ragyo was here, then Nui Harime wouldn't be too far behind. That girl's fascination with his son was unhealthy, but what else can one expect from Ragyo's favorite employee? Scoffing once more, Isshin began walking away while motioning for Ururu to follow him, "I'm an adult and a grown man to boot! There is nothing Satsuki can say or do to me that I haven't already done to myself."

"Ok," If Mr. Kurosaki was going to go to the helicopter than Ururu wasn't as worried. Mr. Urahara had told her all about his time as a shinigami captain, "What about Ichigo?"

"Ichigo?" Isshin laughed, "He'll be fine. I sent Kon to keep an eye on him. What could possibly go wrong?"

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"Get back here so I can kill you, you damn perverted stuffed animal!"

The students of Honnouji Academy, some of which were carrying plates of half-finished meals, turned around as the sounds grew louder and louder. Before they could understand what was happening, they watched a small lion plush skid out of an adjacent hallway before proceeding to run towards them faster than most of them could run. They watched the plushie run past them with a complete look of terror in its face, confusion evident in their expressions, before Ryuko Matoi blew by and knocked them to the ground.

"Stop running already!" Ryuko brandished her red Scissor Blade menacingly at Kon, who turned his head around only to scream and run faster. She couldn't understand how the hell the damn plushie was not only alive but running faster than her. She would have transformed Senketsu, but that would be overkill. She was going to take care of this problem personally.

"It was just a damn compliment!" Kon complained back as he turned the corner, stepping several times on his left foot, before sprinting away. Just when he thought he outran Ryuko, Kon was flabbergasted when Ryuko skidded around the corner after him and almost managed to slice him with her Scissor Blade. Jumping over the Life Fiber weapon, Kon willed his short plushie legs to go faster as he shouted, "What the heck is wrong with you anyway? Don't you know a compliment when you hear one? All I said was that your schoolgirl uniform really made your chest stand out. Why are you so upset?"

"You think that was a compliment?" Ryuko half-shouted, half-asked as she swept her Scissor Blade through the air only to grunt angrily as the mod soul once again managed to elude her attacks. As the thought of how a toy was outrunning her reached Ryuko's mind, she gritted her teeth and pushed herself harder. There was no way in hell she was going to lose a footrace against a stupid toy!

While Ryuko was thinking up cruel and unusual punishments to inflict on Kon for what he did to her, said mod soul was doing some thinking of his own. He knew that even as fast and nimble as he was,

eventually Ryuko was going to catch up with him and, judging by the look in her eyes, it wasn't going to be pretty. He needed a way to escape and hide from Ryuko but his favorite choice, the air vents, weren't possible. First he would need to find one and then open it. That required time and effort that he was sure Ryuko wasn't going to go give him.

"Come on legs don't fail me now!"

Spotting a door opening just down the hall, Kon quickly adjusted his plans and slid beneath the student's legs and into the stairwell. After a moment of quick thinking, Kon jumped onto the railing and ran upwards as fast as he could.

Kon didn't even manage to reach the next floor before Ryuko kicked open the door, knocking the poor and unfortunate student out in the process. With her blue eyes locking squarely on him, Kon screamed like a girl and ducked as Ryuko's Scissor Blade flew through the air and embedded itself in the wall in front of him. Visibly sweating at the near death experience, Kon was just about to continue fleeing for his life when he noticed something floating to the floor. Looking closely at it, he realized it was part of his brown mane.

"Somebody help!" Kon yelled as he jumped into the air, avoiding Ryuko's impromptu tackle and sprinted up the railing. It was only a matter of time before his luck ran out and Kon hoped it didn't fail him until he escaped Ryuko's relentless pursuit.

" *This girl isn't just crazy.*" Spotting a door propped open due to two students carrying something heavy, Kon jumped onto one student's head before flipping through the air and into the hall. Turning to the right, Kon sprinted down the mostly empty hallway with tears of pure fear streaming from his eyes, *"She's not just crazy, she's completely insane. She's even crazier than that blonde girl from yesterday!"*

The sight of a button on a wall gave Kon an idea. Adjusting his momentum, the mod soul jumped into the air and firmly slammed his paw down on the button. Immediately afterwards a large steel door,



built into Honnouji Academy in case of a siege or battle, slammed downwards out of the ceiling and cut off Ryuko just as she was able to pass underneath.

"Ha... ha..." Kon panted from exhaustion as he finally managed to stop Ryuko. Wiping his brow, he chuckled and turned to find a place to hide, "That's what you get from messing with the best, sister! Now all I need to do is find a nice cozy place to - "

Kon was cut off when a foot slammed down on the back of Kon's head and planted him firmly and violently against the floor.

"Not here five minutes and already doing perverted things," Ichigo grumbled in annoyance at the mod soul wiggling under his foot. Reaching down and firmly grasping Kon by the back of his head, Ichigo held the mod soul up in front of his face and growled angrily, "Just what made you think you could say something like that to Ryuko and get away with it?"

Kon stopped his struggling as soon as he realized it was Ichigo. Ichigo may abuse and torment him, but he wasn't about to kill him like Ryuko, "I couldn't help it. That Ryuko girl is just so hot. She's just like Orihime but with a more assertive personality!"

That was the stupidest reason for what Kon did but Ichigo admitted that was in line with the mod soul's idiotic line of thinking. He knew it was only a matter of time before Kon's perverted behaviors caught up with him and he peeped on someone who wasn't going to just hit him once or twice. Shaking his head at the stupidity of Kon's behavior, Ichigo was about to chastise the mod soul when Ryuko's red Scissor Blade pierced through the three inches of steel composing the security door. It stayed still for only a second before it quickly and rapidly crossed several times back and forth, cutting the door to pieces.

"You're fucking dead."

Ryuko stepped through the hole she made in the steel door with a visibly demonic aura surrounding her body. With her Scissor Blade clutched firmly and tightly in her hand, she grinned savagely when she spotted Kon trapped in Ichigo's grip, "You caught him, Ichigo? Good. This will be over in just a second..."

Kon's button eyes seemed to widen in terror upon seeing Ryuko, "Don't let her kill me, Ichigo!"

"It's fine Ryuko," Ichigo didn't spare a second glance at the violently shaking plushie, "Kon's mostly harmless. He's just a stupid little pervert."

Ryuko harshly glared at the mod soul and for just a single moment it looked like she wasn't going to listen to Ichigo. Eventually she sighed angrily and propped her Scissor Blade on her shoulder, "Fine, but I have a question for you. You called this thing Kon. What the hell is a Kon?"

"His name is Kon," Ichigo answered nonchalantly as he gave Kon another shake, eliciting a squeak from him, "And he's not supposed to be here. Why aren't you in Karakura Town? How did you get here?"

"Your dad sent me here!" Kon squeezed himself out of Ichigo's grip and tapped his cheek a few times before jumping and landing on the ground. Dusting himself off and making sure everything was where it should be, he turned around and pointed one stubby arm at Ichigo, "He says you are getting into trouble and that you need someone to babysit you and I couldn't agree more. I will be watching and listening to everything you do! I'll always be in the shadows where you least expect to find me. Every single mom - "

Whatever Kon was about to threaten Ichigo with was cut off as Ryuko slammed her sneaker down on the mod soul's face several times before kicking the plushie into the wall. As Kon pathetically tumbled down to the floor, Ryuko smirked victoriously, "That was for trying to sneak glances at my panties you perverted toy!"

"But..." Kon mumbled miserably. He'd never been discovered before seeing anything. Even Rukia only caught him afterwards or in the middle of the act. This was a new experience for the perverted mod soul.

While Ryuko may have been angry with Kon for her behavior, her Kamui was staring at the mod soul with a discerning eye. There was something not quite right about Kon, but Senketsu couldn't put his eye on it. A living, breathing stuffed toy was cause for concern, but he was a living mass of Life Fibers so Senketsu couldn't say anything without sounding hypocritical. As he stared at Kon's smoking form on the ground, Senketsu finally realized what it was he was sensing, ***"Ryuko, that thing is made up of Life Fibers."***

"It is?" Ryuko blinked as a manic grin appeared on her face. Holding out her Scissor Blade once more, she approached Kon with the edge gleaming with a malevolent shine, "That means I need to finish this thing off."

"You can't kill Kon," Ichigo hooked his finger through the hole in Ryuko's Scissor Blade. Sparing the mod soul a pathetic look, he said, "As much as I hate to say it, I need him alive for the time being. If he spies on you again, you can do whatever you want to him."

Ichigo was puzzled by what Senketsu had just said. Kon had Life Fibers in his body? That made no sense but at the same time it helped to answer a few questions that had been bugging him since he found the mod soul. Chief of which was how Kon managed to stay mostly intact despite the 'stress' his plushie form used to take on a daily basis. Pushing Ryuko's Scissor Blade to the side, he stepped forward and roughly picked Kon off the floor. Shaking the mod soul to snap him back into consciousness, Ichigo asked, "You're going to answer some questions or I'm going to let Ryuko deal with you. You got that?"

"Yes!" Kon blubbered before asking, "But can I ask you something first Ichigo? Call me crazy but did that girl's uniform just speak?"

" ***Wait,***" Senketsu's eye widened in surprise, "***You can hear me?***"

"Well duh!" Kon scoffed and rubbed his stuffed nose, "You're speaking as clearly as anyone else. Hey Ichigo, your uniform has those really freaky and evil looking eyes as well. Can it talk or did you finally develop a sense of fashion?"

" ***I can talk,***" Mugetsu answered with an annoyed tinge to her voice, "***But I cannot stand listening to the ravings of a pervert like you.***"

"Wait a second..." Kon escaped from Ichigo's grasp and moved closer to one of Mugetsu's eyes, "I've seen you before."

For obvious reasons Mugetsu found such a notion appalling, "***I think I would remember an annoying little thing like you.***"

"That's because you weren't... well... you yet, I guess," Kon hopped off Ichigo's shoulder and began pacing back and forth across the floor, his stuffed arms folded across his body in a caricature of thinking. He remembered meeting whatever it was Mugetsu was clearly as if it were only yesterday. That was probably because it was the same visit to Kisuke's shop that had him stumble across Yoruichi in the middle of getting changed. Good times. Kon shook his head in order to focus his mind. He needed to answer the question before Ichigo or his more insane friend with the partially dyed hair grew annoyed.

"It was at Kisuke's shop, where I usually hang out since you're no fun anymore Ichigo. I was going about my business of sleeping and doing nothing when I happened to stumble across Kisuke doing something really strange in his basement," Kon explained as best he could, "He had these large balls of glowing red yarn hooked up to weird and complicated machines. I didn't know what to make of it, but I happened to notice Ichigo's uniform being sewn together or something very slowly. I hid behind a rock watching Kisuke do his thing and when it finished, lightning appeared in the basement and

Kisuke kept shouting 'it lives!' over and over again. It was really freaky."

" ***So you knew my creator,***" Mugetsu took Kon's words with a large grain of salt but she had to admit that the annoying plushie knew far more about her than could be made up. He knew Kisuke Urahara's name and Ichigo seemed to trust the little thing so she was willing to give Kon the benefit of the doubt just this one time, "***But you never answered the question. Why does your ugly body contain a large amount of Life Fibers?***"

"Life Fibers?" Kon scratched his head and huffed, "I don't know what you're talking about. Perhaps my label will shed some light on your question."

Quickly grabbing Kon off the ground, Ryuko roughly looked around before finding the well-hidden tag, " **Unofficial version of Ponkichi from Carnivore Kingdom. Machine Wash Only. Revocs Corporation.** It doesn't say anything about Life Fibers or why you can talk."

"That, my beautiful friend, is a secret," Kon was introduced to a world of pain as Ryuko punched him in the face before dropping him to the floor and violently stepped on him. As she walked away, Kon faintly muttered, "What did I say?"

Not bothering to spare Kon another moment of her time, Ryuko turned to Ichigo and asked, "How can Kon talk?"

Ichigo rubbed the bridge of his nose to stave off a headache, "It's a long story."

Ryuko didn't look like she was buying Ichigo's excuse if the judgmental look she was giving him meant anything. Truth be told, Ichigo wouldn't believe what he himself was saying. Before she could get up into his face and demand answers, Ryuko paused when an extremely bright line filtered in through the windows lining the hallway.

"Hey," Kon shook his head and raised a paw in front of his eyes, "Who turned up the sun?"

"That's Satsuki Kiryuin," Ryuko explained, actually wincing slightly at the intensity of the light, before narrowing her blue eyes, "Although something seems off..."

There was something bothering her about the intense light. Satsuki Kiryuin's weird backdrop was always either bright yellow or white, but this particular light was a literal rainbow of colors. Unless Satsuki decided to expand her influence and subjugate the entire spectrum of visible light, she couldn't be doing this. Folding her arms across her chest, eyes squarely focused on the roof of Honnouji Academy, Ryuko felt something off, "That's not Satsuki Kiryuin."

"I know," Ichigo agreed as he was also focused at the rainbow light. There was something bothering him about the light but for the life of him he couldn't figure out what was causing his curiosity. It was better for him to find out now rather than waiting for whomever or whatever it was to surprise him later on. With his mind decided, Ichigo turned his eyes away from the roof and began heading up there himself.

"Ichigo?" Ryuko turned from the window and watched Ichigo walking away, "Where are you going?"

"To find out more about that weird light," Ichigo pointed his thumb at the window towards the rainbow light, which was already starting to fade away, "Despite what I said earlier, I'm now Satsuki's Vice President or something. That means I can go find out what's going on and she can't do anything about it."

"What about Kon?"

Ichigo paused momentarily before answering, "Do with him what you want. Just be sure to not kill him."

As he walked away, Ichigo couldn't hide the grin of satisfaction as he heard Kon's screams for help suddenly be cut off as Ryuko got her revenge on the mod soul. Perhaps that would be enough to help Kon give up being a pervert, but Ichigo wasn't betting on it.

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Ragyo Kiryuin rode the elevator leading down from the landing pad to the rest of Honnouji Academy in complete silence. What reason was there for her to speak other than to ask Satsuki if the preparations for tonight were complete? It wasn't like she didn't already know the answer. If there was a single good thing about her only public daughter it was that she was punctual and efficient to a degree that could only be compared to her own.

Another source of the silence and the not-so-subtle clenching of Satsuki's hands on Bakuzan's hilt was the presence of Nui Harime. The Grand Couturier was smiling happily right next to Ragyo and was virtually untouchable as long as she did not leave the confines of the academy. Ragyo was genuinely amused when Satsuki saw Nui standing behind her as she stepped out of the helicopter. She had forgotten what it was to see a shocked look on her daughter's face.

"Wow, it's really quiet in here," Nui pointed out the obvious as she looked over the single member of Satsuki's Elite Four that had been there to greet her mother. Quickly glancing over Inumuta's Probe Regalia, Nui snorted derisively, "Whoever is making your Goku Uniforms is a real amateur. I could do better stitching five years ago with one eye closed!"

"Now my dear Nui," Ragyo's regal voice cut the Grand Couturier off with the sheer amount of power and respect being each word. Nui might have some leeway when it came to her fun, but she would never do or say anything that would compromise or make the

Director look bad, "It isn't polite to compare the work of others to someone such as yourself. We can't all be gifted."

"True," Nui conceded happily and smiled when the elevator dinged to let them know they could leave. That smile quickly dropped to a basic grin when she saw who was standing outside waiting for them.

She was not the only one. Ragyo also was stunned to see Isshin Kurosaki waiting for them but that feeling quickly turned to elation. She had to give the man credit where it was due. He did the one thing she did not expect him to do. Strutting forward, much to Satsuki and Nui's surprise, she stopped right in front of Isshin and quickly slapped him across the face.

If everyone was shocked by the display, they were even more shocked when there was a sound like a cannon going off before every single pane of glass within one hundred feet abruptly shattered into millions of pieces. Out of all the onlookers, only Nui knew that Lady Ragyo had hit Isshin with enough power to kill a normal human but Isshin was simply standing there like nothing happened.

"Ouch."

Isshin rubbed his sore cheek, where the imprint of a hand was still visible, "I see you still haven't forgiven me for whatever you think I did. I'm surprised you only slapped me. The last time we met you tried to kill me."

"Kill you?" Ragyo had a manic smile on her face as she ran a finger down Isshin's chest. Said grin didn't vanish when Isshin's hand gripped her wrist and stopped her.

"I see you're wearing that dress I gave you all those years ago," Isshin frowned when he sensed what she did to it. It was a perversion of all that dress meant, "Although I thought the purple suited you better since it doesn't show dirt."



"My, my," Ragyo's gaze softened as the madness within her eyes momentarily abated. Satsuki, having seen something like this happen before, tensed her body and prepared for the inevitable bloodshed that would soon result. Her reaction would be for nothing as Ragyo just grinned and took a single step away from Isshin, "You never did have a sense for fashion. You really shouldn't try starting now."

"Oh? And what's this?"

Ragyo's gaze shifted away from Isshin to Ururu, who was doing her best to shyly hide behind Isshin's larger frame for protection. Ignoring the pointed look she was getting from him, Ragyo placed a hand on Isshin's shoulder and peered around, maddened red and silver eyes gazing into a pair of familiar blue ones.

"How generous of you to return something that I thought I lost so very long ago," Ragyo whispered into Isshin's unflinching ear. With a hint of madness and anger tinging her voice, Ragyo's eyes widened manically as she said, "I thought my dear little Amu was lost to me forever..."

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## **Kamui Tales # 12 - The Substitute Gym Teacher**

"Listen up slackers!" Ira Gamagori shouted at the collected students, who looked back at him with a mixture of boredom and disdain. Ignoring their looks for the moment while making sure to mentally note who was going to be problem, he coughed and continued, "Due to medical issues, your normal physical education teacher is taking a leave of absence. Therefore you shall have a substitute for the foreseeable future!"

"Great," Ryuko muttered quietly to Ichigo, "We get to have a wimpy sub that can't do anything and will expect us to run laps or

something."

"It'll be fun Ryuko!" Mako pointed out happily from Ryuko's other side. Substitute teachers were among Mako's favorite people for a variety of reasons, least of which was that she could talk and befriend them without getting into too much trouble with Lady Satsuki. The last teacher she talked to, which coincidentally was the old gym teacher, was gone. Mako didn't find that odd one bit.

"I introduce to you..." Gamagori stepped to the side and swept his arm back, "... Kenpachi Zaraki!"

What came out of Ichigo's mouth immediately after the announcement could be heard clear across the entire gymnasium, "Oh fuck no..."

"Why, hello there Ichigo..." A gravelly voice said from right behind him, "That's some fancy looking uniform you're wearing."

"Oh no," Ichigo leapt back in fear and saw to his horror that Kenpachi was indeed his substitute teacher. The shinigami captain was wearing the standard coaches uniform complete with whistle and clipboard, on which Ichigo thought he saw the words 'tortures' scratched out. Kenpachi, upon seeing Ichigo move away, grinned viciously and stepped forth.

"It's been quite a while," Kenpachi looked around and only saw a few students who weren't weaklings in the group, "The last time we fought, you left me on the verge of death. Speaking of which, when do you want that rematch? I'm up for it any time you're ready."

"That's right!" A chirpy voice called out as Yachiru Kusajishi appeared on Kenpachi's shoulder, "Kenny came all the way to this place so that he could get his rematch Ichigo! So get on the field and let's get this party started!"

"Forget it!" Ichigo crossed his arms in front of his body and continued to backpedal away from Kenpachi. He could already see the looks

he was getting, mostly from Gamagori and Ryuko, and he could tell they thought he was being a coward, but Ichigo did not care in the slightest. They had no idea the monster that Kenpachi was, "There's no way in hell that I'm ever going to fight you again, Kenpachi!"

"That's a damn shame," Kenpachi looked downtrodden before he grinned, "You know, I met an opponent on my way here this morning. She and Yachiru hit it off just fine, but then she tried to kill me with her purple sword. She failed, of course, but I almost managed to kill her in the end. I never thought I would fight someone that can regenerate. It really takes the fun out of a fight when you can't get hurt. That's why I'm glad you're here Ichigo!"

Kenpachi rushed Ichigo while pulling his zanpakuto out of nowhere and quickly slashed downwards through the air. Ryuko was stunned at Kenpachi's speed, mostly because it was almost as fast as her speed while Senketsu was transformed and for a moment she thought Ichigo was dead. So it was to her relief when she saw Ichigo fly out of the smoke cloud that had been made from Kenpachi's attack, clad in Mugetsu, and hovered in the air overhead.

"You're insane Kenpachi!"

"So you can fly now?" Kenpachi stepped out of the smoke and dispersed it with one wave of his sword, "That's interesting. Get down Yachiru. I must rampage."

Without waiting around, Ichigo twisted his body in midair and rocketed towards Honnou City. If he had any luck, he could lose Kenpachi in the twisting and winding streets of the Slums.

Kenpachi crouched to go chase after Ichigo but paused when he realized he still had a class. Glancing at Gamagori, who for the first time in recent memory was staring at someone taller than him, and then at his students, he said the one thing that came to his mind, "Everyone do laps or something until I get back."

# Family Affair

*So yeah... this chapter is really late but I think every single one of you will accept my delays based upon how good it is. I spent my time off plotting, thinking and free writing and I do believe this is one of my best chapters yet. I am especially proud of the omake at the end. It actually made me laugh while I wrote it. So enjoy the chapter and make sure you review it at the end so I know if you love it/hate it/or just like reading Kill la Kill fanfiction.*

*Also note that I'm posting the first updated chapter of my previous story, **Rise of the True Death God**, as **A Shinigami's Journey** . After working and writing TMDiF, I noticed that my writing style has improved and I wanted to go back and compare it to my earlier stories, of which this was my favorite. After reading through all 8 chapters, I noticed how... well... badly my writing was compared to my current level so here is the rewritten first chapter. It may look strangely familiar to the original one, but it's much better and i promise that Ichigo's journey will NOT be the same as the original story.*

*But you didn't come here to read about a second story, did you? You can go ahead and read it after you enjoy what you all came for!*

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## Chapter 25 - Family Affair

*Twenty Years Ago*

*Isshin didn't like the feeling he was getting from this place. As he watched the incandescent lights lining the passageway flicker and dim in time with their steps, he couldn't help but think about how this day started off so well.*

*He had been quite surprised when Rei Hououmaru appeared at his small home in Karakura Town last night. The diligent secretary of his friend seemed to have run the entire way with her light purple hair disheveled and frayed. Quickly bringing her inside while Masaki fetched a cup of tea, Isshin gently sat Rei down on the couch and asked her what happened. Rei didn't say anything until Masaki came back but when she was calmed down, she began sobbing as she told Isshin about Ragyo. Something had happened to her boss and she didn't know who else to turn to.*

*As Rei finished her tale and collapsed against the couch, Isshin had turned to Masaki and told her that he was going to check up on Ragyo. Masaki had been initially reluctant to let him go but Isshin would not hear any of it. Ragyo was his friend and if she was in any kind of trouble he needed to be there for her. After promising Masaki that everything would be all right, he quickly headed out the door and into his car.*

*The drive to the Kiryuin mansion took a few hours, so when Isshin finally arrived outside the gates he was expecting to either find his friend in a lot of trouble or injured. His skills as a doctor, all of which came from his shinigami training, would be enough to treat most minor injuries but if Ragyo had any serious injuries he would need to take her to the hospital. As Isshin raced up the front steps and used his key, which Ragyo had given to him, to unlock the front door he was quite surprised to find a perfectly fine Ragyo waiting for him.*

*After quickly making sure she was all right, much to Ragyo's bemusement, Isshin had sighed in relief when he found nothing wrong with her. That relief quickly vanished when Ragyo motioned for Isshin to follow her. There was something in his friend's voice that raised Isshin's suspicion about something being wrong with Ragyo. It was extremely subtle but there was a slightly hollowness to her voice that didn't sound as if it belonged. Turning around to the front door with his car idling right outside, Isshin made up his mind and followed Ragyo deeper into the mansion. If something was wrong with her, he needed to be around to help her.*

*"Gah!" Isshin shouted as he walked straight into a spider web. As he pulled on the offending substance clinging to his face, he looked at Ragyo, who hadn't stopped or even turned around, and asked, "So you never told me what this thing is you wanted to show me."*

*"Be patient Isshin," Ragyo answered mysteriously as she walked away from a still floundering Isshin. After he finished cleaning the spider web off his face, he hurried to catch up to her retreating form as she said, "Before you ask, I have yet to see what is beyond the passage with my own eyes."*

*Isshin found that incredibly suspicious, which only helped his nerves to be put even more on edge. Years of being the head of the Shiba Clan had introduced him to the underworld of politics, brownnosing and other forms of crude behavior. He could tell something was wrong with Ragyo the moment he rushed into her mansion but the issue was that he didn't know what the problem was exactly, "If you haven't seen it, how do you even know if anything is down here?"*

*"All will be answered," Ragyo answered cryptically and Isshin could sense a sly smile on her face. As the passage continued winding forward, Isshin eventually found himself standing in front of a large pair of metal doors, "We are here."*

*Isshin looked upward at the imposing doors and muttered, "How ominous."*

*He didn't like the look of the metal doors looming dozens of feet over his head. He might not be an engineer, in fact he might suck at most sciences in general, but even someone like him could tell that the amount of rust and wear on the doors indicated that they had been down here for a very long time. Stepping forward and pressing a hand against the doors, Isshin frowned when he noticed that the metal was actually buckling outwards and in several places seemed almost on the verge of tearing in two. Isshin had seen damage like this in the past. Something inside the room beyond the doors had tried repeated to escape and he wasn't sure he wanted to see what could cause that kind of damage.*

*Isshin was distracted when his friend stepped to the side and began inputting a double digit password into a modern keypad. As her hand glided over the keypad in a blur of motion, he gulped and asked, "Do you know anything about what's behind this door and will I even like what I see?"*

*" What lay beyond these doors is both the end and the beginning," she answered oddly as she finished typing in the password. While the sounds of several massive and heavy locks opening reverberated around him, Isshin turned when he saw Ragyo standing next to him.*

*" My mother told me when I was but a child and her mother told her many years before that. Every Kiryuin mother had regaled their firstborn daughters with the ancient tale of our family," Ragyo's blue eyes watched as the doors began to creak as the hydraulics hidden in the walls began forcibly opening the rusted structure. As a sliver of orange and red light began permeating the passageway, causing a sickly feeling to well up in Isshin's stomach, she continued with her tale, "She would always tell me that one day after she was gone I would hear a voice whispering to me from deep underneath the ancient Kiryuin home compelling me to journey down into the catacombs. When I was ten years old my mother disappeared, but before she did she said she hoped I would be the one to bring the secret buried underground out into the light of the world."*

*As the metal doors swung open, allowing Isshin to fully grasp what it was that lay inside, anything he had to say was extinguished by the sight before him. Floating in the air in the center of the room while anchored to the surrounded walls and floor by several spiked protrusions was a glowing yellow and orange sphere. It was seemingly composed of a thread-like material seemed to be gently hovering up and down. Isshin stood in transfixion before the object, his eyes staring in amazement and wonder as its surface seemed to pulsate and bubble before reverting back to normal moments later.*

*Stepping into the chamber, momentarily forgetting that he was not alone, Isshin's gaze was broken when he felt the ground beneath his*

feet crumple and flex. Looking down at the floor, he quickly stepped back out of the room when he saw it was covered in the same type of material as the object. While the waves of the thread-like stuff lining the ground didn't have the same glow as the object itself, it still didn't sit right with him.

" Uh, Ragyo?" Isshin felt something in the chamber shift as his voice echoed around him, "What is that thing?"

When he failed to get an answer from his friend, Isshin turned and noticed Ragyo slowly walking past him towards the object with an enraptured gaze. Deciding to not allow his friend to get anywhere near that thing Isshin, against his better judgment, decided to walk with her. While Ragyo's blue eyes stared upon the glowing object with a look akin to that of devotion and reverence, Isshin was feeling something quite different. As he grew closer to the object, Isshin began to feel a horrible sensation of realization set upon his chest like a vice. It was almost as if his mind was purposely failing to make that one final connection that would allow him to fully understand what was going on in order to save his sanity at any cost.

" In my mother's stories, she would talk about this magnificent thing..." Ragyo, now nearly directly underneath the object, raised her hand upwards. Much to Isshin's horror, several glowing tendrils emerged from the object and gently floated down to meet her. With the same passive smile on her face, Ragyo stared at the tendrils and continued, "... she called this creature the Original Life Fiber and told me it was the catalyst for humanity's evolution. It's so beautiful..."

And that was Isshin's cue to act. Ragyo may hate him for this in the morning, but there was no chance in hell that he was going to let whatever the Original Life Fiber was touch his friend. As the tendrils of Life Fibers closed in towards Ragyo's hand, Isshin reached forward and roughly pulled her away. While Ragyo, still transfixed by the Original Life Fiber, struggled to pull herself out of Isshin's clutches, he was already making his way to the exit. As a reverberating and deep growl echoed throughout the chamber, Isshin quickened his pace.



*Upon hearing the growl Ragyo stopped struggling as Isshin pulled her away from the Original Life Fiber. Shaking her head and appearing to have just awoken from a terrible dream, Ragyo looked around in confusion as to where she was before gasping when she saw dozens of Life Fibers emerging out of the Original Life Fiber and flying towards them, "Where are we Isshin? What is that thing?"*

*" I was hoping you could tell me!" Isshin shouted over the roar of the Original Life Fiber as he continued to dodge its attempts to ensnare him. He didn't feel like being the main course for an eldritch abomination. He's read enough books by that author to realize nothing good could come out of touching that thing, "You were looking at it like it was your god or something!"*

*" I don't remember," Ragyo grabbed the side of her head as she ran alongside him, "The last thing I remember was a soothing voice and then nothing until you pulled me away from that thing."*

*Accepting Ragyo's reason for the time being, Isshin continued to dodge tendrils of Life Fibers as he reached the metal doors and the passage beyond. Just as he was about to pass through them to freedom, he found the air knocked out of him when several Life Fibers wrapped around Ragyo's ankle. Coughing as he gathered his breath, Isshin quickly recovered when he heard Ragyo screaming his name. Getting back onto his feet, he ran after Ragyo, who was being pulled back towards the Original Life Fiber, and managed to grab her just as her feet left the ground.*

*" Isshin!" Ragyo's terror filled eyes stared at the Original Life Fiber as tendrils of Life Fibers began tightly wrapping themselves around her body as she was slowly drawn into it.*

*" I'm not going to let it take you!" Isshin's augmented strength, courtesy of the gigai he was wearing, may have allowed him to perform feats of strength no normal human could ever hope to accomplish but even that wasn't enough to stop the Original Life Fiber. As soon as her feet touched its surface the Original Life Fiber*

*seemed to shift and morph into a liquid, allowing Ragyo to continue being pulled inside.*

*As Ragyo's body vanished within the Original Life Fiber, the glowing orange and red threads wrapping around what was left of her throughout the process, Isshin reached down and grabbed a chunk of the Life Fibers on the floor. With a resounding pull that nearly tore his arms off he managed to halt Ragyo's absorption into the Original Life Fiber. While a reverberating roar shook the chamber, Isshin ignored it as he took one step and then another away from the creature devouring his friend. He hadn't forgotten what happened to Masaki after he confronted that strange black hollow all those years ago and he was not about to let another person he cared about suffer under his watch.*

*" Don't worry, Ragyo! I got you!" Isshin pulled harder and for a moment Ragyo's body began to emerge out of the Original Life Fiber while the glowing threads did their best to draw her back in. Even if it cost him his life Isshin was not about to let something swallow his friend.*

*The stalemate was broken when the Original Life Fiber groaned and shot out hundreds of smaller Life Fiber strands at Isshin. Even as the glowing threads wrapped around his limbs and were pulled taut, Isshin refused to let go of Ragyo. Glaring intently at his straining hand, which was losing its grip on the floor, Isshin didn't have time to shout before he lost footing and was drawn into the Original Life Fiber alongside Ragyo.*

*What happened after he was absorbed by the Original Life Fiber seemed to be a hazy dream to Isshin. He could vaguely remember an all-encompassing blackness surrounding him before hundreds, if not thousands, of Life Fibers pierced straight through his body. He also swore that Engetsu, his zanpakuto spirit, was fighting off a creature that looked to be made up of Life Fibers, which was odd because ever since he put on his gigai he had been unable to speak with his zanpakuto's spirit. Isshin lost consciousness right before Engetsu blasted a wave of fire at the creature, causing it to vanish*

*into the darkness accompanied by a pained roar, but before everything vanished he swore he saw a burst of multicolored light shine up the surroundings around him.*

*Isshin opened his eyes and immediately sat up.*

*"What the heck was that?"*

*Breathing heavily and looking around the chamber, Isshin was strangely relieved when nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. Glancing suspiciously up at the Original Life Fiber, he noticed that the creature was floating calmly in the middle of the chamber without a hint of any other strangeness. Sighing in relief, he rubbed his temple and muttered, "What a strange dream. That's the last time I let Masaki try to make jambalaya. I need to remember to warn Ragyo..."*

*Remembering who it was that brought him down here, Isshin looked around and saw his friend lying unconscious on the other side of the room. Standing on his feet and ignoring the strange feeling from his body, Isshin ran across the chamber and turned her over. Immediately after doing so he froze when he saw that her once beautiful black hair had been transformed in shining silver with a glowing rainbow undertone that shone with the intensity of the sun. With his mouth opening and closing as he tried to say something, Isshin decided to say nothing as he picked Ragyo up and carried her out of the chamber.*

*The further they got away from the Original Life Fiber the better.*

*End Flashback*

*"How generous of you to return something that I thought lost to me so very long ago," Ragyo whispered into Isshin's unflinching ear. As a hint of madness spread across her beautiful face, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and stared into his eyes, "And here I thought my dear little Amu would be lost to me forever..."*

Ragyo felt an unfamiliar sensation well up within her body and it took her a moment to realize that it was pride. Sixteen years of fruitless searching for her precious and missing Amu had turned up nothing. She had always suspected Isshin of having a hand in her daughter's disappearance but the man was impossible to pin down. As long as he remained within the borders of Karakura Town he was all but untouchable to her and Revocs, but here he was standing in front of her with Amu. Ragyo wanted nothing more than to introduce Amu into the world of Life Fibers and COVERS that was her birthright. The only problem was, once again, Isshin.

The irony of the situation was not lost to her, but the only sign of the annoyance she felt at having her goal so close and yet so far was the stretching of the manic smile on her face and a widening of her maroon eyes.

"Tell me something," Ragyo stared deep into Isshin's brown eyes and sighed she saw that he was hiding something. While it would have pleased her greatly to tear away the curtains and expose Isshin's little illusion to the world at large, it would be a mistake to do it in such a lonely place. The exposing of her love's illusion needed to be spectacular. Noticing that Isshin's face was a cold expressionless mask, void of any of his familiar warmth, Ragyo sighed once more and raised a delicate hand to her cheek. Tilting her head sideways and letting out a shallow breath, she asked, "Did you think you could have hidden something like this from me?"

"I did it for sixteen years," Isshin answered back and subtly moved between Ragyo and Ururu even further, "The fact that it took you this long to figure things out really says more about you, doesn't it?"

Satsuki expected her mother to punish Ichigo's father for the insult to her intelligence, but after seeing him withstand her slap with nary more than a slight reddening of his cheek she didn't know what to think. As she and Inumuta stood at a safe distance away from Isshin and Ragyo, she could not help but compare the two people to the ancient Greek titans. She had a strange inkling that if they were to fight, it would decimate Honnouji Academy. Even Junketsu was

strangely quiet. Ever since Isshin Kurosaki appeared in front of them, the Kamui has stopped all attempts at overwhelming her mind.

Ragyo easily took Isshin's slight insult in stride. She would allow Isshin to have his little jokes while she focused on more important matters. Staring at what little she could see of Ururu behind Isshin's body, Ragyo knew she would feel great pleasure in introducing her to the world of clothing in which she so rightfully belonged. She couldn't begin to imagine how damaged Amu was after spending her existence under the care of Isshin but Ragyo was confident that it wouldn't take more than a single visit for Ururu to come around to her mother. If it took a bit of memory refitting to accomplish it, then that was what needed to be done.

The only thing standing in the path of the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet was Isshin and as she trailed a delicate and manicured finger down his chest, Ragyo knew getting rid of him was far easier said than done. As goofy and loveable as he made himself out to be, and Ragyo loved him for that, Isshin Shiba was the only person that could truly stop her.

"Do you want to know what I admire most about you?" Ragyo's eyes softened as she thought back upon the fond and distant memories of twenty years ago. That day when the world was truly opened to her eyes still vibrated deep within her core and she only wished that Isshin had continued to stand by her side instead of leaving her for that woman. Leaning forward until her chin was just brushing up against the fabric on Isshin's shoulder, she took a breath and whispered into his ear, "That deep down you see things my way. Despite our differences you have done nothing to stop my plans. That is why I know you truly love me."

A clash between Isshin and herself would not be in her best interest. Ragyo was absolutely certain that all of Honnouji Academy as well as most of the surrounding Honnou City would be demolished in the ensuing battle between them. It continued to irk her that since the power bestowed onto Isshin has always been greater than her own and yet he still failed to see the world as it truly was. It was a small

consolation that Isshin could not end it all by destroying the Original Life Fiber with his own hands. A twinge of regret and sadness briefly passed through Ragyo's heart before it was quickly suppressed beneath her anger. Her lovely daughter had already shown that she didn't need to fight Isshin to get what she wanted. There was, after all, more than one way to win a war.

"Everybody has a reason for what they do. Perhaps I felt settling down with Masaki and raising a family was more important than standing up to you at the moment," Isshin shrugged off Ragyo's advances and looked around. While Nui was standing back with a knowing and adoring smile on her face, he could easily see the intelligence swimming just beneath the façade of insanity watching his every move for any potential threats. He'd figured out long ago that Nui's happy demeanor was just a cover she used to hide the intelligence she inherited from Ragyo. Isshin didn't know whether Nui truly thought that was how people were supposed to act or Ragyo simply raised her that way, but he would need to make sure she didn't snap.

Satsuki, on the other hand, well she reminded Isshin a lot of Ragyo in her younger days. Now that he could get a good look at her, Satsuki looked nearly identical to a much younger Ragyo. If he wasn't absolutely sure she was Souichiro's daughter he would have placed his bets on Ragyo cloning herself. Glancing down at the Kamui she was wearing, Isshin locked gazes with its eyes and was pleased to see it attempting to pull away in fear.

"Besides, let's be honest," Isshin pouted childishly and folded his arms. There would always be time to deal with Junketsu later, preferably after he managed to take a long hot shower, "You were the one with the international conglomerate and I was just a small town doctor. If I had so much as sneezed in your general direction I would have faced a private army or something."

"I did offer you the chance to stand by my side," Ragyo easily saw through Isshin's childishness with practiced ease. She had known the man long enough to be able to pierce the veil of stupidity he

portrayed as his true persona. The man was nearly, if not equally, as devious and cunning as her. While she played up the indifferent and pragmatic CEO of Revocs to the world at large, Isshin did the exact opposite by playing the bumbling idiot, "You would have been the perfect Grand Couturier."

"Hey now, you know I stink at anything involving fashion. You remember how it took me forever to pick out that dress you're wearing? Even after I spent hours looking at all the confusing dresses I needed help in the end. I would have made an absolutely terrible Grand Couturier," Isshin chuckled at what he saw as a joke on Ragyo's end while out of the corner of his eyes Nui momentarily had a look of shock on her face.

"Oh?" Nui looked back and forth between Ragyo and Isshin, "Is this true Director?"

"Yes," Ragyo sighed as she reminisced, "At one time I did offer Isshin here the position of Grand Couturier of Revocs but don't worry, my dear little Nui. You have done an absolutely superb job. I dare say your designs are currently worn all around the world by the pigs in humans clothing."

Nui smiled, "Thanks Lady Ragyo! I always make sure to do my best work, you know."

"I expect nothing less from you," Ragyo's attention quickly moved away from the adoration Nui was giving her back to Amu or, as Isshin called her, Ururu. Staring at the girl who was so shyly standing behind Isshin, Ragyo saw what she was looking for as soon as her maroon eyes locked gazes with Ururu once more. With the beginning of a psychotic smirk causing the corners of her lips to curl upwards in pleasure, Ragyo was ecstatic that fixing Amu wasn't going to be as hard as she initially thought. As much as she wanted to tell Amu everything about her birthright, there was one last thing she needed to deal with first.

"Satsuki," Ragyo's voice quickly obtained her firstborn daughter's attention. Staring over her shoulder with indifference in her eyes, Ragyo asked "Did you not tell me that you finally picked out a Vice President for your Student Council?"

"Yes," Satsuki stepped forward and bowed just enough to be seen as respecting her mother, "Yesterday afternoon I extended to Ichigo Kurosaki the position of Vice President. Upon receiving his acceptance I have already begun the formal proceedings. His public induction into the Student Council was to be at the ceremony tonight."

"I see," A cruel smirk slowly adorned the Kiryuin matriarch's face, "Nui if you would be so kind as to retrieve Isshin's wayward son..."

"Oui!"

Noticing Isshin's body tensing up, Ragyo decided to placate the man, "Do not fret Isshin. Nui is only going to retrieve Ichigo. I have expressively forbidden her from having any fun while we are here."

Laughing happily as she spun around on her feet, Nui was ecstatic upon being able to see Ichigo again. Spinning around one final time, she turned and jumped through the nearby wall while leaving a perfect imprint of her body in the process. As her playful laughing died down, Satsuki's grip on Bakuzan only tightened as she wondered what her mother was planning. The last update she had on Ichigo's whereabouts, it was with Ryuko Matoi in one of the lecture halls on the second floor, east wing. When Nui found Ichigo, and Satsuki had no doubt that she would, the Grand Couturier would have needed to pass through crowds of students. Even with the free catering out in the courtyard to keep the majority of the student population as far away from Nui as possible, Satsuki knew there would be a few students in the halls.

While Satsuki's thoughts were turning grim as her analytical mind began calculating the list of casualties sustained from Nui's enthusiastic search for Ichigo, a sudden upwelling of power from a



few floors below her quickly drew her attention. Every few seconds the ground beneath her feet would shake and while Satsuki would never accidentally stumble from losing her balance, she nearly did so when she saw Ururu standing still despite the shaking, her eyes focused firmly on the floor.

"Ichigo..."

Ururu was worried about her friend more than even her dreary demeanor could express. She could intimately and accurately sense Nui's movements below and it was clear to Ururu that she was fighting Ichigo. After she found out what Nui tried to do to Ichigo yesterday while Ryuko and Mako were fighting, Ururu had wanted to track down Nui and make her pay. It was only her regard for the welfare of all her new friends and the insistence of Mr. Kurosaki that she enjoy having the old Mako back that Ururu stayed her hand.

"Don't worry about a thing, Ururu!" Isshin chuckled and patted Ururu on the top of her head, "Ragyo promised Nui wouldn't hurt Ichigo and I'm positive she's telling the truth. Besides, if Nui tried to pull any funny stuff while I'm around, I'm just going to have to lay down the law and show her the error of her ways."

Isshin smiled in relief when Ururu's perpetual dreary expression began to melt away. He always knew just what to say to make the frown on Ururu's face turn into a smile. It was really good that she was making friends left and right at Honnouji Academy. Ryuko and Mako will do wonders to permanently bring her out of her shell. She was already well on her way but Ururu still had a while to go.

It was at that moment, either through coincidence or cosmic karma, that Ichigo came crashing upwards through the floor. Fully clad in Mugetsu's released form, he slammed into the ceiling with a resounding thud and hard enough to buckle the metal sheets surrounding his landing into a crater. As he stood upside-down on the ceiling, Mugetsu doing more than her share of keeping him stuck to the surface, Ichigo stared at the hole his body had made and grimaced.

"I'm really starting to hate fighting Nui Harime."

Ichigo did not appreciate having to fight Nui Harime two days in a row. He had been on his way to investigate that strange rainbow light and hopefully run into his dad along the way, when she crashed through the nearby window. Instead of attacking him right away like he expected, Nui had instead twirled about and said that he should activate his Kamui. Seeing no reason to argue with her, especially since he knew he couldn't stand against her otherwise, Ichigo had activated Mugetsu's true form only to find himself constantly on the defensive once more. It was times like these that Ichigo wished he could just live a normal life without super-powered enemies crashing in through windows to attack him. It was starting to get old.

"Love and hate are two sides of the same coin, you know," Nui's peppy voice came from right behind him and Ichigo quickly turned around to parry the strike from her purple Scissor Blade. As the two hardened Life Fiber weapons clashed in a cascading series of rainbow sparks, Nui smiled and her single remaining eye widened with glee as, with one powerful swing, she knocked Ichigo to the ground below. Stepping backwards with her feet glued to the ceiling as if it was the floor, Nui lazily swung her arm and Ichigo immediately pushed Mugetsu to her limits to deflect the lightning fast attacks. Bursts of steam shooting out from the Kamui's vents on his back as Tournesol swung through the air.

"Wow!" Nui said cheerfully as Ichigo managed to parry and dodge almost all of her attacks even while she was upside-down. Sure there were a few stab wounds on his body but he was doing a much better job surviving than yesterday. In fact, Nui was having so much fun fighting him that she was actually considering simply forgetting about killing Ryuko Matoi to play with him. While she still really wanted to bleed her dry for what her dad did to her left eye, Nui thought it would nearly as bad for her to never find out who killed her dad. The constant search for her father's murderer would absolutely drive her insane!

*" But what should I do?" Nui thought as she lazily avoided a strike from Ichigo's Tournesol before continuing to attack him, "Just allowing Ryuko to slip slowly into madness won't be enough. I need to make it super fantastic and awesome. Oh! I got it! What if I pin the blame on someone else and then announce that it was me all along? Then she'll have to bear the guilt of killing some poor innocent human!"*

Clapping happily, Nui leaned her head to the said and said, "It's super awesome that you're not dead yet, you know. I thought for sure you would have a few more injuries by now, but I'm happy to be wrong in this case!"

"You really think I'll fall for that again?" Ichigo spat angrily as he twisted to deflect Nui's attempt to stab her Scissor Blade through his back. Adjusting his grip on Tournesol, Ichigo forced Nui's Scissor Blade upwards before driving his knee into her chin. As Nui slowly fell backwards through the air from the attack, Ichigo clenched his fist and smashed it into her stomach with enough force to damage the nearby walls and send the Grand Couturier flying backwards.

Ichigo may have thought he had finally done some damage to Nui but as she bounced and skidded across the floor, her head twisting and bending awkwardly to the point that it would have snapped for any normal human, she continued to think nothing but happy thoughts about Ichigo. She was really glad he finally woke up yesterday. It helped to make hanging out with her cousin much more fun and exciting. As her sole remaining sapphire eye stared into Ichigo's brown eyes, Nui was mildly upset that Ichigo did not hate her. Sure there was a lot of anger and frustration in his eyes but none of the hatred she expected.

Rolling her eye wildly around in its socket, Nui focused her attention past Ichigo and Isshin onto the Director. Lady Ragyo was staring at Ichigo with a look that promised many good things in the future. Smiling in pleasure at doing a good job of helping Ichigo show off his powers to Lady Ragyo, Nui decided she should stop playing around.

She had promised the Director she would not do anything to hurt Ichigo and for once Nui was keen on keeping such a boring promise.

"I really want to keep playing around with you Ichigo but I'm afraid I'm here on business," Nui abruptly stopped bouncing along the ground upon speaking and brought her Scissor Blade around to block Ichigo's attempt to behead her. Gasping in mock surprise at Tournesol as it shook from Ichigo trying to overpower her Scissor Blade, Nui leaned forward until her face was barely an inch from his and happily whispered, "Lady Ragyo has been waiting a really long time to meet you and it would be quite rude to put it off any longer, you know."

Spinning around with her Scissor Blade trailing a purple arc through the air, Nui forced Ichigo backwards and away from her. As his heels skidded along the ground to a stop, Ichigo took a moment to spit out a glob of blood before answering, "Do you really think I care about whatever you say?"

"You should!" Nui beamed as she rocked on her heels and stuck out her tongue childishly, "She is standing right behind you after all!"

Ichigo hadn't noticed during his fight against Nui due to being a little preoccupied with not getting the crap beat out of him but there was a bright multicolored light permeating the hallway that was now impossible to miss. Cursing himself for being so oblivious, he turned around while mindful of the fact that Nui Harime would most likely stab him in the back given half a chance, and found himself standing several feet from Ragyo Kiryuin.

"It's been a long time since I last gazed upon you, Ichigo. You were merely an infant when Isshin last permitted me to hold you," Ragyo's smile grew larger as she watched Ichigo leap away before pointing his Life Fiber weapon at her. As her maroon eyes focused on the hardened Life Fibers composing Tournesol, she couldn't help but admire the quality and craftsmanship of the Life Fibers. It was of comparable density and sharpness to Bakuzan, which she spun out of the Original Life Fiber itself for Satsuki in the hopes that the Life

Fibers in the weapon would sway her to Ragyo's side, but when Ragyo sensed several Banshi threaded within Tournesol, she had to suppress a manic grin. Whoever created Ichigo's weapon was a genius and while it bothered her that she hadn't thought of doing such a thing herself, Ragyo planned on correcting that mistake the first chance she got. There were so many things she could do with a weapon created from the base of a Kamui.

Ichigo didn't know who this woman was but when he saw a slight tensing of his dad's neck as she spoke, he knew she wasn't to be trusted at face value. After making a mental note to ask his dad about what this woman was talking about when he had the time and patience to deal with it, he reluctantly lowered Tournesol to his side as he asked, "So you're Ragyo Kiryuin. I see where Satsuki gets that backdrop of light. How do you know me?"

Before she answered Ichigo, Ragyo looked at Mugetsu just long enough for the Kamui's eyes to dilate in fear. It was appropriate that clothing should always know its betters and a Kamui was no different. Even if they were made from nothing but the highest standards of Life Fibers Kamui instinctively could sense who she was. Letting out a huff of breath in amusement from Ichigo's question, Ragyo tilted her head around and asked Isshin, "Isshin, I'm hurt that you haven't told Ichigo about our relationship."

Isshin's face looked like he just eaten a particularly sour lemon as he answered, "I told him all he needed to know."

"I'm sure you did," Ragyo propped her hand under her chin. Isshin had no doubt told Ichigo one of the lies concerning their past relationship and if Nui's information was correct, it was the one involving the hotel bombing. Mentally chuckling at the mere thought of a bomb hurting her, Ragyo turned her attention back to Ichigo, "I've known your father for a very long time. As for how I know you Ichigo..."

Ragyo leaned in close enough to make Ichigo uncomfortable, "... it's because I was there the day you were born. In other words, I'm your

godmother."

"What?" Ichigo couldn't believe what he had just heard. There was no way that Ragyo Kiryuin, who he hadn't even heard of until he got the letter of acceptance to Honnouji Academy, was his godmother. If she was really his godmother, Ichigo was sure he would have heard his dad mention her at least once. Turning to his dad with a pleading look, he asked, "Is that true?"

Isshin coughed awkwardly and turned away, "It's really complicated but yeah, Ragyo is your godmother Ichigo."

That revelation came as a shock to everyone within earshot apart from Isshin and Ragyo. Even the normally cheerful Nui had adopted an expression of pure confusion as the gears within her mind wrapped around the new revelation. Behind Nui and watching the entire exchange between Ichigo and her mother with a discerning eye, Satsuki subtly motioned for Inumuta to begin recording everything that was said.

*"My mother is Ichigo Kurosaki's godmother? Such an act of generosity does not fit her usual motives."* Satsuki's eyes narrowed slightly as she processed the new piece of information. The answer to why her mother would choose to become Ichigo's godmother eluded her but the animosity between Isshin Kurosaki and her mother suggested there had been a strong relationship between them in the past.

"If you're really my godmother then why did you send Nui Harime to kill me?" Ichigo was having a hard time believing Ragyo was his godmother even if his dad had said so.

Ragyo smirked and closed her eyes. Folding her arms under her bosom and chuckling, she answered, "I believe you are mistaken, Ichigo. I did not send Nui Harime to do anything. As the Grand Couturier she has free reign to visit any and all Revocs-owned properties. My dear little Nui was simply playing with you because if

she really wanted to kill you..." Ragyo leaned in and finished in a whisper, "... you wouldn't even see it coming."

" **Focus, Ichigo!**" Mugetsu, who had been strangely silent up until this point, shouted to snap her wearer out of his sudden shock and nervousness. She may not have known or understood why the knowledge of who his godmother was would startle Ichigo but he couldn't afford to remain this way. The woman in front of them was dangerous and she would do her best to protect Ichigo from Ragyo Kiryuin, **"You cannot afford to let your guard down. This woman is extremely dangerous!"**

"So this is Mugetsu..." Ragyo pretended to ignore the Kamui's voice. It was best that for the time being the number of people aware of her true nature be limited to two.

Wrapping her hand around Ichigo's wrist before he could pull away, she rubbed her fingers against Mugetsu's gauntlet and suppressed the shiver that ran through her body. Feeling such exquisitely crafted Life Fibers responding to her touch like this always brought such great pleasure. The fact that Ichigo and his Kamui could converse with each other as they pleased also brought her great joy since it could only mean that the Life Fibers throughout his body were finally coming into maturity or as her lovely Nui puts it, awakening.

"When Nui told me about your Kamui I was skeptical," Ragyo strutted around Ichigo, taking in each and every aspect of Mugetsu in the process, "But I see now that I was mistaken. It makes sense that Isshin's progeny be able to control the marvelous power of a Kamui."

"Isn't that awesome?" Everybody was so caught up in what Ragyo was talking about that they failed to see Nui slide up next to Ururu and wrap her arm around the shy girl's neck in a hug. Pressing her face uncomfortably against Ururu's, Nui's single eye widened in pure glee, "Ichigo's Kamui is so amazing, isn't it Amu? Its craftsmanship is superb and its stitching is nearly perfect!"

"My name is Ururu not Amu."

Irritated at both Nui's insistence at calling her Amu as well as her constant touching, Ururu ducked down in a blur of motion that left normal human eyes wondering what was going on before she stood back up and slammed the palm of her hand flat against Nui's face. As the Grand Couturier blinked owlshly at her actions, Ururu spun on her heel and slammed Nui into the ground with enough force to send up a cloud of smoke.

Squinting to protect his eyes from the expanding cloud of dust, Ichigo felt something grab hold of his hand. Looking down he saw Ururu, who in the brief space of time between her attack and Ragyo turning around to watch it, had moved to his side. Opening his mouth to ask what was bothering her, he stopped when he saw an angry look in her normally droopy and sad eyes. From the way Ururu reacted to her, Ichigo had to guess she had some history with the Grand Couturier.

"Gosh that hurt!"

Floating down gently next to Ragyo, who still possessed a bemused smirk, Nui had a large grin on her face while blood continued to trickle out from her nose. Looking down at her nose with her one sapphire eye, Nui adopted a puzzled look as the damage to her body slowly healed, "But I'm super curious why you can hurt me."

"That's enough Nui," Ragyo placed a manicured hand on the Grand Couturier's shoulder, stopping Nui before she could press Ururu further. Wickedly grinning as she glanced from Isshin to Ururu and finally focusing on Ichigo, Ragyo shut her eyes and turned around, "I think we've taken up enough of Isshin's precious time and we do have business to attend to after all. I promise that once we're done you can play with Ichigo and Amu as much as your little heart desires."

"Okay Lady Ragyo!" Nui twirled around and blew a mock kiss to Ichigo, her wounds already fully healed, "I'll be seeing you around



real soon Ichigo!"

As Ichigo watched Nui skip away to catch up to Ragyo he noticed Satsuki walked up to his side. While the Student Council President had her usual stoic and condescending expression on her face, Ichigo could see that she was upset about something. Turning her dark blue eyes to look at him, Satsuki rested a hand on Bakuzan as she asked, "Am I correct to assume that you had no prior knowledge of what my mother just said?"

"That she is my godmother? Yeah, I was just as surprised as you were," Ichigo had a really bad feeling about Ragyo and it wasn't just that she had a rather limited understanding of invading his personal space. Aizen had made him nervous simply because the man's power, speed and intelligence were just so enormous that it took Ichigo everything in his arsenal just to weaken the traitor enough to be sealed. Ragyo, on the other hand, seemed to cause a primal sense of caution that Ichigo couldn't repress. There was also the matter of how his dad actually knew her because Ichigo sure as hell didn't believe the stupid excuse his dad told him and Uryu.

Folding his arms and releasing Mugetsu's transformation in a cascade of blue stars and lights, Ichigo huffed and asked, "Is it too late to take back my offer of being your Vice President?"

"Your official coronation will be tonight at the ceremony," Satsuki appeared to ignore his question as she walked past him with Inumuta trailing right behind her. Throughout the entire meeting the Information and Strategy Committee Chair had not stopped typing into his handheld computer and gave Ichigo a friendly little wave as he walked by.

"I must thank you Ichigo Kurosaki," Inumuta said amiably from beneath his collar, "Thanks to your timely appearance I was able to collect a lot of valuable data although it would be appreciative if you used had used your Gufū configuration. My data on that particular mode of your Kamui is sorely lacking."

"The dress code for the ceremony is strict, Ichigo," Satsuki said before Ichigo could threaten Inumuta. Turning her head around and staring at him with one eye, a slight haughty smirk adorned her face as she finished, "I expect you to dress properly for the occasion."

" ***Hey! What do you mean by that?***" Mugetsu was absolutely livid by Satsuki requiring Ichigo wear anything else but her. While she had come to an agreement with him that sometimes other clothes are better suited than a Kamui, she was enraged by the notion that Satsuki would force Ichigo to wear something else!

Ichigo ignored the outburst from his Kamui and huffed, "I don't own a suit and I'm sure as hell not wearing any of my dad's clothes."

"You misunderstand," Satsuki's heels clicked loudly against the floor as she walked away, "You are already wearing a Kamui. To my mother there can never be anything as grand as a Kamui. I will be wearing Junketsu and Matoi will most likely wear Senketsu. I expect for you to show up an hour early in Mugetsu. Anything else would be tantamount to spitting in my face."

Ichigo said nothing as Satsuki disappeared into the distance after her mother. He still couldn't get the bad feeling that something was off out of his mind. If it was as simple as dealing with someone insane like Nui Harime than Ichigo could figure out a way to solve that problem. The fact that Ragyo Kiryuin not only knew she was here at Honnouji Academy but found no fault in allowing Nui to kill at her leisure sent up many red flags. There was also the matter of Ragyo being his godmother that needed some explaining.

"I know what you're going to ask Ichigo," Isshin said with a loud sigh as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. Out of all the things he expected Ragyo to say or do he hadn't dreamed she would come out and admit that she was his godmother. Isshin had wanted to tell Ichigo later on after everything was dealt with but since Ragyo forced his hand, he saw no reason to hide it, "Yes, Ragyo is your godmother. Masaki and I both agreed to let Ragyo be your godmother because back when she was pregnant, Ragyo promised

Masaki to take care of you financially if anything were to befall us. I know she may not seem to be the most... normal... person but I'm pretty sure Ragyo would never intentionally hurt you."

"Fine," Ichigo grumbled and rubbed the back of his neck in an attempt to alleviate his rising annoyance with the whole situation. He had a nagging feeling that everything had just become a whole lot more complicated, "But there is one thing that's been bugging me."

"What's that?"

Before his dad could blink Ichigo rushed forward and grabbed him in a headlock, "Why the hell did you send Kon here?"

"I thought it would be a good idea!" Isshin argued as he struggled to free himself from Ichigo's surprisingly tight grasp.

"You thought it was a good idea?" Ichigo's eye was beginning to twitch as his mind failed to comprehend the sheer level of stupidity coming from his dad's mouth, "He wasn't here five minutes before he tried to hit on Ryuko! You sent a perverted mod soul to a school where every single girl's transformation involves them losing most of their clothing? What the hell were you thinking?"

**" *Ichigo, what's a mod soul?* "**

"I'll tell you later," Ichigo brushed off Mugetsu's curiosity to focus on more important matters such as beating the tar out of his dad for doing something as stupid as sending Kon to Honnouji Academy. Allowing Kon to get anywhere near Ryuko or Satsuki when they released their Kamui was a disaster waiting to happen although now that he thought about it, Ichigo probably wouldn't stop Satsuki if she tried to kill Kon. The little bastard would probably deserve it anyway.

"Umm..."

Ichigo and Isshin stopped fighting as Ururu made her presence known. Ever since Ragyo arrived and began taking an interest in her,

Ururu had done her best to stay out of the way until everything settled down. Giving his distracted son one last punch to the face, Isshin stood up and dusted his jacket off, "What's the matter Ururu?"

"Well..." Ururu twiddled her fingers and looked gloomily off to the side. She didn't know how to explain the weird feeling that suddenly shot through her body upon seeing Ragyo and Nui but the fact of the matter is that she hated it. It felt completely wrong to the normally depressed girl and she never wanted to feel it again, "It's just that everyone keeps calling me Amu but that's not my name. Do you know why they call me that, Mr. Kurosaki?"

"Oh boy..." Isshin knew this moment would come and, to be frank, he wished he never wished it would. What he was about to say would most likely make Ururu very upset and he didn't want to give the normally sad girl even more stress to deal with but he really had no choice. It was either he tell her now when he could comfort her afterwards and explains things clearly or allow Ragyo to tell her. Isshin didn't doubt Ragyo would put such a spin on the truth that Ururu would subconsciously begin believing the woman, "Ok, you really want to know Ururu? It's rather complicated and but Ichigo, you must first promise me one thing."

Ichigo's eyebrows rose in confusion, "What?"

Isshin pouted childishly, "You must promise to not hit me! Got it?"

Rolling his eyes sarcastically, Ichigo nevertheless mockingly waved his hand. He was curious about what his dad was going to say, "Yeah, yeah, I promise not to hit you."

"Alright then," Isshin took a deep breath and prepared for what was to come, "The reason Ragyo and Nui call you Amu, Ururu, is because that was your name before Kisuke took you in and adopted you. The truth of the matter is that you're Nui Harime's twin sister."

"Hang on a second!" Ichigo grabbed his dad by the front of his jacket. He could hear Ururu begin sniffing as the weight of what his

dad said began to sink in, "Are you out of your mind? There's no way in hell that Ururu is related to that insane little psychopath!"

"Ururu..." Isshin ignored the subtle threat from Ichigo to focus on what was important. It seemed that he was correct in his assumption that Ururu would not deal well with the revelation that she and Nui were twins. Easily pulling himself free from his son's grasp, Isshin knelt in front of Ururu and placed his hands on her shoulders, "Ururu, look at me. Just because you and Nui are twins does not mean you are anything like her. Just look at my adorable little girls! Yuzu and Karin couldn't be any more different and yet they live under the same roof! If my cute twins aren't alike at all, what are the chances you are anything like Nui Harime?"

The tears in Ururu's eyes threatened to fall as she sniffled, "L-Low?"

Isshin grinned goofily and pulled Ururu into a one-armed hug, "You and Nui may be twins but you're your own person. Don't let something as stupid as genetics tell you what to do. Make your own decisions in life and deal with the consequences of your actions. If Nui or anyone else tries to convince you otherwise you either ignore them or convince them that they are wrong. It's as simple as that!"

A small smile graced Ururu's face as she began to calm down, "Do you really mean that Mr. Kurosaki?"

"Of course I do!" Isshin gloated with a chuckle, "And If that's not good enough, Ichigo will be more than willing to threaten those who won't leave you alone. The scowl on his face should be more than enough to scare away even the likes of Nui!"

"Go to hell, old man!"

With an angry shout Ichigo kicked his dad in the back of head. Giving an angry aside glance to the smoking crater Isshin's head was currently stuck in, Ichigo turned to Ururu and nervously sighed, "My dad actually has a point. Even if you are related to Nui Harime there is no chance in hell you are anything like her."

"But if we're twins..." Ururu seemed to struggle to articulate her thoughts. For all her strength and power she was nothing more than a sixteen year old girl who just had perhaps the most devastating news of her life delivered to her, "... if that's true, what does that make me?"

Instead of answering Ichigo gently hit the top of Ururu's head with his fist, "How many times do I have to say it? You're Ururu and Nui is Nui. That's all there is to it. Now come on, I need to find Kon before Ryuko ends up killing him."

"Ok," Ururu started to follow him before turning around to look at Isshin, "But what about your dad?"

"He'll be fine," Ichigo answered with a lack of concern. The man was withholding a lot of information about Ragyo and how she knew him and Ichigo wasn't about to let his dad get away with that, "Now come on. If we're lucky we can get some of the catering before Mako eats everything."

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Dusk fell quickly over Honnou City as the chilly air of the autumn night forced anyone outside to seek the comfort of warmth. Up at Honnouji Academy, which would normally have been empty due to the students going home for the weekend, there was a constant hustle and bustle as students brought their families to the Parent Student Day ceremony. It was here that every parent will receive an update on the current situation of Honnouji Academy as well as an in-depth review of their child's progress in the year. Satsuki Kiryuin had initially started Parent Student Day as a way to weed out those too weak to stay in Honnouji Academy and thus every year those at the border between passing and failing became more and more nervous as they contemplated whether this would be the year they would be expelled.

The large ballroom in which the venue was to take place this year was perhaps the least used room in all of Honnouji Academy. The room, usually empty apart from the weekly dusting and cleaning, was now packed to the brim with every single amenity that money could buy. Apart from dozens, if not hundreds, of tables that stretched across the extraordinarily large room there was a band playing German waltzes and classical songs in one of the corners. Up on the stage that dominated the far side of the ballroom, Rei Hououmaru held up one hand to her ear as one of her men updated her on the situation.

"Everything is in order then?" The petite woman seemed pleased by what the man on the other end said. She had apologized to Lady Ragyo for being late due to some last minute work at Revocs but now that she was here, Rei was going to make sure everything went off without a hitch. While Lady Satsuki had done an almost perfect job on accommodating for her mother's presence, there were a few things that Rei had to alter or replace. Lady Ragyo was fickle about several things that she hadn't informed her daughter about and as much as Rei did not look forward to Satsuki's verbal displeasure, she was looking forward to Ragyo's disappointment even less.

"I see..." Rei stared out over the ballroom where students and their parents were filing in and noticed Isshin just walking in, "Lady Ragyo wishes to know if the final seating arrangements been updated."

Rei Hououmaru fully understood why Lady Ragyo wanted the location Isshin Kurosaki's table but she was confused about why she wanted it moved. She had no idea why it had to be the table two rows away from the stage and eighth from the right but Rei would never complain. If Lady Ragyo wanted Isshin Kurosaki to sit at that particular spot then Rei was going to comply without argument.

"Oh wow!" Mako Mankanshoku looked around the ballroom with stars twinkling in her eyes. In all her time at Honnouji Academy she had never been to this particular room. Even though she had been to Parent Student Days in the past, none of them involved the use of this very special and forbidden room. Satsuki had expressively

forbidden any student from entering this room under penalty of death and expulsion, in that order. Twirling around in her fancy new dress, her brown eyes taking in as much detail as they could without exploding from the excitement, Mako grabbed a silent Ururu's hand and began running away.

"Let's go find our seats Ururu!"

"Humph," Ryuko had her hands placed squarely on her hips. As she looked over the crowd of men and women in suits and dresses she had the distinct feeling that she was a tad bit underdressed for the occasion, "Hey Senketsu, you think I'm underdressed?"

" ***Of course I don't!***" Senketsu was insulted by the idea he wasn't as fashionable as the boring clothes he was forced to surround himself with. A Kamui was the epitome of fashion and everything else was just plain boring! Huffing indignantly, he rolled his eye and stared up at Ryuko, ***"As a Kamui I am the best piece of clothing in the world. Everything else is but an attempt to reach my level of perfection. That is why I refuse to allow you to wear anything else besides your pajamas!"***

"Oh? Is that so?" Ryuko quirked an eyebrow in annoyance at her Kamui's snooty attitude, "If that's the case, I think next week I'll go back to wearing my old uniform and blazer. Perhaps five days of hanging on the wall will teach you some respect."

" ***Y-You wouldn't!***" Senketsu began shaking in fear and nervously around Ryuko's body at the thought of being separated from his friend for so long. He didn't know if he could last five days without being worn and that single thought made him start blubbering incoherently. ***"I thought you cared about me, Ryuko!"***

"Uh... there, there," Ryuko awkwardly rubbed Senketsu's lapels to calm him down. Why did her Kamui have to be so emotional all the time? At least it was better than Mugetsu, who seemed to be overly jealous of Ichigo to the point of tearing up his normal clothes. Ryuko still remember hearing that argument all the way from the Slums, "I



was kidding Senketsu. Can't you take a joke? Of course I would never wear anything but you. You are by Sunday best after all."

"Yeah man, grow a pair why don't you?"

Kon stood on Ryuko's shoulder with a completely miserable look on his plushie face. While Ryuko had stopped trying to kill him on the sole condition that he not peek on her changing, his humiliation had not ended. As soon as she could, Ryuko had given him to Mako and told her that he was a 'magically talking plushie that was wished into life.' Mako, like the simple minded girl she is, had fallen for the lie instantly. It was to his eternal horror that Mako had dressed him in a miniature version of a girl's One-Star Goku Uniform and proceeded to call him Bostov.

"Shut it!" Ryuko squeezed Kon's neck, causing the mod soul to exaggaratingly choke, "You're supposed to keep quiet. What if someone hears you?"

"Listen lady, everyone already knows I can talk," Kon pulled himself free from Ryuko's clutched and hopped to the floor. Dusting his body off and wishing Mako hadn't stapled the stupid dress to his body, he turned around and pointed an arm at her, "If you remember our little chase earlier I ran past nearly half the school trying to get away from you. I think by now the entire school knows I can talk, which is a problem because now I can't hide in the girl's locker room and - "

Kon was cut off when Ryuko stomped down on his face with her sneaker several times before picking him up and throwing him away in the nearest trash can. Huffing in embarrassment, Ryuko folded her arms and followed after Mako. She felt like she needed a shower just from being around Kon and hoped she never met anyone else as perverted as the plushie.

Some distance away from where Kon was trying to pull himself out of a trash can, Barazo Mankanshoku laughed jovially as he shook Isshin's hand. He had come to Parent Student Day with Sukuyo but unfortunately had to leave Mataro at home with Guts. Actually, it

wasn't that bad of a situation. After they were kicked out of the Two-Star Residential District back to their old home in the Slums, Barazo had noticed that they needed several things. So while they were seen in public at the ceremony, Mataro could go out and steal what the family needed. It was the perfect alibi.

"So you must be Ichigo's dad?" Barazo shook the equally enthusiastic Isshin's hand, "I've heard good things about your clinic in Karakura Town. Is it true you were labeled the third best family clinic in northern Japan?"

"That's right. I've been in the top ten for nine years running now," Isshin laughed alongside Barazo while they compared their individual practices. Out of all the parents and students attending the ceremony, Isshin's white suit and bloodred tie made him stand out the most, but he didn't care. He may have gotten this suit nineteen years ago but what really irritated him is that Ragyo stole his fashion sense for her COVERS design. Couldn't she have at least asked him first before using his suit pattern?

"I noticed," Barazo folded his arms and nodded at something, "Hey, I was wondering if you could hook me up with some extra packets of blood? As a Back Alley Doctor my clinic is kind of short on some vital supplies and I'd rather not get caught stealing blood again. The last time I got caught Sukuyo had to pay my bail! I was forced to sleep outside for a whole week in the middle of winter!"

"I only did that because I love you," Sukuyo hugged Barazo's arm tightly causing the man to scream in pain, "A Back Alley Doctor such as yourself should know better than to get caught."

"Some extra blood you say? I suppose I could scrounge up some extra supplies if you really need it..." Isshin scratched at his chin as he contemplated whether or not he should bother Ryuken about this. The man might be a ruthless businessman who always stuck to the rules and laws but he was a doctor before any of that. If he explained to the man what the situation was, Isshin was sure Ryuken would

somehow mysteriously send several crates of refrigerated blood to the Mankanshoku Clinic.

While Isshin and Barazo were discussing the best way to transport blood into Honnou City without getting caught, Ryuko had already found her assigned table. As she stared at the placard on the table with her name on it, she glanced up at the stage looming just a dozen feet away. Ryuko should have known Satsuki Kiryuin would make sure she had a front row seat as she made Ichigo her Vice President. Satsuki was really being underhanded if she was trying this hard to make her mad. Lazily sitting down in her chair with one leg propped up on the table, Ryuko let out an irritated huff as she imagined what the ceremony was going to be like.

"Since when were you invited, Transfer Student?" Ryuko's eye started twitching as a familiar voice mocked her, "I thought this was Parent Student Day. Didn't you say your dad was dead?"

Tilting her head backwards over the chair, Ryuko frowned when she saw Nonon Jakuzure in her old Three-Star Goku Uniform. Actually, strike that. Unlike her original uniform, Nonon's new uniform had three golden yellow stars instead of black ones, "Screw you! I see you finally shown your true colors, you Snake."

Nonon actually looked surprised by that as she blinked owlishly in confusion, "What are you talking about, Transfer Student?"

With the advantage on her side, Ryuko waved off the pink haired girl's question with a haughty chuckle, "Please, did you really think Ichigo and I were convinced by your little show about getting revenge on Satsuki? We would have to be really stupid to fall for such bad acting. Thanks for the help against Sanageyama though. I really couldn't have beaten him without your super awesome advice."

Nonon snarled and slammed her forehead hard against Ryuko's, her majorette's hat falling over her face while sparks shot between their eyes. As pink eyes glared daggers into Ryuko's blue ones, Nonon

scoffed and placed her hands on her hips, "While I really dislike Strawberry for defeating me, I'm going to make sure I humiliate you when Lady Satsuki allows me to fight you. I'm going to kick your ass so hard you won't be able to sit down for years, stupid Transfer Student!"

"Ryuko! Nonon!" Mako slid up between the two girls and brought them into a big group hug. With a large smile on her face, Mako looked back and forth between them and asked, "Isn't it awesome that we're all sitting at the same table? It must be a coincidence or something!"

"Don't lump me in with you Underachiever," Nonon growled sarcastically as she pushed Mako off her body. After wiping her Goku Uniform free of any germs Mako might have given her, Nonon began walking away before stopping and turning around, "Just to make things clear Underachiever, I'm not your friend and I have never been your friend. In fact, I will never be your friend! I am Lady Satsuki's best friend and nothing will ever change that!"

"Ok then!" Mako waved goodbye to a frustrated Nonon as she added, "I'll make sure to stop by during lunch with lots of croquettes my mom made! She just went shopping so be ready for anything!"

As Nonon's frustrated shout echoed throughout the ballroom due to Mako's innocent question, Isshin was in the midst of telling Barazo about his adorable girls when his phone went off. While that would normally not be a cause for concern, the fact that the ringtone was a recording of him singing a song really badly caused Isshin to rapidly fumble around his pockets. Once he managed to find the offensive device and turn it to vibrate, he gave Barazo a nervous chuckle, "Sorry about that but I need to take this call. I made the ringtone really embarrassing so I can't just ignore it. I'll be back in about five minutes.

Quickly walking out of the ballroom before he could embarrass himself further, Isshin soon reached what appeared to be a deserted hallway. Pulling his cellphone back out and checking to make sure

he was completely alone, Isshin stopped before proceeding any further and opened a nearby door on the off chance Nui Harime was standing right behind it eavesdropping on his conversation. Once he was completely certain the coast was clear, he redialed the number and brought his phone up to his ear, "What did you want?"

"How goes the party?" Aikuro Mikisugi answered in a nasally tone. A teacher coming down with the flu would normally be a really bad thing but for a nudist like Aikuro it was the perfect excuse to work undercover since no one would be watching him. As he blew his nose into the last tissue from the box, Aikuro threw the now empty box across his apartment into the trashcan and asked, "I would be there but I'm sick."

"I don't need to be a doctor to know that," Isshin answered sarcastically, "But that's not why you called, is it?"

Aikuro smiled, "Ah, you know me too well. So what's the answer?"

"Well..." Isshin paused momentarily before finishing, "There's no doubt they are both definitely here. I ran into Ragyo and her little helper not five minutes after they landed in order to check if they sent a pair of decoys to throw everyone off. They are the real deal."

"That's all I needed to hear. You should probably get back to the ceremony before anyone notices you're missing."

"Good luck, Aikuro."

Isshin snapped his cellphone shut as he contemplated what he was doing. He knew that he had to stop Ragyo's plans before they could come to fruition but he didn't know just how wide his old friend's grip on the world had become. When his ears picked up the sound of polite and loud clapping coming from the direction of the ballroom, Isshin turned and ran back. He needed to get to his seat before Ragyo started her speech. It's a good thing he had gone to the bathroom beforehand. Ragyo's speeches could last for hours if she

was on a roll and he had a feeling this was going to be one of those nights.

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"Good luck, Aikuro."

Aikuro stared at his phone for a few seconds before pursing his lips as he began dialing a new number. The opportunity that Isshin was giving Nudist Beach was perhaps a once in a lifetime chance. Up to this point Nudist Beach had always been wary about going after high class international targets due to the likelihood that the Grand Couturier would be waiting for them. With Isshin confirming that both Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime were here in Honnouji Academy, Aikuro needed to make some calls on his private phone. To pass this up would be a costly mistake not only to his organization but to every single human on Earth.

Across the globe and in a different time zone, Kinue Kinagase stood on the top of the Eiffel Tower in the midst of rainy Paris morning. With her black and red hair matted down against her face by the heavy rain, she stared through a detached rifle scope at the high security Revocs facility more than two kilometers away across the Seine River. This particular facility was vital for Revocs's control of the apparel market for Western Europe. It was from here that every single Life Fiber was distributed to the unwary public. Upon hearing her phone ringing, she scoffed angrily but nevertheless picked it up. As a clap of thunder echoed in the background, she scolded Aikuro, "You know I'm on a mission. Why are you calling me? Do you know how dangerous this is for the both of us if I get caught?"

"You won't get caught. What do you take me for, an idiot?" When Aikuro didn't hear anything but the sound of heavy rain through the phone, he quickly added, "Never mind. Don't answer that. I'm calling you because Isshin has just confirmed the presence of Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime at Parent Student Day. They will be forced to

remain in Honnouji Academy for at least a few more hours. Operation Paris Fashion Week is to proceed."

Kinue's eyes widened for a moment before a relieved smile adorned her face. She knew this day would come eventually but for it to come so soon was a complete surprise to the older Kinagase. Crouching down on the Eiffel Tower with her phone still pressed firmly against her ear, Kinue lowered the scope away from her eye, "I see. What are the specifications of the operation? Has anything changed?"

"The operation remains as intended," Aikuro answered, "You are to get in, set the Anti-Life Fiber charges and get out before it blows. With any luck we can cripple Revocs's chokehold over Western Europe for years."

That was both the good and the bad about having a dedicated facility like this. Inside the wall tens of tons of raw Life Fibers were stored, just waiting to be sewn into every piece of Revocs clothing. If Kinue could destroy it all, Ragyo Kiryuin would be forced to ship out an entire new shipment of Life Fibers, which Nudist Beach could then harass and stop.

**" Finally we can get down to fucking business!"** A crass voice called out as Kinue hung up her phone, **"This spy crap was getting really boring!"**

Kinue sighed and shook her head, "What have I don't you about language, Danketsu?"

**" Go to hell,"** Danketsu's eyes swiveled up to look at her wearer. In the weeks since her fateful battle against Ururu, Kinue had noticed a slight diminishing in her Kamui's animosity and insatiable bloodlust. That did not mean Danketsu's behavior had changed. The Kamui still cursed up a storm and was rude and obnoxious, which made Kinue glad that no one but a few people could hear her voice. Blinking once and then twice as she looked over her form, Danketsu gave a satisfied huff, **"But I am happy you stopped wearing**

***clothing over me. As a Kamui being touched by those pieces of crap was an insult. When are you going to get rid of the pants?"***

"You know why I wear military fatigues," Kinue had already gone over this line of thought with Danketsu several times in the past. Her Kamui may be powerful and allow her access to a level of strength no normal human could dream of but she lacked pockets. There was no way that Kinue could carry all her Nudist Beach equipment on Danketsu's form. So while she had foregone wearing anything from the waist up apart from Danketsu's transformed state, Kinue constantly wore a pair of military fatigues simply for the pockets.

***" I do and I don't care,"*** Danketsu paused as her eyes focused on something in the distance. When she spoke again, her voice was full of anger and hate, ***"There someone at the Revocs facility with a large concentration of Life Fibers. I want to fucking kill them."***

Kinue frowned, "How strong are they?"

***" You have to be kidding if you think they are a match for us!"*** Danketsu exclaimed proudly before answering, ***"They are stronger than the mockery Three-Star uniforms at Honnouji Academy but nowhere close to the power of a true Kamui like me!"***

There was only one group of people on the planet that Danketsu could be talking about. Kinue stood up and stared out over the dreary Paris morning before letting out a huff of annoyance as her mission just became more complicated and risky, "Xcution."

Xcution, the most powerful group of men and women under the employ of Ragyo Kiryuin, was a name that struck fear into Nudist Beach and was one of the reasons why they had been mostly forced to remain within the borders of Japan. They were the crème of the crop in terms of power. While they most certainly did not possess Kamui, since all but a handful of humans would be devoured by the Life Fiber clothing, they did have uniforms that made them nearly unstoppable.



Kinue had yet to fight them herself since in the past she had been more worried about losing control over her emotions and allowing Danketsu to transform into a monster. Yet from the vague and minimal reports headquarters received, Xcution had no qualms about killing their operatives. Unlike Nui Harime, who preferred to play around for a while before killing them, Xcution would move in right away for the kill. This meant that Nudist Beach had no idea what powers their Life Fiber outfits possessed. The only information they had indicated Xcution's power was above that of the Three-Star Goku Uniforms Aikuro had reported at Honnouji Academy.

" ***You're going to kill them right?***" There was no hiding the excitement in Danketsu's voice as she mentally salivated over the thought of completely destroying Life Fibers.

"Does it look like I have a choice?" Kinue sarcastically asked her Kamui as stared at the Revocs facility before taking a single step off the Eiffel Tower. As she fell through the rain-filled air, her eyes narrowing slightly in the process, she flipped around in midair and shouted, "Danketsu Funsha!"

Kinue's body was surrounded by a burst of purple and blue light before she rocketed up into the sky over Paris. Hovering in midair in her newly discovered flight configuration, Kinue allowed the feeling of the Life Fibers in her body to envelop her. As much as Danketsu still did not like her, she could not help but appreciate the fact her Kamui was willing to allow her access to a greater portion of her strength. Silently thanking Ichigo Kurosaki once more for helping her move on with her life, Kinue spun around and allowed a stream of dark purple exhaust to shoot out of the jet engine her legs had morphed into.

While twin contrails trailed behind the two wings arcing away on either side of her back, Kinue pulled out her Genji blade and held it in her armored hand. She knew that using her Funsha configuration would undoubtedly make the Xcution member aware of her presence but Kinue was counting on the fact Danketsu was a Kamui to shift

things in her favor. She might be unaware of the XCution member's ability but the same could be said about her.

Flying high enough that the ground-based defenses surrounding the facility were unable to lock onto her, Kinue spun around in the air and flew downwards. As the rain of anti-aircraft bullets flashed past her, Kinue crashed through the reinforced roof of the building with ease before landing in a crouch on the floor.

As the smell of pure and raw Life Fibers assaulted her senses, causing Danketsu to shift and morph around her body in anger and disgust, Kinue tried to mentally calm her Kamui down. While she may not have liked the smell of Life Fibers any more than Danketsu, they could not afford to show weakness. Once Danketsu managed to get herself under control, after much coaxing from Kinue and another promise to defeat the member of Xcution, Kinue finally had a chance to get started on her mission. Patting the Anti-Life Fiber charge in one of her pockets, Kinue began walking towards the main storage room of the facility, her purple heels clicking ominously against the bare concrete floor. All she needed to do was place the charge in the storage room and get out within ten minutes before it detonated. It was simple enough except for the fact that someone was rushing towards her back at speeds much greater than a human should possess.

Spinning around and raising her Genji blade, Kinue blocked the armored kick that would have either broken her neck or killed her instantly. As sparks flew off her blade as her opponent continued to try and overpower her, Kinue felt the jets on her back burst into life. As power coursed through her body, she let out a determined shout before she managed to throw her opponent off and into the catwalks above. Letting out a sigh as steam shot out from Danketsu, Kinue gripped her Genji blade tightly as she looked around in the shadows for her opponent.

"So I was right," Kinue took a few steps forward as she attempted to sense her opponent. With all the Life Fibers in the building as well as

the air it was nearly impossible for Danketsu to pinpoint their location, "You're a member of Xcution."

"Is that a Kamui?" A distinctly French and feminine accent echoed all around her as Kinue finally saw her opponent. With one armor-covered leg propped up on a railing, the woman on the catwalk moved a lock of dark hair out from in front of her eyes, "It's no wonder you were able to sense and block my attack. Lady Ragyo knew you Nudists would come here eventually but she had no idea one of you actually had a Kamui. A long lost work of the late Isshin Matoi, I presume?"

"You can keep on presuming," Kinue shifted her leg back and raised her Genji blade, "It won't help you."

"Let's just calm down for a moment," The French woman casually leapt off the catwalk before landing just in front of Kinue, allowing her to see just who it was she was dealing with. The woman's body was covered in a distinctive white armor with glowing gold trim with the Revocs logo superimposed with the symbol for Xcution on her chest right over her heart. As the dark skinned woman's eyes took in all of Danketsu, she could not help but whistle in appreciation, "So that's what a Kamui looks like, huh? I've seen some of the work by the Grand Couturier but I never thought I would see an actual Kamui in battle. It's really something."

"Are we going to talk or fight?" Kinue couldn't afford for her opponent to keep talking. Every second wasted was another second a silent alarm could be sent out informing Ragyo Kiryuin of the situation. Charging forward towards the woman, Kinue attempted to stab her Genji blade through her gut only to find the woman quickly shifting to the side and out of the path of her blade.

"I had hoped to kill you quickly so you wouldn't feel any pain." The woman seemed almost remorseful as she stared at her clenched fist, "I detest drawn out violence but Lady Ragyo gave me the order to kill all intruders so that's what I'm going to do. Je suis désolé. Jackie

Tristan's the name. Let's see how your Kamui stands up to the power of my Sanguinaire Raiment!"

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### **Kamui Tales #13 - Meeting the Boss**

Ichigo and Ryuko stood on the outskirts of Honnou city with annoyed expressions on their faces. They had no idea why Aikuro Mikisugi had dragged them out here on a Sunday but as they stared at their teacher, who seemed to be doing his best to not look back, Ryuko had finally reached her breaking point. Storming across the road and grabbing Aikuro by his tie, she pulled down hard until the Nudist was at eye level with her.

"Are you going to explain why the hell you dragged us out into the middle of nowhere?" Aikuro wilted under Ryuko's angry gaze as beads of nervous sweat began running down his face. Raising his hands in a placating gesture, he managed to coherently say, "Now Ryuko, I brought you and Ichigo out here for a good reason. It's been quite some time now and the leader of my organization wants to meet you two."

"Wait a second," Ryuko glanced away before scowling. Shaking Aikuro's body like a ragdoll, she shouted, "You're saying that the nonsense you told us about Nudist Beach was all true? I thought you were just being a pervert!"

Ichigo would have said something if not for the truck barreling toward them down the road. Just before the vehicle could run them over, it abruptly spun to the side and skidded to a halt as the smell of burning rubber tires assaulted their noses. For a moment the truck, painted in a nondescript color to prevent drawing any unwanted suspicion, was silent apart from the creaking of the engine cooling down. The silence was shattered when the driver's door swung open and an immensely massive man stood up.

"I see that your mission at Honnouji Academy is coming along nicely. Well done Aikuro," The man walked forward and patted Aikuro on the shoulder. While it appeared to be nothing more than a friendly tap, the force behind it was enough to cause Aikuro to stumble forward.

While he was initially put off by the man's large size, he was bigger than Kenpachi for crying out loud, his seemingly normal behavior and dressed state calmed Ichigo down. Perhaps Aikuro was the only member of Nudist Beach who actually liked to be nude. That belief was broken completely when the man, upon spotting Ryuko staring at him with her mouth slightly agape, got down on one knee and began crying tears of joy.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies for not introducing myself to you as soon as I arrived! It has been quite some time since my eyes have been able to look upon the beautiful visage worthy of belonging to Isshin Matoi's daughter! While I can never hope to equal the sheer majestic charisma and authority belonging to your late father, I will do my best to emulate the greatness that he possessed in life."

"Who... I... what..." The sheer ridiculousness staring her in the face had temporarily caused Ryuko to lose the ability to form complete and coherent sentences. Even Senketsu was affected by the man's exuberance. The Kamui's multicolored eye had taken the form of a swirl as he temporarily passed out from the man's nonsense.

"Oh dear, in my haste to apologize for my rudeness I have forgotten to introduce myself." The man flexed and in an instant his shirt was torn off his body, exposing rippling muscles and a virtual constellation of purple stars sparkling around his body, "Allow me to take this moment to do so. I am Alex Louis Armstrong, leader of Nudist Beach and your father's former second in command. Under my caring and well-defined arms the organization shall free humanity from the throes of Life Fibers and allow each person to live the life they please! Now please look upon my sculpted body and accept my sincerest apologies!"

Ryuko's mind, already pushed to the brink, abruptly collapsed in a desperate attempt to save itself. With white foam leaking out from the corners of her mouth, Ryuko collapsed to the road in a twitching heap, her mind unable to comprehend the existence of someone who is even more of a Nudist than Aikuro.

Alex Louis Armstrong failed to see the impact his body and mannerisms had on Ryuko since he had already turned his attention to Ichigo. While Aikuro dragged Ryuko's body away in the background, Armstrong firmly clasped Ichigo's hand within his own and stared into his eyes.

"It is good to finally meet you, young Ichigo!" Even though he was giving a friendly handshake, Ichigo felt as if his hand was being crushed to dust, "Your father has said many good things about you and I am looking forward to working together for the good of humanity!"

Ichigo was nearly on the verge of unconsciousness himself before something Armstrong said caught his attention, "Wait a second. How do you know my dad?"

Armstrong's blue eyes widened before the sparkles reappeared around his face, "It appears that I have spoken too soon. Your father wanted to explain things himself but in my haste to introduce myself I have failed to heed his words."

Abruptly stepping back and flexing his body in front of Ichigo, Armstrong leaned in and declared, "Please accept my sincerest apologies for spilling your father's secret! If you seek to punish someone for hiding this knowledge, please make me the sole focus of your righteous fury. I deserve no less for breaking the sacred oath your father bestowed upon me!"

"Uh... Sir?" Aikuro appeared at Armstrong's side before he could say anything else, "Satsuki Kiryuin has started to mobilize her Elite Four. At the current rate she will be here in three minutes."

That would complicate things. Armstrong had an entire list of things he needed to say to Ichigo and Ryuko and with the latter unconscious he needed to find a place to lay low. Coming to the conclusion that going back to Osaka would be a terrible idea, Alex Louis Armstrong reached over and picked Ichigo up with a single hand.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Ichigo shouted as he tried, and failed, to free himself.

"I apologize for my rude behavior but I will explain everything once we reach the nearest Nudist Beach safe house. Please save all subsequent questions for the presentation later on."

Picking Ryuko's unconscious form off the ground, Armstrong gently placed her in the back of his truck before throwing Ichigo in after her. Getting into the driver's seat, he quickly turned the engine on, spun the truck around and shot off into the distance. While Ichigo was quick to untangle himself, he was forced back in his seat as the truck accelerated into the triple digits while Armstrong explained where they were going.

"This safe house is someplace where no Kiryuin would dare to defile. It has been in the Armstrong family for generations and it will remain as such until the Earth is safe once more!"

Aikuro awkwardly waved goodbye as Armstrong drove off. He knew Ichigo and Ryuko would be really pissed off at him when they got back. Hopefully he could find a place to lay low until their anger settled down.

# Until You Come Back to Me

*So Chapter 26 arrives and with it comes the official announcement of a few things. Yes, Xcution will be in my story and as you can tell they will not be pushovers. Just read Kinue's fight against Jackie Tristan below if you have any doubts. Trying to make her Sanguinaire Raiment more powerful than Satsuki's Regalia was a little difficult but I think it worked out in the end. Oh, just a quick warning for those of you who understand French, Kinue curses in French in this chapter and I hope I got the words correctly.*

*I hope you shippers are happy with this chapter. I finally gave a small hint of a pairing but that's probably not enough for you guys. Everything will come in due time. Also, I had some fun writing the omake, especially the different interactions between the Kamui. There are many shout outs to various games, animes and other things in this chapter. Try and find them all if you can!*

*This chapter has been proofread to the best of my ability but some grammatical errors might have come through. Enjoy and don't forget to read and review if you can!*

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## Chapter 26 - Until You Come Back to Me

During the worldwide recession after the turn of the millennium, France's economy had faltered to a halt before slowing shrinking. For nearly two years the number of people losing their jobs and homes continued to increase and for most citizens it appeared that the recession would soon end up becoming a full-blown depression.

That was when Ragyo Kiryuin and Revocs came to the rescue.



In an act that seemed absolutely generous she had come to Paris with the intentions of making it the epicenter of her conglomerate's European operations. With the country's economy declining by the week and with no hope in the near future, the French government had quickly agreed to the easy terms of Ragyo's contract. The only term that caused any amount of discussion was the concession that the main facility in Paris be given a quart mile zone surrounding it where no one apart from company employees can go. While initially wary of such secrecy, the state of the country forced the government's hands and they easily capitulated to all of Ragyo's terms. Almost as soon as the Paris Distribution Facility had come online the French economy shifted in reverse. The amount of revenue and taxes Revocs brought first to Paris and then the rest of the country quickly turned France into the leading economy of Europe.

Three men clad in standard armor Revocs Security Force armor methodically searched the western side of the facility for the intruder spotted only a few minutes ago. As soon as the silent alarm went off, the security personal on duty had spun into action. They had no idea how the intruder managed to pierce the blanket of anti-aircraft cover but they were going to get answers, one way or another. With the recent addition of an Xcution member there was no way the intruder could hide for long.

"Any sign of the intruder?" The leader of the group asked, his voice muffled by the mask he was wearing. All three of them were wearing the standard Revocs Life-Fiber Anti-Personal Military-Spec Uniforms. The uniforms augmented their speed, strength and reaction time to twice that of a normal human, which allowed them to counter any threat that might be posed by governmental forces or Nudist Beach.

"No sir!" the second security personal snapped off a salute before wiping rain off his face, "This area appears to be secure."

"Understood. Let's do one last sweep before moving to the next sector. Mademoiselle Tristan is not a very patient woman -"

The leader was cut short when the sound of explosions echoed out from somewhere within the facility. Raising his weapon, his men doing the same, he cautiously approached the employee's entrance. As the pouring rain drowned out any sounds apart from the pitter patter of rain hitting the ground, the leader swiped his keycard in the pad next to the door. Once the light turned from red to green and indicated it was unlocked, he nodded to one of his men to open the door while he and the other man covered it with their weapons. Just as the man shifted the handle downwards and disengaged the lock, the entire wall exploded as Kinue Kinagase's body was thrown through concrete and steel into the cold and pouring rain.

As debris from her collision rained down around her, Kinue let out a grunt coming more from discomfort than pain as she hit the ground with an audible thud. Waiting until she bounced along the ground a second time, Kinue stabbed her right arm out and planted it against the wet surface before flipping herself over. While her Kamui's purple heels dug twin trenches in the ground before coming to a complete stop, Kinue let out an exasperated sigh as she reached up to dislodge a particularly persistent piece of debris from her hair. When she felt something shift painfully inside her shoulder, Kinue cautiously tried to move her left arm only to stop when her entire shoulder lit up in pain.

*" My shoulder's broken in two... no three places."*

Kinue suppressed a groan of pain as she tried to think about how Jackie Tristan broke her shoulder. She couldn't understand how her power was increasing but when she let her guard down for one tiny fraction of second, her opponent connected with a punch that nearly shattered her left clavicle in several places.

**" You are a complete idiot,"** Danketsu sneered angrily right before a burst of steam spewed forth from the vents on her back. Tensing her body tightly as she felt the bone in her shoulder shift painfully back into place, Kinue waited until Danketsu was done before trying to move her left arm. As she flexed her hand and rotated her shoulder, Danketsu looked up at her and rolled her eyes, **" You**

***should be down on your hands and knees thanking me that our bond allows me to heal your injuries. Now go back in there and kick her ass!"***

Kinue responded to her Kamui's criticism by simply rolling her eyes. She couldn't really fault Danketsu for her anger. It was her fault that she had broken her shoulder, "Thank you for healing me. Now focus on the fight at hand. Just because Jackie Tristan isn't wearing a Kamui doesn't mean I can afford to go easy on her. That last punch was almost on your level of power."

***" Don't try and blame your failure on me!"*** Danketsu snapped at Kinue angrily, ***" That woman would need to be at least twice as strong to even stand close to our level!"***

A form walking through the debris alerted Kinue and Danketsu that their opponent was coming back. Slowly and carefully removing her Genji blade from its sheath, Kinue knew this would be a test of how much her training over the past months paid off. Before she acquired the Genji blade from Professor Matoj, she had been training herself in basic hand-to-hand combat but once she possessed a weapon capable of cutting all but the most powerful of Life Fibers, Kinue was forced to renew her training.

Turning her head towards Jackie Tristan, beads of water dripping heavily from her black and red hair, Kinue narrowed her eyes when she saw the woman casually walk over her own men without a care. They may all be employees of Revocs who devote themselves to Ragyo Kiryuin, but they were still humans. To see the member of Xcution so callously ignore her men's cries of pain caused Kinue's blood to simmer.

While her own hair began to glisten from the rain, Jackie grinned and placed her hands on her hips, "You're still alive, eh? I would have sworn my last attack shattered your rib cage, but I've never had the fortune of fighting someone wearing a genuine Kamui. La vie est drôle."

Jackie Tristan raced towards Kinue in an all too familiar burst of speed with her arm cocked back. With an emotionless look in her eyes as she easily traced the woman's movements, Kinue leaned to the side and watched as the armored white fist paced through the space previously occupied by her head. As a look of shock appeared on Jackie's face, Kinue decided to go on the offensive. In one fluid motion she snapped her left arm out and grabbed Jackie's extended wrist. Pulling her opponent towards her and off balance, Kinue reared her elbow back before smashing it into Jackie's face.

A painful crunching sound came from Jackie's nose as soon as Kinue's elbow made contact, signifying that it was most likely badly broken. While blood spurted from her broken nose down her face and the front of her Sanguinaire Raiment, Jackie took a few steps back and glared heatedly at Kinue. As the dark-skinned French woman snorted a wad of blood from her nose and raised her fists, Kinue had to give the woman credit for determination. Not everyone could survive a blow to the head from a Kamui while remaining both conscious and without a concussion.

When Kinue saw Jackie's scowl turn into a vicious smirk, she immediately let go of her Genji blade and crossed her arms over her body just in time to block her opponent's drop kick. There was absolute silence for about a second after the two women made contact but that was abruptly broken when the ground beneath Kinue's feet began rumbling before suddenly cratering inwards from the sheer force behind Jackie's kick.

" *How is she getting stronger ?*" Kinue grit her teeth before a burst of power, accompanied by a jet of steam from Danketsu, coursed through her body. Easily throwing Jackie Tristan backwards through the air, Kinue picked her Genji blade back up and slammed it hilt-first into her stomach and sending the dark-skinned woman rocketing through the air and back inside the building.

" ***She's stronger than when we started,***" Danketsu was getting pissed off at the lackluster job Kinue was doing against the member of Xcution. How hard could it be to fight someone wearing a cheap

knockoff of a true and pure Kamui? Granted, the power of Jackie's Sanguinaire Raiment was no laughing matter and Danketsu could not fault Kinue for struggling against a full frontal blow, but Danketsu sure as hell wasn't going to say that. Instead, she scoffed rudely and added, ***"Why the hell are you going easy on her? Quit fucking around and kick her ass or I'll take control and do it for you!"***

"Quiet down," Kinue hissed, earning a bemused look from her opponent.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?" Jackie Tristan, who had recovered and was already walking back towards Kinue, noticed the moving eyes on Danketsu. It was unbelievable by her opponent was actually talking with her Kamui! This was something she needed to inform Lady Ragyo about as soon as she was finished. Only a few worthy humans would ever have the honor of hearing the glorious words from a Kamui. Not even the members of Xcution, who possessed some of the highest Life Fiber resistance in the world and wore uniforms with fifty percent Life Fibers, could wear a Kamui.

*"From what Lady Ragyo said, her daughter is still unable to hear Junketsu's voice,"* Jackie glanced once more at Danketsu before wiping away the blood leaking from her lips, *"If Lady Ragyo's own lineage is unworthy of hearing the beautiful voice of a Kamui then how on Earth is this woman able to do so?"*

"So you can hear your Kamui?" When Jackie saw Kinue and her Kamui's eyes widen she knew her suspicions were correct. Everything was changed now that she knew Kinue could hear her Kamui. Instead of killing her as a sign to Nudist Beach she would instead knock her out and bring her back to Revocs headquarters. Lady Ragyo would love to see just what it was that allowed this nobody to hear the voice of a Kamui.

"Hey, I work for Revocs remember? I know almost all there is to know about how a Kamui works," Jackie crossed her arms under her ample chest and laughed before she adopted a murderous grin, "But now that I know you can hear its voice everything's changed! Lady

Ragyo will be elated when I bring your unconscious body back to Revocs to figure out how you were able to do it!"

Kinue ignored the shift in Jackie's persona to focus on what was bothering her, *"After I broke her nose I noticed a sharp rise in her power. Wait a second. Didn't she call her uniform Sanguinaire Raiment? If I remember my French, Sanguinaire stands for either bloody or bloodthirsty. Could it be that simple?"*

"I take it from your enlightened expression you've figured out the special ability of my raiment," Jackie shrugged her shoulders before making it a point to raise her hand to her face. As Kinue watched closely, Jackie smeared the blood from her broken nose onto her armored hand only for the life-giving liquid to quickly be absorbed, "My Sanguinaire Raiment becomes more powerful the more I bleed and get hurt, but I'm not surprised that the woman who destroyed every Revocs Sewing Factory east of the Rhine River would figure it out."

Kinue narrowed her eyes. She was certain she had destroyed all photographic evidence of her presence during missions, "How do you know about me?"

The vicious grin on Jackie's face vanished and was replaced with a cocky smile, "Lady Ragyo's known about you ever since you somehow gave the Grand Couturier the slip in Rome. She knew that you Nudists would eventually be forced to take out this facility if you ever wanted to be more than just an annoyance. That's why she sent me, a member of her elite security force Xcution, here. Although had known you possessed a blessed Kamui I would have asked for some assistance."

"So you came here alone?" Kinue brought her Genji blade up into a basic stance. As rivers of rain dripped off the blade, she glared at Jackie and asked, "Do you really think you can stop me? Your best attacks have done little more than bruise me and yet you're the one bleeding out."

"So naïve," Jackie sighed and rubbed the knuckles of her hand against her forehead. Why did Nudists always think they could win against Life Fibers? Looking at Kinue with mock pity, she asked, "Do you honestly think that just because you are wearing a Kamui that you are not being worn yourself. Someone like you is unworthy of a Kamui's power and is nothing more than food for such a magnificent garment! It is only a matter of time before your body is bled dry by your Kamui! You should have let my first attack kill you. It would have been a much more merciful death than what's in store for you. You should take off your Kamui before it kills you. You're no good to Lady Ragyo dead."

***"I'm tired of listening to her fucking preaching! This is a fight not a soap opera,"*** Danketsu glared angrily at Jackie, ***"Kick her ass and be done with it!"***

Kinue stared at Jackie with a stoic expression while ignoring the angry ranting of Danketsu, "Be quiet. I have a mission and nothing is going to get in my way. Especially not someone so conceited about their power that the prospect of losing completely eludes them. You've let Life Fibers corrupt your mind and turn you into something that's no longer human. I pity you for the monster you've become and the humanity you discarded along the way."

Snarling in rage, Jackie forced more blood into her Sanguinaire Raiment and raced towards Kinue with her fist cocked back. How dare a human who was fortunate enough to have the ability to wear a Kamui tell someone like her what to do! She was one of Lady Ragyo's elite forces and one of the few people privileged to know what the Life Fibers have in store for humanity. She no longer wanted to capture Kinue. No, now she wanted to bash her face in until it was nothing more than a bloody mess. With the amount of blood coursing through her raiment's Life Fibers, there was nothing that could beat her!

"Die you pig in human clothing!"

Kinue quickly sheathed her Genji blade and brought out her twin Armor-Piercing Anti-Life Fiber Sewing Needle Pistols or, as she calls them, the M-6 Carnifex. Unlike her brother who uses twin Sewing Needle Machine Guns that fire specialized Sewing Needles that can desynchronize the Life Fibers in a uniform from their wearer's control, Kinue tended to go with a much more practical and powerful approach. When dealing with opponents such as Nui Harime and Xcution who have seen such weaponry and can counter or avoid the projectiles it is best to go with something with a bit more power.

The Carnifex was able to shoot the same type of sewing needles as her brother's weapons but with a speed that gave them nearly five times the piercing power. Kinue was certain that even the Grand Couturier wouldn't be able to shrug off several rounds from her Carnifex.

"Do you think a mere Sewing Needle weapon would work on my raiment? Die crétin!" Jackie bragged in triumph. She was well aware of the Sewing Needle weaponry used by Nudist Beach, which is why all of Xcution's raiment was specifically designed to be immune to their unimaginative ammunition. The looks on the Nudists' faces when they found that their weapons had no effect brought a tear to Jackie's eyes.

"Sorry but only a fool would not use all the tools at their disposal," she sarcastically apologized as she leapt to the side just before Jackie could hit her. Backpedalling along the muddy ground, her heeled feet kicking up splashes of mud and water, she quickly raised the Carnifex in her right hand. Taking careful aim at her still turning opponent, Kinue fired off three needles in quick succession that traveled through the air and easily pierced the protective armor of Jackie Tristan's Sanguinaire Raiment.

"Salope!"

Jackie cursed in her native tongue as her entire left arm went completely numb from the needles. Reaching over and clenching her still working right hand around the three needles jammed deep in her



shoulder, she painfully tore them out from her raiment with nary a grunt. As the feeling returned to her arm, she glared angrily at Kinue and shouted, "How did you do that? The Nudists I've killed never had such powerful weapons!"

"Let me give you a useful piece of information," Kinue shifted her arms around and fired the Carnifex in her left hand, "I may wear a Kamui but I am a true Nudist through and through. What I wear does not change that. Your failure to understand such a basic concept makes me pity you even more."

Knowing what was about to come, Jackie ran across the muddy ground as the armor piercing needles shot through the air inches only behind her. As her dirty boots continued to fight for traction against the slippery ground, she picked up the faint sound of Kinue's Carnifex clicking empty. Allowing a relieved grin to appear, Jackie turned towards her only to have several needles pierce the length of her legs.

"Merde!"

Jackie collapsed as her legs immediately went numb from the effects of the needles. Clenching her hands into fists in anger, Jackie looked up and saw Kinue's shadowed face briefly illuminated by a flash of lightning. As she witnessed Kinue aim her Carnifex at her, Jackie sneered, "What's going on? I heard your weapon click empty."

"I have two, remember?" Kinue made a motion of showing her second Carnifex to Jackie before aiming it back at her heart. She was in a very fortuitous situation. Kinue had come to Paris to destroy the Revocs Distribution Facility. She could not have dreamed that she would be able to capture a member of Xcution. The information Jackie Tristan possessed about Ragyo Kiryuin and her operations was immensely valuable. With rain streaking down her skin-tight Kamui, Kinue pressed a heel against Jackie's back, "I do not like to repeat myself so I will only say it once. Get up and put your hands behind your head."

"You... bitch..."

Kinue quickly jumped back as a burst of power exploded from Jackie. As the needles embedded in her legs were forced out, allowing her to stand up once more, Jackie glared at her opponent with all the hatred she could muster. Forcing as much blood through her raiment as she could, Jackie raised a hand, ignorant of the red-tinged steam wafting off of it, "I'm not to let a Nudist like you stop me! Lady Ragyo will not be stopped by the likes of you. Now die!"

Focusing all her power into her fist, Jackie let out a scream of anger and raced along the muddy ground towards Kinue. With all the blood she's fed to her raiment her power was now at a level greater than that of a Kamui. There was nothing Kinue could do to stop her.

With an almost dejected look in her eyes, Kinue watched Jackie run towards her with rage evident on her face. She didn't understand why people always tried to use one final attack when they were about to lose. It almost never works since it is usually out of desperation and thus not well thought out. Waiting until Jackie's fist was inches from her face, Kinue quickly moved in a blur of motion to do what she needed.

Kinue accomplished several things in the time it took Jackie to blink once. As Jackie's fist approached her face, Kinue firstly put her Carnifex pistols back into the hidden holsters on the small of her back. When Jackie's fist only an inch from her face Kinue let out a breath and allowed Danketsu's power to flow through her body. Just as the fist touched the tip of her nose, Kinue leaned back and avoided the attack altogether before twisting her body and smashing the hilt of her Genji blade directly into Jackie's solar plexus.

There was a cacophony of lights and purple stars before Jackie's body was propelled backwards through the air. As she impacted the wall of the distribution facility with a resounding echo, Kinue took the time to sheath her Genji blade once more and reload her Carnifexes. A lull like this in a serious fight was not a time to go searching for her opponent. She could sense that Jackie was conscious but more

importantly agree. She would come back to her in a pitiful and hasty attempt at revenge, which will allow Kinue an easy chance to finish the fight.

As she clicked the final clip into her Carnifexes, Kinue lamented on the single design flaw of her weapons of choice. Unlike her brother's that can fire one hundred sewing needles before reloading, her weapons only had six shots before emptying. In return for a such major decrease in ammunition, her sewing needles packed much more of a punch. She had never actually tested it, but two six-needle clips should be enough to greatly weaken a Kamui instead of the many pin cushion bombs, spool grenades and rounds Tsumugu needed against Ryuko Matoi's Senketsu. Speaking of which...

Quickly reaching into a pocket on her fatigue pants, Kinue pulled out a pin cushion bomb and set the timer for five second before throwing it into the debris she knew Jackie was hiding in. Kinue knew that the Nudist explosive wouldn't damage her opponent or weaken her Sanguinaire Raiment. She was counting on Jackie becoming so enraged by the insultingly weak attack that she would charge out of cover and forget any plans she may have come up with just to attack her.

When the pin cushion bomb detonated and released its needle payload directly over its victim, Kinue felt Jackie's power increase as she shot out of the debris. "Well," she said dryly as her opponent's power seemed to keep increasing. Perhaps she should have gone with a spool grenade instead. It would have been less flashy, "That went better than I thought. I expected a member of Xcution to be more cautious and level-headed in battle."

" ***What were you thinking?***" Danketsu asked in confusion. If there was one thing she knew about her wearer it was that Kinue was a pragmatist. She would never do anything in combat that was flashy, overly dramatic or prone to backfiring on her. That was why the Kamui was so confused about Kinue's recent actions. All Danketsu could detect from Kinue throwing the pin cushion bomb was a sharp and dangerous increase in Jackie's power. It was nearly to the point

of equaling her raw power, which was something Danketsu did not appreciate one bit, ***"Have you fucking snapped or something?"***

"Give me the benefit of the doubt, Danketsu," Kinue ran to the side to avoid Jackie's powered attack all the while continuing to spam sewing needles at every known junction in her Sanguinaire Raiment. It appeared that the anger and rage clouding Jackie Tristan's mind gave her immunity to the anesthetizing effect of the needles. While this would no doubt make taking down Jackie Tristan more difficult, it was not impossible. Kinue just needed to stay calm and focused. Her opponent's rage will work to her advantage in the end.

"How do you keep hitting me?"

Jackie didn't know what was going on and it really pissed her off. How could a mere Nudist who was blessed with the opportunity to wear a Kamui be beating her? There was no way in hell that a Kamui would even consider to be worn by someone opposing Lady Ragyo's ambitions and plans!

"If you think I'll fall to a Nudist, think again," Jackie snarled as she glared at Kinue. Slamming her fists together with enough power to cause a miniature shockwave to radiate outwards, her anger reached a tipping point when she saw Kinue staring impassively at her. Forcing her Sanguinaire Raiment to take in more blood than it could safely handle, all in an attempt to utterly destroy Kinue and her Kamui, Jackie was stunned when she felt the world around her spinning before she collapsed to the ground.

"It seems that the tranquilizing needles have finally started to take effect," Kinue walked slowly towards her downed opponent while being sure to keep her Carnifexes trained on every major seam, junction and weak point of Jackie's raiment. Coming to a stop front of Jackie's barely moving head, Kinue used her heel to flip her opponent over so that she could aim at her face, "Actually, that is only half right. While my Anti-Life Fiber sewing needles did a lot of the work, your own idiocy enabled me to win."

"What did... you do... to me?" Jackie struggled to speak but found it increasingly difficult. It felt as if her body was made of lead and no matter how much she willed it, her Sanguinaire Raiment failed to heed her call. Harshly coughing and staring up at her opponent's stoic face, Jackie was confused when Kinue holstered her Carnifexes.

"Your Sanguinaire Raiment's power is tied to how much blood you give it. That much you've told me," Kinue reached down and picked up Jackie's immobile form with a single hand. As two sets of eyes stared at their defeated opponent, Kinue ignored Danketsu's oh-so-helpful ideas on how to humiliate Jackie Tristan further, "But in the end the greatest strength of your Life Fiber uniform is also your greatest weakness."

Jackie struggled to move her arms and it was only after a concentrated effort that she was able to raise them high enough for her to close her hands around Kinue's wrist. She needed to get free and inform Lady Ragyo of Kinue's Kamui. Revocs losing the Paris Distribution Facility wasn't as important as dealing with someone like Kinue but the woman's strength was abnormally strong.

"H-How?"

Kinue's eyebrow arched upwards in curiosity, "How what?"

"How are you still alive?" Jackie seethed as she continued to struggle. She didn't understand why she was so weak. Her Sanguinaire Raiment should have blessed her with enough power to take down this damn Nudist and yet it seemed like Kinue's power was leagues above her own. Feebly kicking against Kinue's stomach, only to find the woman completely unflinching from the assault, she spat and shouted, "The Kamui should have devoured your unworthy body by now! There should be no blood left in your body! How are you still alive?"

"Oh, that. It's none of your business," Kinue's amusement in finding out what Jackie wanted to say quickly evaporated. Twisting her

upper body around, Kinue spun around and launched Jackie's body through the air. The member of Xcution tumbled weakly while in flight until her body hit the wall hard enough to crater and crack it.

Jackie coughed harshly, flakes of blood escaping her lips, as she fell to the ground in an unmoving heap. Her body felt like it was completely dead and yet her mind still couldn't figure out why she was so damn weak. Looking up at her approaching opponent with half-lidded eyes, Jackie was thrust back against the wall when twelve sewing needles embedded themselves in her arms and legs. As the last dredges of power left her body, Jackie barely heard Kinue speaking to her.

"Your raiment must be tailored exceptionally well to still be in one piece. I don't suppose the Grand Couturier designed it herself, did she?" Kinue didn't expect an answer from her opponent. All of Jackie Tristan's offensive and defensive capabilities were destroyed, leaving her as nothing but an extremely weakened normal human. Holstering one of her Carnifexes while reloading the other, she trained the Sewing Needle weapon over Jackie's heart, "Let me tell you a useful piece of information. Are you familiar with the meaning of exsanguination? From your confused expression I see that you are not. It means that your body is dangerously low on blood."

"Fuck you, you damned Nudist," Jackie Tristan was on the verge of unconsciousness but she was not going to sit and listen to Kinue prattle on about stuff she didn't care about. Her defiance was shattered as Kinue fired three sewing needles into her stomach.

"I also hate to be interrupted," Kinue admonished evenly, her voice not betraying any other emotion other than irritation and annoyance at being interrupted. Changing the aim of her Carnifex to Jackie's head, she continued, "The more blood you gave to your Sanguinaire Raiment the less that remained in your body. In the past you've never fought anyone that forced you to truly fight, have you? You've never fought anything like Danketsu in all your time in Xcution. That is why as our fight dragged on you were forced to give your raiment more and more of your blood. You needed to do so in order to not

lose, but in your haste you forget you needed blood to live. As your power increased your endurance and stamina fell. That is why you have lost."

"You think I care if you kill me?" Jackie spat blood on Danketsu only to see the Kamui visibly shift and remove the red liquid, "You Nudists are no match for Lady Ragyo! You've lost before you even knew you were fighting!"

"Seni-Soshitsu!"

Kinue Kinagase was not a woman who did not learn from others. Her Genji blade might not be as sharp as Satsuki Kiryuin's Bakuzan or possess the ability to sever Life Fibers like Ryuko Matoi's Scissor Blade, but it was more than good enough to destroy anything other than a Kamui. After she stuck around in Honnou City and witnessed a few of Ryuko and Ichigo's fights, she took the time to analyze their finishing moves until she was able to do it herself. A move like Seni-Soshitsu was not something she could afford to ignore.

Jackie Tristan didn't know what hit her as Kinue's Genji blade, which had just been holstered on her back, cut downwards through her Sanguinaire Raiment. As her Life Fiber uniform fell to tattered pieces of cloth around her, Jackie's last thought before falling into the inky darkness of unconsciousness was how Kinue possessed a Life Fiber weapon.

**" I was wondering if she would ever fucking shut up,"** Danketsu glared down at Jackie's form, naked apart from her underwear, before shifting her attention on her wearer, **"That was fun though! You completely and totally tore apart all her dreams and strategies without even trying. Perhaps working alongside you will be worth it if this is what we'll do from now on!"**

"Quiet down, Danketsu," Kinue didn't need to voice her complete displeasure at Danketsu's behavior. Due to the new bond between the two of them, her Kamui could hear the intentions of her words and knew that she truly wasn't angry with Danketsu. Sparing one

final look at Jackie Tristan's body, she reached for her cell phone and dialed a number. After the phone rang thrice, a familiar voice picked up, "Hello brother. Yes. Yes. I'm fine, although I ran into a complication during the mission. There was a member of Xcution stationed at the distribution facility. No, I'm not injured thanks to Danketsu."

Something Tsumugu asked caused Kinue's eyes to widen in mild annoyance, "No. I don't need to give my report directly to him. I can't deal with his nonsense right now. Tsumugu, I need you to do me a favor. Prep an immediate evac from my current location and make sure to account for a prisoner - a member of Xcution itself. Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime's absence have given us a golden opportunity. We shouldn't let their generosity go to waste."

Hanging up and putting away her phone, Kinue hefted Jackie Tristan's body over her shoulder and began walking away from the Revocs facility. She was not stupid enough to link the Anti-Life Fiber charges to a timer. Revocs always had on hand one or two employees capable of disarming those types of explosives. The bombs she planted were linked to Danketsu's Life Fibers. The moment she walked a kilometer away from the charges, they would immediately detonate.

"Well now," Kinue gave a look to her prisoner before increasing her pace, "This has been quite the eventful morning."

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"Students of Honnouji Academy!"

Satsuki Kiryuin, clad in Junketsu, slammed the hilt of Bakuzan against the stage as her voice echoed clear across the expansive ballroom without any electronic assistance. She did not need the help of any device to say what was needed to be said. Glancing across the ballroom, her gaze lingering on several people for a



microsecond, the perpetual stoic expression on her face seemed to triple in intensity as a backdrop of light illuminated her in shadows, "For the past three years Parent Student Day has helped to weed out the weak from the strong! Those unable to adapt and persevere in the face of adversity and hardship have fallen by the wayside, discarded like the trash they are, while those with the fortitude and constitution to stand strong have prospered!"

"She sure likes to hear herself talk."

Ryuko Matoi leaned her chin onto her elbows as she stared up at Satsuki in annoyance. Even now the Student Council President was telling all of them just how lowly and worthless they were and that they should aspire to become her lackeys like the Elite Four. It, quite frankly, pissed her off.

" ***You should pay attention, Ryuko,***" Senketsu lightly chided his wearer's lack of attention. He may not have a choice when it came to listening to Satsuki Kiryuin talk but the information she was saying could one day be valuable. Swiveling his eye until he was looking directly at Satsuki's Kamui, Senketsu interestingly noticed Junketsu turn its eyes to look right back at him.

"I know," Ryuko whispered just loud enough for Senketsu to hear her. She couldn't afford to talk to her Kamui like she normally did while she was at the ceremony. Doing so would no doubt draw unwanted attention and Ryuko sure as hell didn't need any more of that, "It's just that listening to Satsuki preach on and on is really annoying."

" ***It seems that you're not the only one,***" Senketsu's voice had a hint of humor and mirth as he minutely moved his left sleeve, which Ryuko had been forced to pull all the way down for the ceremony, to get her attention. Once Ryuko looked down to see what he wanted, Senketsu motioned with his lapel to the stage, "***Ichigo and Mugetsu look to be just as miserable as you.***"

Following Senketsu's line of sight up to the stage, Ryuko allowed a small grin to break through the façade of annoyance that had been plastered on her face ever since she had first walked into the room. Sitting just behind and to Satsuki Kiryuin's left was Ichigo. The teen had his standard scowl of annoyance on his face and from the way he was looking anywhere but Satsuki it was obvious he found her speech to be boring.

**" Mugetsu's saying something."**

"She is?" Ryuko focused her gaze on Ichigo's Kamui but couldn't pick up anything over the sound of Satsuki's speech, "I can't hear anything."

**" Ryuko, you may wear me and I may be worn by you but you are not a Kamui. While I cannot hear any better than you when it comes to other humans nor can I read lips, the Life Fibers making up my being allow me to hear ultra-low acoustic effects created by other Kamui."**

"Really?" Ryuko sat up a little straighter and stared down at her Kamui. She had no idea Senketsu had an ability like that, "What is Mugetsu saying?"

**" Let me listen,"** Senketsu's eye closed in concentration and after a few seconds opened again. In an irritated tone, Senketsu answered, **"She's telling me that I should have my Life Fibers bleached and starched. She's really upset that she's being forced to sit in front of hundreds of people. From the underlying desperation in Mugetsu's voice as well as the urgency it seems that my fellow Kamui has stage fright."**

Finding out that Ichigo's Kamui had stage fright almost caused Ryuko to break out in a fit of laughter with the only thing stopping her being the fact that she was in a public ceremony with hundreds of people. Even she was not foolish enough to potentially piss off Satsuki Kiryuin and all of her little helpers all alone. Allowing a soft chuckle at Mugetsu's expense while filing away that information for

later use, Ryuko looked over at the three women on the opposite side of the stage and immediately felt something off about them.

Ryuko didn't know what was bothering her about them. The dark-skinned woman wearing the white business suit, shorts and thigh high stockings didn't seem too strange apart from the fact that once in a while she would raise her fingers to her ear and whisper something. From the way she was acting and the sheer lack of any resemblance to Satsuki, Ryuko figured she was some sort of bodyguard or something. Next to the dark-skinned woman a tall woman wearing a pure white dress that Satsuki had introduced as her mother, Ragyo Kiryuin. The subtle, but still visible, rainbow aura emanating from the multicolored undertone of her silver hair was proof enough of her relation to Satsuki. Ryuko had no idea what Satsuki's mother was like but taking what she knew from Satsuki, Ragyo was probably just like her.

Before she shifted her attention away from Ragyo, Ryuko found herself entranced by the Kiryuin matriarch's rainbow undertone. She didn't understand the feeling in her chest but for some strange reason it reminded Ryuko of her own red highlight. For as long as she could remember Ryuko had been mystified by the single red bang of hair that always fell to the same exact length over her left eye. Ryuko had tried for years to get rid of it. She had tried cutting it off only for the bang to grow back in by the next morning. When she attempted to dye it the same shade of black as the rest of her hair, the dye simply slid off the bang like water right in front of her eyes. Eventually after dozens of failed attempts at hiding it she had given up.

Letting out a sigh of frustration as memories of her failed exploits at taming her red bang were brought to the forefront of her mind, Ryuko glanced over at the last of the three women and immediately felt something disturbing about her. It didn't come right away but after a few seconds of trying to piece together what was bothering her, Ryuko figured it out.

The blonde girl was staring directly at her.

As soon as Ryuko's dark blue eyes settled upon Nui Harime, the blonde haired girl's single visible eye immediately shifted and locked gazes with her, causing a small shiver to race up her spine. Ryuko could not figure out how the girl knew she was looking at her. She had to be more than fifty feet away in a nearly pitch black room for crying out loud. In fact, if it wasn't for Satsuki's backdrop of light illuminating the room Ryuko was certain she would not be able to see her hand in front of her face. So how did the girl know Ryuko was looking at her?

" *What's wrong with her eye?*" Ryuko forced herself to stare directly at Nui's face for a few more seconds while purposely ignoring the slightly deranged look in the Grand Couturier's eye. Out of Nui's entire ensemble, the purple eye patch over her left eye stuck out like a sore thumb. Narrowing her eyes slightly as she noticed a weird pattern to the eye patch, Ryuko thought for a moment that it resembled a set of Kanji or something, "*Did something happen to it? Is she blind or something?*"

Almost as if she was capable of reading Ryuko's thoughts, Nui Harime's smile slowly widened until it seemed to take up half of her face. With a saccharine grin adorning her face and her hands clasped politely on her lap over her kicking feet, Nui looked like the epitome of cuteness and innocence but Ryuko could not help but feel something off about her. She wasn't able to pinpoint where the feeling was coming from and with Senketsu too upset about whatever Mugetsu was telling him to be of any help, Ryuko decided to let it go for the moment but she just couldn't get rid of the notion that she had seen Nui somewhere before.

"This brings me to the following announcement - the reinstatement of Nonon Jakuzure into the Elite Four!" Satsuki's voice sharply rose in volume as she finished speaking, managing to break Ryuko's gaze away from Nui Harime and towards herself. What Ryuko, nor anyone else, would ever find out is that Satsuki had been quite aware of Ryuko's wandering attention and had purposely raised her voice to snap her back to reality before the Grand Couturier could attempt

any of her mind games. Satsuki knew from firsthand experience that Nui Harime did not need to do or say anything to get inside someone's mind and with what she knew about Ryuko's past, it was clear she was in no way prepared for Nui's tricks.

Satsuki didn't need to do more than avert her gaze towards the table seating her Elite Four to get Nonon's undivided attention. While Jakuzure completely failed in her mission to discover what it was about Matoi and Ichigo that enabled them full control over their Kamui's respective powers, she did retrieve valuable evidence that may be just as important. Despite Jakuzure lack of social grace when it came to associating with anyone she perceived to be Satsuki's enemies, the information she gathered about Mugetsu and Senketsu's combat capabilities would be more than adequate when it came time for the implementation of the Naturals Election.

"As you all are no doubt aware, several weeks ago I expelled Nonon Jakuzure from the Elite Four! By failing her assigned task of defeating Ichigo Kurosaki and retrieving his Kamui, she had brought shame dishonor upon Honnouji Academy and everything it represents!" Satsuki slammed Bakuzan onto the hardwood stage, causing an echo to reverberate out into the ballroom from the impact, "But her time as a No-Star has shown me that she is deserving of one last chance! The information she has managed to gather will help to uphold the safety and security of Honnouji Academy against anyone that dares to stand against us! As of tonight Nonon Jakuzure is once again the Non-Athletic Committee Chair and will be treated with the respect she deserves! I will not tolerate anything less! Do I make myself clear?"

As if on cue every One and Two-Star student currently in attendance stood up and began clapping earnestly for the newly promoted Nonon. It was not that they were glad for her. On the contrary, many of them had been gunning for the position she vacated upon her demotion and were understandably upset to find that a position on the Elite Four was probably never actually up for grabs. Ignorant of the treasonous and jealous thoughts coursing through a lot of the

applauding students Nonon stood up, a smug smirk on her face, and did on a one-armed bow to the audience.

*" I may not have gotten my revenge on Strawberry or the Transfer Student but it's only a matter of time."* Several plans on how to take her revenge on those that scorned and mocked her coursed through the devious pinkette's mind. With her position on the Elite Four once again publically accepted she could dedicate time and effort to taking revenge. Even Ichigo and his stupid Kamui would not be able to stand up to the might of her new Symphony Regalia Mark III.

Satsuki stood at attention as the noise in the ballroom died down. Once everyone's attention was squarely on her once more she resumed where she had left off, "This brings up another point of contention. For far too long a vital part of Honnouji Academy's hierarchy has been left vacant due to the simple fact that no one worthy enough of filling the void has shown themselves! That emptiness ends tonight! The position of Vice President of the Honnouji Academy Student Council has been filled! Stand at attention and welcome your new Vice President - Ichigo Kurosaki!"

Every pair of eyes in the ballroom turned towards Ichigo upon Satsuki's proclamation. As Mugetsu's shivering increased tenfold from the added attention, which was really annoying since he couldn't tell her to quit it while in public without sounding crazy, the former substitute shinigami could not help but feel that perhaps he should have refused Satsuki's offer of protection in exchange for keeping Nui Harime away from his friends. The Grand Couturier was, after all, sitting not twenty feet away from him. What was the damn point of becoming the Vice President of Honnouji Academy if the one person you wanted to stay far away from was sitting almost within arm's reach?

*" It's like Nui is well aware of what Satsuki promised and is doing her best to piss me off. I swear she's trolling me or something."*

Putting Nui's disturbing interest in him aside for the time being, Ichigo focused on the matter at hand. When he showed up an hour

before the ceremony like Satsuki wanted, she had been quick to lay down the rules and itinerary of the night's events.

Handing Ichigo a list, Satsuki had begun mentally reciting the order of events for the night. The ceremony would start with the standard introduction before she would abruptly switch topics and introduce her mother, Ragyo Kiryuin. When Ichigo foolishly asked why it was so important to introduce Ragyo, Satsuki had nearly beheaded him with Bakuzan for daring to refer to her mother so casually. Muttering a quick and sarcastic apology and averting his eyes from Nonon and Sanageyama's snickering in the background, Ichigo decided to get out with it and ask what his part was in all this. Satsuki's glare had doubled in intensity at Ichigo's continuing rude behavior but when he refused to back down, she had been forced to concede that she could not deal with him like a normal person. Where most students and even adults would be cowed by her presence and overwhelming willpower, such things had no effect on Ichigo.

After she thought about his question for far too long a time, which should have been Ichigo's first cue that something was off, Satsuki had softly smiled and said that he would need to give a speech.

*"How the hell could she expect me to give a speech when I only had an hour to do it?"* Ichigo thought in annoyance as his frustration came to a head, *"It would have made a lot more sense to tell me this yesterday. What does she want me to do, make up crap about how 'amazing and powerful' she is?"*

Amazingly enough that was exactly what Satsuki wanted him to do.

Standing up and ignoring Mugetsu's pleas for him to activate her transformed state and get out of there, Ichigo took the microphone conveniently offered to him by a groveling One-Star student and made his way towards Satsuki at the front of the stage. While making sure not to look at his dad, who was snapping pictures, Ichigo rubbed the back of his neck and let out a sigh that the microphone managed to pick up.

"So apparently I'm your new Vice President. Truthfully I have no clue what I'm supposed to do," Ichigo stopped briefly and gave a look of annoyance at Satsuki, who had moved to stand on the opposite side of Rei Hououmaru from her mother. Deciding to get it over and done with while mentally telling the consequences to go to hell, Ichigo snapped back to attention and said, "If I'm going to be your Vice President I should probably start with how much I didn't want the job. Satsuki asked me to take the job five times before I finally gave in and said yes."

Slightly curious about why Satsuki wasn't moving to stop him, Ichigo nevertheless continued, "Most of you probably hate me for not bowing down before the great Satsuki but I just don't care. All I wanted to do when I came to Honnouji Academy was to get through a full school year without anything crazy going on but as soon as I arrived I was pulled into a fight courtesy of our "glorious" Student Council President. Now if you'll please excuse me I have other, more important, places to be."

Fully vented of his frustration, Ichigo tossed the microphone to a still silent Satsuki and walked backstage. As soon as he opened the exit behind the stage he let out an audible sigh of relief. He was certain that the way the Elite Four were looking at him towards the end, especially Gamagori, that they would jump on stage to enact their strict form of discipline on him.

" ***Never ever do that again, Ichigo,***" Mugetsu swallowed nervously, a remarkable feat for a Kamui that lacked a mouth. Ever since Ichigo walked on stage and she saw the hundreds of people looking in her general direction, the normally confident and boasting Kamui had been reduced to a mute mess, unable to do anything more than move her body to let Ichigo know what she wanted. Senketsu's lack of empathy did not help either.

"Hey," Ichigo glared at his Kamui's eyes in equal annoyance, "How the hell was I supposed to know you would have stage fright?"



**"Now you know,"** Mugetsu's eyes narrowed dangerously, **"And you will never do it again or you'll suffer the consequences."**

Ichigo rolled his eyes, "Sure I will..."

Unbeknownst to Ichigo, things in the ballroom had quickly moved on after his tirade. While most of those loyal and devoted to Satsuki had been incensed at what he said, most of those in attendance had quickly forgotten when dozens of waiters and waitresses came out of nowhere with trays of high quality food, drinks and wines that were of a quality only Two-Stars were used to partaking in. The Mankanshoku family in particular had a photographic memory when it came to food and vividly remembered each and every single dish brought out to them. While they were depressed that they could no longer eat such wondrous food whenever they wanted, they were content with being a happy and loving family once more.

"It appears that your description of Ichigo was accurate," Ragyo Kiryuin majestically stepped down from the stage with a sly smile on her face. She had been quite pleased with Ichigo's performance just a few minutes ago. In fact, she was still shivering from the power and authority each of his words possessed. Turning maroon eyes at Satsuki walking respectfully at her side, Ragyo remembered watching the video of Ichigo and his Kamui defeating Junketsu. Mentally connecting with the Life Fiber being she had created so many years ago, Ragyo was intrigued when the Kamui's voice suggested nothing but admiration for Ichigo and Mugetsu.

"Thank you mother," Satsuki's voice was subdued as it always was in the presence of her mother. While she was the Student Council President, she knew her mother was the true ruler of Honnouji Academy and could easily dispose of her if she truly wanted to. For the moment she would play the helpless and subservient daughter, "I will let Inumuta know you found his information acceptable."

"Ichigo's Kamui is truly magnificent. It is a work of art and its Life Fibers are beautifully woven together," The Kiryuin matriarch seemed lost in her words before turning towards her daughter,

"Ichigo would make a fine addition to the Kiryuin family. His compatibility with Life Fibers exceeds your own and his body truly seems to be made to be worn by clothing. He would be the perfect man for you to court, wouldn't you agree?"

A slight creasing of Satsuki's brows was the only sign of the embarrassment she felt at the conversation her mother had started, "I will admit that Ichigo had piqued my interests. He does not seem to be concerned with material wealth and views the power his Kamui grants him as nothing but a means to an end."

"He is truly Isshin's son," Satsuki stopped walking as she watched her mother and Rei Hououmaru continue forward, "I look forward to seeing what becomes of you and Ichigo."

"Yes mother," Satsuki felt something off as she watched her mother leave but for the moment put it aside as she made her way back to where her Elite Four were waiting. It was only as Sanageyama bowed his head towards her that she realized what it was she saw, or rather who she failed to see.

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Ichigo silently walked through the empty halls of Honnouji Academy in deep thought as the sounds coming from the ballroom grew quieter. He knew what he did was probably going to come back and bite him in the ass tomorrow but in all honesty he was getting a little sick and tired of Satsuki always thinking she's better than him. While he was grateful for her assistance against Nui Harime the previous day, the fact that she apparently knew the Grand Couturier on a more than personal level was highly suspicious.

" ***So what are you going to do now?***" Mugetsu had calmed down since leaving the ceremony and was back to her normal and impatient self. Letting the feeling of complete isolation with no eyes watching her every move circulate through her Life Fibers, she

looked up at her wearer and said, ***"Satsuki Kiryuin is not going to ignore what you did. If I didn't agree completely with what you said, I would be calling you a complete idiot."***

"Someone needed to bring her down a peg," Ichigo defended his actions with a hint of annoyance in his voice, "Unfortunately I'm the only one who seems to have ever beaten her in a fight, which means she's probably going to want to figure out why I'm so strong. Damn, this is getting complicated. Things would be a lot easier if I didn't have to save Ryuko."

***" Satsuki would have killed Ryuko."***

"Maybe..." Ichigo frowned as something about Satsuki's expression that morning long ago came back to him. When he blocked her Bakuzan with his Tournesol, he had looked into Satsuki's eyes and noticed what could only be relief. At the time he thought Satsuki was relieved she finally had a worthy adversary to test Junketsu out against, which ended up working against her when Mugetsu's power proved too much for her Kamui to handle, but with everything going on Ichigo was beginning to have a different theory. Perhaps Satsuki was relieved because he had shown up in time to save Ryuko? If that was the case, than why was Satsuki sending out all the club captains after them and, from what Ryuko told him, order Mako to kill Ryuko?

" *Oh man, this is confusing,*" Ichigo rubbed his eyes and yawned. Why couldn't people just announce their motives or reasons instead of hiding behind walls upon walls of conspiracies, gambits and schemes?

***" But she can't do anything to you,"*** Mugetsu's voice was positively beaming with praise as she spoke, ***"During our fight all those weeks ago as well as our collaboration against Nui Harime yesterday, it was our power that was greater. If we hadn't constantly drawn Nui's attention, Satsuki Kiryuin would likely have been killed by that monster. I just wish Junketsu would stop staring at me silently every chance it gets."***

Ichigo looked down in surprise at his Kamui, "Wait just a second, shouldn't Junketsu talk? Why haven't I heard it say anything?"

***" Junketsu has yet to say a word telepathically. If a Kamui wears a human and is, in turn, worn by a human it can telepathically communicate with their wearer. That is the reason why you and Ryuko are able to hear both my and Senketsu's voice. We trust you two enough to let you hear our actual voices. I don't know much about Junketsu's relationship with Satsuki Kiryuin, but it is quite likely she has less than an amiable relationship with the Kamui."***

"I should tell her about this," Ichigo muttered out loud. When he saw Mugetsu looking at him with a suspicious gaze, he sighed and clarified, "Remember what happened at the end of my fight against Satsuki? Junketsu was trying to kill her. I don't like Satsuki any more than you do, but I'm not going to let her die just because we're on opposite sides."

Mugetsu growled softly before scoffing, ***"Fine, but don't make it too easy for her! Junketsu was holding back nearly half of its full power from Satsuki Kiryuin. If you help her form a true bond with her Kamui, it might make her too strong for us to beat!"***

"I'll burn that bridge when I come to it. Besides, now that I'm her Vice President or whatever I'm probably going to be - "

"That was a hell of a speech, Ichigo."

Before Ichigo was able to turn around and confront the owner of the familiar voice, he found his legs quickly swept out from underneath his body. As he slammed back-first onto the ground, he tried to get up only to find himself pinned heavily to the ground by a foot to the chest. Staring up into the amber eyes of his ambusher, Ichigo sighed and gave up struggling, "Hello Yoruichi."

Yoruichi Shihoin gave the former substitute shinigami a cat-like grin as she leaned on her leg, "How are you doing this fine evening? You

seem a little down tonight, Ichigo."

"Oh, I'm just great aside from the fact that you're standing right on top of me!" Yoruichi chuckled at how easy it was for her to annoy him. Isshin's kid always did seem to have a short temper when it came to dealing with ladies. Removing her foot from on top of Ichigo's chest, Yoruichi stood back and watched as he got up and dusted Mugetsu off before giving her a sharp glare, "Why are you here, Yoruichi?"

"What kind of question is that?" Yoruichi butted her head against Ichigo's forehead and jabbed her finger into his chest, "What's so strange about a teacher checking up on her favorite student? If I didn't know any better, I would say you were upset that I stopped by!"

"Of course I'm suspicious!" Ichigo pushed back against Yoruichi as his eye began to twitch, "I've been at Honnouji Academy for almost seven weeks and the only time I've seen you is when you dropped off my sword."

Yoruichi gave Ichigo a gasp containing nothing but complete and utter shock at her student's harsh and critical words. When she saw that Ichigo wasn't moved by her acting, Yoruichi burst out into laughter, "I'm glad you haven't changed a bit Ichigo! If you had reacted any other way I would have made sure to beat some common sense back into the thick skull of yours. If you really want to know why I'm here, it's because I came to see you."

Ichigo backed off for the moment, "Me?"

"It's sort of a long story so I'm just going to start at the beginning," Yoruichi's amber irises shifted to the side as she gazed down the seemingly empty corridor. Expanding her senses, honed by centuries as a shinigami and captain of the Second Division, Yoruichi relaxed when she didn't sense anyone within range and turned her eyes back to him, "After I dropped off your sword and left, I found myself the target of an assassination attempt."

"What?" Ichigo had been expecting a ridiculous answer from the mischievous shinigami, but something like that was a shock.

"Oh please, who do you take me for?" Yoruichi sounded more insulted that Ichigo thought she was hurt from the assassination attempt than from the notion that someone would actually try to kill her. Grinning like a cat once more, Yoruichi folded her arms and said, "It will take a lot more than a simple rocket to take me out. The problem came from the person I had to fight - a girl by the name of Nui Harime."

Ichigo didn't answer right away as he pondered how the hell she always knew where to go. Swallowing the bile in his throat before it could rise any further, he twisted his head away from Yoruichi's penetrating gaze, "I know who she is. I've fought her twice now."

Yoruichi placed her hands on her hips and scoffed but didn't say anything. The memories of her fight against the Grand Couturier were still fresh in her mind. She never thought she would fight a human that was faster than Sui-Feng. If she hadn't continued training her speed and reflexes after the fight against Aizen and his arrancar forces, her surprise at Nui's immense speed could have been her downfall. Once she became used to Nui's speed, Yoruichi didn't have much of an issue avoiding her attacks. The problem was with Nui's terrifying endurance and regeneration. She didn't think even Kenpachi could walk away from having his head forced through nearly a foot of concrete and asphalt without getting at least slightly injured.

"While figuring out a way to counteract Nui Harime's strength and regeneration is important, it is not the reason I came to see you," Yoruichi reached into her jacket, a new one since the last one was torn up by a rocket, and handed Ichigo an old weathered journal that had the name SOUICHIRO embellished on the cover. Opening the old journal and flipping through the hand-written pages, Ichigo stopped when Yoruichi started to talk again, "Once I got back to Karakura Town and made sure Nui wasn't tracking me down, I headed back to Kisuke's shop. I thought it was awfully convenient

that someone would come to kill me just after delivering your sword and showing you the picture and video. As I dug through the remains of the underground training room I found one of Kisuke's lockboxes."

"And this journal was in it?" Ichigo flipped to the first page of the journal and noticed that the date in the corner was from nearly nineteen years ago.

Yoruichi nodded, "There were two things in the lockbox - that journal and a note from Kisuke about Life Fibers."

When Ichigo gave her a surprised look, Yoruichi scoffed incredulously, "I know enough about Life Fibers now to be in the loop. Kisuke's notes contained a lot of disturbing information about the correlation between humanity and Life Fibers. I couldn't make heads or tails of what Kisuke was trying to say but one thing I was able to decipher was that Life Fibers have been around a long time, Ichigo. Kisuke was able to date Life Fibers and place their age to at least seventy thousand years. Life Fibers are alive Ichigo, and they've been around for far longer than the Thirteen Court Guard Squads."

"There was something else in the lockbox - a note written by Kisuke," Yoruichi's words brought Ichigo out of his thoughts concerning the age of Life Fibers and Mugetsu, "I thought it might be important but it turned out to only have a few scribbled sentences about some of Kisuke's theories on Life Fibers. It didn't make much sense to me, but Kisuke thought that all Life Fibers are capable of emitting and receiving an unknown signal. He ended the note with only a single word - Domination. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Domination?" Ichigo didn't have a clue what that might mean. It had to do something with Life Fibers but he couldn't figure out what it might mean. Deciding to forego secrecy, he glanced down at Mugetsu and asked, "That mean anything to you?"

**" I am afraid not," Mugetsu answered curtly, "Unfortunately my knowledge of Life Fibers is limited. I am just as stunned as you**

***are about the potential age of my Life Fibers. As for what Domination could mean I haven't the slightest clue."***

"What a great help you are," Ichigo sarcastically muttered.

"Who are you talking to?"

Ichigo saw Yoruichi staring at him with a suspicious look in her eyes. Sighing dramatically, he pointed to Mugetsu's right eye and said, "I asked Mugetsu if she knew anything about what Kisuke wrote. It turns out she's just as clueless as the rest of us."

***" Don't call me clueless. I just have a distinct lack of information pertaining to the matter at hand."***

"That means you're clueless!" Ichigo snapped back, ignoring the amused grin on Yoruichi's face, "Why can't you just admit you don't know anything about this?"

Yoruichi clapped her hands right next to Ichigo's ear to regain his attention, "While I would love to continue listening to this one-sided conversation, I need to know if you have always been able to hear Mugetsu."

"What?" Ichigo ignored the return barb from his Kamui, "Ever since she woke up after I accidentally got some of my blood on her, Mugetsu's been able to telepathically speak to me."

"That's... I don't know what to say to that," Yoruichi was having quite the hard time digesting what Ichigo told her. Kisuke's notes hadn't contained any information about a Kamui being sentient or able to talk and the fact that Ichigo was the only one able to hear Mugetsu caused alarms to go off in her head, "Are you sure you're hearing Mugetsu talk?"

It took Ichigo less than a second to understand Yoruichi's true question, "I'm not crazy! Ryuko can hear Mugetsu as well!"



"Fine," Yoruichi raised her hands in defeat. Perhaps she was wrong about whether or not Ichigo could hear Mugetsu. He was the one with the Kamui after all while she was going from the sparse notes Kisuke left behind. Cursing her best friend's photographic memory and his inability to keep written records, she grinned mischievously as something Ichigo said came to mind, "So Mugetsu's a girl? Are you two going steady?"

***" Ichigo, what does she mean by 'going steady?'"***

Ichigo, embarrassed by Yoruichi's question, opened his mouth to respond but was forced to stop when Yoruichi pressed her hand against it, "You might want to think about your answer and get back to me. It seems we have an uninvited guest."

"Oh, that's not fair" A childish voice echoed through the empty hall, "I was hoping to sneak up on you before you noticed I was here!"

Accompanied by a burst of melodious laughter, Nui Harime appeared from behind Ichigo and wrapped her left arm around his right arm. With a smile that stretched across her face, she looked up into Ichigo's eyes and stuck out her tongue, "I can't believe you were able to notice I was there, especially since I was trying super hard not to be found. I've always been good at hide and seek, you know? But it's so good that I found you Ichigo! I wanted to tell you that your little speech was just awesome and inspiring. I expect nothing less from my favorite cousin who actually beat Satsuki in a fight! I could beat her, of course, but it's just awesome to know that you're just like me now!"

"I'm nothing like you," Ichigo retorted, ignoring the strange feeling emanating from where Nui touched him.

"Why are you being so mean to me? Cousins should get along, you know," Nui pouted and puffed her cheeks out, "I mean, we're family and family should stick together. The warmth from our hearts beating as one just makes me happy!"

Turning her attention away from Ichigo and his lovely Kamui, Nui focused every bit of her intent and focus on Yoruichi. As the childish pout on her face vanished and her sapphire eye darkened in the shadowy hall, the Grand Couturier reached into her pink dress and casually pulled out the larger purple Scissor Blade, "Oh. It's you. I remember you. It's been quite a while. How have you been? Did you know I made a promise to myself after the last time we met? I promised that if I ever saw you again I would cut off one of your arms. Since being around Ichigo's put me in a good and cheerful mood, I'm going to be generous about which arm you get to keep. So pick the arm you happen to like the least, please!"

"You're a confident one," Yoruichi was unperturbed by Nui's threat. Instead of cowering or trying to run away, Yoruichi instead crossed her arms over her chest and gave the Grand Couturier a wide and confident grin, "But from what I remember, you were unable to land a single hit on me the last time we fought. Do you remember how I stole your blade twice and crushed your skull into the pavement? Let's face it, you may be able to heal from any injuries I could give you but you're never going to be able to even catch me!"

"Oh?" Nui's grin turned downright murderous as she vanished from next to Ichigo and reappeared in front of Yoruichi with her purple Scissor Blade held up high in the air. With a sadistic grin on her face, Nui's singular eye widened manically as she slashed towards through Yoruichi's body, "Hearing a human talk to me like that is so insulting! You should just lie down and die!"

The two halves of Yoruichi's body fell slowly to the ground and Nui's smile widened upon killing the one person that got away from her. That smile quickly vanished and was replaced by stunned disbelief as what she thought was a corpse vanished.

"Utsusemi."

Nui turned her head around to see Yoruichi standing unharmed down the hallway apart from a small tear on her jacket. Giving the Grand Couturier a mock salute, she sarcastically said, "You have

speed but you'll never be able to catch me. I'm not known as the Goddess of Flash for nothing!"

"How interesting! A human that can avoid my attacks like that is really interesting. I'm going to enjoy cutting you open and finding just how you work," Nui was insulted that Yoruichi, a mere human, was able to avoid her attack. The Grand Couturier had been certain her Scissor Blade had sliced cleanly through Yoruichi's flesh and bone but despite her attitude and childishness, Nui had a sharp and keen mind. She understood that if Yoruichi was able to avoid her attack so easily then trying to kill her was going to be a problem.

"Well since that is out of the way, I'm going to head back Ichigo," Yoruichi nodded to Ichigo as she kicked open one of the windows. Before she leapt out into the night's cool air, she gave Nui one last mocking salute, "Be sure to call me if you ever need someone to show just how slow you really are!"

Nui puffed her cheeks out and huffed as Yoruichi disappeared into the darkness outside. She was still peeved that Yoruichi had avoided her attacks and wanted nothing more than to tear apart the dark-skinned woman limb from limb but that was what underlings are for! As soon as she got back to Revocs Nui made a mental note to order Rei to send a member or two of Xcution after Yoruichi. No one made a fool of the Grand Couturier and lived long enough to enjoy it.

"Well now that the wet blanket is gone, I have something super-duper awesome to tell you Ichigo!"

Nui spun on her heel and twirled around before pulling a piece of paper out of thin air. Handing it to Ichigo with an accompanying giggle, she wrapped her arm around his and leaned in, "You left the ceremony so quickly that Satsuki wasn't able to let you know about the Naturals Election coming up!"

Ichigo tried to pull his arm free but found Nui's grip to be like a vice, "Naturals Election?"

"Uh huh!" Nui nodded and stared happily at Ichigo, "It's all for that Ryuko Matoi girl! At least that's what I heard Satsuki tell her little stooges! It's supposed to start in a couple of days and you're going to be fighting too! Isn't that awesome?"

"Like hell I'm going to fight Ryuko!" Ichigo managed to tear his arm free from Nui's grasp and almost tore it out of the socket in the process. Rubbing his shoulder, he glared at Nui and asked, "What makes you think I'm going to do anything Satsuki says?"

"Huh?"

Nui tilted her head to the side and blinked owlishly before Ichigo's question hit her. Smiling and sticking out her tongue, she answered, "Oh, you got it all wrong! You're going to be fighting alongside Ryuko, at least if she survives the whole seven days! I'm really rooting for her, you know? She's going to be in for a really awesome surprise if she makes it to the last match! Good luck, Ichigo!"

Humming softly to herself, Nui began to skip her way back to Lady Ragyo's side. It was really good that she came to see how Ichigo was feeling after he stormed out of the ceremony. Who knows what lies that Yoruichi lady could have filled his head with if she hadn't come to save him?

"I can't see it."

Nui skidded to a stop as Ichigo spoke. Turning her head sharply around, her face adopting a pose of confusion, she asked, "What are you talking about, Ichigo?"

"I know you're Ururu's twin sister," Ichigo's words cut sharply through Nui's cheerful façade and the smile on her face immediately fell. As her normally bright blue eye darkened and seemed to drain of all emotions, Ichigo ignored it and continued, "But she's nothing like you."

"Please don't talk about things you have no knowledge about." The sheer lack of emotion in Nui's voice caused Ichigo to pause and take notice. Staring deeply into Nui's emotionless gaze, he realized he had seen that look somewhere before - on Ururu's face. Before he could question what she meant, Nui vanished in a burst of speed, leaving him all alone in the hallway.

***" I said it once and I'll say it again. Nui Harime is a dangerous woman,"*** Mugetsu's voice cut through the silence like a knife, ***"But she mentioned a Naturals Election. Are you going to participate?"***

"Does it look like I have a choice in the matter?" Ichigo grumbled and began walking in the direction of his dorm, "Satsuki's got something planned... and that's not mentioning what Nui's has in store for Ryuko with her 'surprise.'"

***" Agreed,"*** Mugetsu's multicolored eyes narrowed as she tried to shake off the feeling of Nui's hands on her sleeves, ***"I don't know what that woman wants with Ryuko but I'm not going to just stand around and let it happen!"***

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## **Kamui Tales #14 - How a Kamui Changes its Look**

There was a burst of static before Senketsu appeared in front of the camera. As his one eye loomed ominously in front of the lens, he backed off and waved with one of his sleeves, ***"Hello and welcome to another exciting episode of Kamui Tales! I'm your host Senketsu and tonight we're going to go over the various transformations or configurations of Kamui. First we'll start with - "***

Senketsu's introduction to the omake was cut off harshly as Mugetsu flew out of nowhere and smashed the bottom part of her uniform into

his mouth. As the male sailor uniform gagged as he was kicked off stage, eventually hitting something with a loud crash, Ichigo's Kamui huffed angrily and crossed her sleeves in a pose reminiscent of a pout, ***"Why are you the host of this omake? You're not the only Kamui able to do the job, you know!"***

***" I'm hosting it because I'm the readers' favorite Kamui! "***

Senketsu argued passionately as he hovered back onscreen and growled menacingly at an increasingly annoyed Mugetsu. Before she could argue back, however, a rude feminine voice interrupted Senketsu for her.

***" Actually I'm hosting the omake."***

Mugetsu and Senketsu looked to the left as the camera panned out to show Kinue Kinagase sitting calmly in a chair with her legs folded over one another. It was obvious that with the headphones over her ears and her eyes focused squarely on the book in her hand that she hadn't been the one to interrupt their argument. When Kinue noticed the camera was zooming in on her face, she rolled her eyes and pointed with her thumb to Danketsu's narrowing eyes.

***" The author has made me the host of this omake,"*** Danketsu declared enthusiastically, ***"After my epic battle against Jackie Tristan no other Kamui could compare to my fucking power!"***

Senketsu and Mugetsu shared a look before both Kamui rolled their eyes at Danketsu's boasting. Seeming to come to a mental decision at once, Senketsu raised his sleeve at Danketsu and asked, ***"You're lying. The author would never make a bloodthirsty Kamui like you the host of an omake! How do you know you're not lying?"***

***" Like this."***

Danketsu turned her eyes up to her wearer and coughed to get Kinue's attention. When the elder Kinagase sibling continued to ignore her Kamui, Danketsu decided to take a more physical approach and forcibly took control of Kinue's hand long enough to

get her to drop the book. While she was more than a little annoyed at her Kamui for forcing her to lose her place in the book she was reading, Kinue nevertheless reached into her pocket and pulled out a familiar remote. Clicking on the button once and bringing up an image of Ichigo fighting Nonon while transformed into Mugetsu's Gufū configuration, she raised up eyebrow when Mugetsu and Senketsu depressingly deflated onto the floor.

With a happy tone in her voice, Danketsu began her narration, ***"Ok, listen up since I don't want to say this damn speech twice. Every Kamui has the ability to change their body in order to increase their battle potential. Mugetsu Gufū is a good example of what a Kamui can do when dealing with an airborne opponent like Nonon Jakuzure. By transforming each of Ichigo's legs into a separate propulsion system powered by the Life Fibers inside a Kamui, Mugetsu allows her human to fly under his own power. Hey, switch to the next slide, you annoying bitch!"***

Kinue seemed to pick up the insult through her headphones because as soon as the expletive left Danketsu's mouth, she tossed the remote to a recovered Senketsu.

***" Ah, thank you kind woman!"*** Senketsu blushed when Kinue nodded in appreciation. Dodging Mugetsu's attempt to claim the remote, he pressed the button and switched to the slide of Ryuko's first battle against Sanageyama, ***"Kamui configurations are not just limited to changing the field of battle. We can also shift forms to give our wearers new and unique abilities in combat. The invisible blade granted to Ryuko by my Senkou configuration is perfect for dealing with an opponent who relies on his eyes to avoid attacks."***

Stopping as he finished his explanation, Senketsu looked around suspiciously when he noticed Mugetsu was no longer there. Turning to ask Danketsu if she saw her, he reconsidered when he saw the belligerent Kamui shouting at her wearer for giving the remote away.

Kinue, due to her headphones and selective hearing, simply ignored her Kamui's ranting as she turned a page in her recovered book.

**" Now Junketsu!"**

Senketsu's eye widened in surprise as Satsuki's Kamui grabbed his sleeves from behind and held him tightly. Struggling to get free, he turned to the silent Kamui and shouted, **"Junketsu? What are you doing in this omake?"**

Junketsu averted her eyes away from Senketsu before pointing with her lapel in front of him. That gave the male Kamui just enough time to see Mugetsu appear out of nowhere and grab the remote from him.

**" Serves you right,"** Mugetsu growled before turning her attention to the other Kamui, **"Thanks for the help Junketsu. You want to try this?"**

Junketsu shook her lapels before picking up her dry erase board and marker, **"No thank you."**

Tearing his uniform free from Junketsu's grip, Senketsu scratched his sleeve in confusion as he asked, **"We know you can speak. Anyone in an omake has the ability to read and view all the previous omakes. "**

Junketsu's eyes widened in fear before her whole uniform began shaking violently. Letting out a very feminine gasp of fright, Junketsu's eyes rolled up into her shoulders as she collapsed to the ground in embarrassment at someone actually hearing her voice.

**" Oh great, you broke her,"** Mugetsu chastised her fellow Kamui as she nudged Junketsu's fallen form with one of her pant legs.

**" I didn't break her,"** Senketsu countered before sighing and grabbing the top of Junketsu's uniform, **"Anyway, we can't just**



***leave her here. You grab her skirt and we'll find a nice hanger to put her on."***

***"Fine,"*** Mugetsu spat as she dropped the remote and grabbed the other end of Junketsu, ***"But keep your sleeves where I can see them. I've seen how you transform! If you try anything on Junketsu I'll tear you apart one Life Fiber at a time!"***

# I Will Survive

*Wow. This chapter is the longest I've ever written. Without even accounting for padding or other things, it's sitting at a whopping 17,500 words. That breaks my old record by nearly two thousand words. So anyway, this chapter covers the entirety of Episode 8 (apart from the last minute or two). I didn't want to start the King of the Hill final battles (which will be different!) in the middle of a chapter. They are important and should be given the proper focus.*

*This chapter is also focused more heavily on Ryuko than the last few chapters. I realized I was starting to focus too intently on Ichigo and needed to shift back to Ryuko for a bit. Some of what Ryuko (and Satsuki) says here will be similar to what she says in canon but it kind of hard not to use the script given. The entire point of going to her father's destroyed home will also be flipped over by the end of the chapter. So there is the highway chase from Episode 8 in this chapter and I will say that it's many times better than what happened in the anime.*

*There's also a very slight retcon. Nonon's new Goku Uniform is dark blue with gold stars to help differentiate it better from the rest of the Elite Four.*

*Oh, I didn't forget about Nudist Beach and Xcution. A very famous member of Xcution will also be mentioned. Don't forget to read and review and enjoy the chapter!*

*P.S. - Just a heads up, I kept Mako's 'Drive to Hell' song from the subbed version of Episode 8 since it's so funny. Kudos to the person that thought up that particular song for the series.*

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## Chapter 27 - I Will Survive

"Fellow students of Honnouji Academy, it is time we begin anew!"

Satsuki Kiryuin's commanding tone echoed out over the horde of students standing shoulder to shoulder in the courtyard below. Every student at the academy, ranging from the multitudes of No-Star all the way up to the comparative handful of Two-Star, was in attendance. Even former club captains like Takaharu Fukuroda and Omiko Hakodate, who were demoted after losing to either Ichigo or Ryuko, stood silently at attention.

Slamming the sheathed Bakuzan loudly on the podium in front of her, Satsuki clasped the hilt of the Life Fiber blade with both of her hands and glanced at the person standing next to her. Despite what Ichigo thought he could accomplish by mocking and deriding her rule during the Parent Student Day ceremony, his speech had only helped to increase her admiration for him. Not many would dare to even speak a word against her. Turning her gaze away from the scowling Ichigo, she stared back down at the crowd and shouted, "I have read the abysmal reports from Parent Student Day and I find myself appalled! How can any of you stand in front of me with your heads held high? Has the standards of Honnouji Academy grown lax? The answer is yes! That is why starting today I am rebuilding the Honnouji Academy Student Council system from the ground up!"

Intense muttering spread throughout the courtyard as the students discussed what Satsuki could be planning. Ignoring the sounds of the students and their fruitless questions, Satsuki continued, "The rule against attacking other students without clearing it through the Disciplinary Committee is hereby rescinded! All of you now possess the freedom to attack any other student you please without repercussions!"

"Lady Satsuki sure is enjoying this."

Absentmindedly twirling her baton between her fingers, Nonon Jakuzure stood at attention behind Satsuki and to her immediate

right. Dexterously stopping the baton as it nearly slipped out of her fingers, she ignored the glance Gamagori was giving her to focus on the feeling of her new Symphony Regalia Mark III. Even though Lady Satsuki awarded her the new version of her Goku Uniform last week, Iori had forbidden her from activating it for a period of two weeks under the excuse he wanted to observe its strain on her body. According to him, he could not increase the overall power of her Goku Uniform past the Mark II without subsequently raising the Life Fiber percentage as well, which now sat at a record 35%.

That was the reason why her Goku Uniform, which used to possess the standard Honnouji Academy grey coloring with black stars, now had a scheme of predominantly dark blue with golden stars emblazoned upon it. It was all in order to differentiate the power between the old and new class of Three-Star Goku Uniforms.

Nonon thought about what powers her new Symphony Regalia might have before her mood abruptly soured. She still hadn't forgotten how Strawberry had beaten her in her Mark II and if that embarrassment wasn't bad enough, Lady Satsuki also informed her Elite Four that Ryuko Matoi's Kamui was at a similar level to her own. Nonon didn't care how strong the Transfer Student was. She was mainly concerned with making Ichigo pay for humiliating her in front of the entire school. She was Lady Satsuki's best friend, damn it! She wasn't supposed to lose to a loser like Strawberry! Biting her lower lip, a soft growl escaping from her throat in the process, she angrily glared at Ichigo and muttered, "What's so special about Strawberry anyway?"

"Give it a break already."

A thoroughly perplexed, and slightly exasperated, Uzu Sanageyama crossed his arms while his bandanna, which was tied around his eyes to hide the self-inflicted handicap, blew freely in the breeze. Nonon had been in a bad mood ever since Satsuki had informed them of Ichigo's new position as Student Council Vice President and it was starting to get on Sanageyama's nerves, "You've been on Ichigo's case for the last week. Who knows what Lady Satsuki why

she did what she did. Perhaps she is adhering to the old saying of 'keep your friends close but your enemies closer.' Ichigo is the only person to ever beat her in combat, which is a feat none of us can truthfully claim."

Sanageyama had no issues with Ichigo being Vice President, and thus his superior. If his fellow swordsman was even remotely unworthy of the position, Sanageyama was adamant Lady Satsuki would not have even considered him. That reminded him that he needed to thank Ichigo when he got a chance. If it was not for the sound and helpful advice after he lost his match to Ryuko Matoi and lost his Goku Uniform, Sanageyama would not have realized that he had grown dependent on his Tengantsu and let the rest of his skills weaken. Even with his eyes sewn shut and Shingantsu enabling him to see the world Sanageyama refused to be conceited. He needed to be ready for an opponent that could outmaneuver him.

*"That mysterious woman with the Kamui was able to slip through my Shingantsu with ease. If one Kamui wearer can do it, then it's likely Ichigo or Matoi can do so as well,"* Sanageyama stood still as another stiff breeze swept across the upper levels of Honnouji Academy. As he sensed his fellow Elite Four's Goku Uniforms shifting in the wind, he recalled with distress a particular bad memory, *"One thing I am grateful for is Iori sewing me a bandanna that fits perfectly. I refuse to allow a repeat of the last time it fell off. No, I'm not going to think about it. I can still hear the first year students' screams of terror."*

"Keep your proverbs in that empty head of yours where they belong, wild monkey!" Nonon spat angrily at Sanageyama upon his attempt to calm her down, "The only reason I lost to Strawberry was because he caught me off guard!"

"Sure he did..." Inumuta's snide remark did not go unnoticed. Adjusting his glasses and locking gazes with an annoyed Jakuzure, Inumuta smirked and asked, "... was this before or after your sneak attack him didn't work? Do I need to remind you that Ichigo Kurosaki is now the Vice President of the Student Council and Lady Satsuki's

right hand man? I'll break it down for you. Lady Satsuki was unable to best him in combat despite the fact that she is leagues above any of us, and therefore the chance you successfully beating Ichigo in battle is roughly one in a million... on a good day."

"Shut up doggy or I'll break your computer in two."

Down in the throng of students in the courtyard and away from the petty squabbling of the Elite Four, Ryuko Matoi alongside Mako and Ururu stared up at Satsuki with varying expressions on their faces. While Mako had a slightly peppy expression, signifying that she really had no idea what was going on but was simply happy to be there, Ryuko's face was furrowed in a mixture of frustration and confusion. Glancing to the scowling orange haired youth standing right beside Satsuki, Ryuko didn't know what to think of Ichigo's presence. On one hand she was still angry Ichigo had suddenly joined up with Satsuki Kiryuin, her enemy, but on the other hand she knew Ichigo didn't do it willingly. His speech during the ceremony last week still brought a smile to her face whenever she thought about it and Ryuko could only imagine the embarrassment Satsuki felt at Ichigo giving her a 'screw you' speech.

" *Still though...* " Ryuko clenched her fists tightly enough to cause her Seki Tekkou to audibly crackle, "*... just what kind of game are you playing, Satsuki Kiryuin? Why did you make Ichigo your Vice President? Are you blackmailing him?* "

"Clandestine meetings, political alliances, treachery, anything and everything you can think of shall be permitted with the sole exclusion of criminal acts! If any of you even thinks of attempting a felony, you will be immediately incarcerated by the Disciplinary Committee and face my personal wrath!" Satsuki's aura and presence tripled in intensity as she finished speaking, causing the greedy and power hungry looks on the horde of students to abet slightly. Noticing Ichigo's relieved expression out of the corner of her eye, Satsuki allowed a pleased expression to grace her face. Did Ichigo truly believe she was so cold as to allow the students of Honnouji Academy to do anything and everything they pleased?

"You have until the end of the week to return to this courtyard alive and intact! If you manage to survive, use your strength and willpower to reclaim all that you once possessed and make it your own once more! Reclaim your social standings that you desperately cling onto in Honnouji Academy's first Naturals Election!"

Ryuko frowned and scratched her head, "Naturals Election? What the hell is she talking about?"

"It's a trick."

Upon hearing the softly spoken words, Ryuko turned towards Ururu. The normally quiet girl was staring attentively at Satsuki with a look of utmost concentration on her face, which clashed with her usually shy expression. Once she noticed Ryuko's gaze upon her, Ururu turned her sapphire eyes towards her and explained, "Satsuki's lying. I can see it in the way her face is tensing up."

"Really?" Ryuko focused intently on Satsuki but due to the distance couldn't see her face, "Are you sure about that?"

"Uh huh," Ururu nodded and pointed up at the Student Council President, "She said the Naturals Election is designed to remake the Student Council from the ground up, but the only ones that will be on it are the Elite Four and Ichigo. Satsuki is tricking everyone at Honnouji Academy into thinking they have a chance of gaining a Three-Star Goku Uniform when it is nothing but a farce."

"So this is all just a scam?" Ryuko growled and her glare towards Satsuki doubled in intensity. She didn't care if Satsuki wanted to do a stupid Naturals Election but she drew the line at getting people's hopes up before crushing them. When Senketsu tensed up as a ill omen drove through the horde of students, Ryuko grabbed Mako and Ururu's shoulders and began walking away.

"Where are we going, Ryuko?" Mako asked happily before seeming to remember something, "We can't leave yet! Lady Satsuki isn't done talking!"

"Don't worry about it Mako," Ryuko gently answered her best friend, "We're just going to find a better angle to watch Satsuki, ok?"

Mako's face lit up and stars appeared in her eyes, "Ok!"

Satsuki's eyes caught a speck of dark blue moving through the crowd of grey and white and immediately her mind knew it was Ryuko Matoi. Looking down at Ryuko and noticing the scowl on her face, Satsuki allowed a small hint of satisfaction to adorn her face. So Matoi knew the true intention of the Naturals Election? Perhaps her earlier assessment of Matoi's intelligence was incorrect. Quickly drawing Bakuzan out of its scabbard and stabbing it into the air, Satsuki allowed the early morning light to reflect off the polished black metal.

"This will not be a normal election where you choose a candidate to dictate your life. In the Naturals Election you will BE the candidate! Every single aspect of your persona shall be made public. Your strength! Your way of life! Your willingness to persevere at all costs! At 8:30 AM this Friday, a sudden death runoff election will be held amongst those that survive the week! You will fight one another and only those with the dedication to win shall emerge victorious! Show me that you deserve to stay at Honnouji Academy and I shall return your Goku Uniforms once more! Now fight, my fellow comrades of Honnouji Academy, fight and prove yourselves!"

A soft rumbling came from the gathered students as the greediest and most power-hungry among them immediately turned on their friends. As dozens of fights broke out in the crowd below, Satsuki turned around and slowly sheathed Bakuzan. As her Elite Four appeared before her, she closed her eyes and tilted her head upwards, "I expect to see all of you here on Friday morning. Understood?"

In one smooth motion all four members gave Satsuki a one armed bow, "Of course, Lady Satsuki."



"Very well," Satsuki knew all four of her closest comrades were going to make it to the Sudden Death Runoff Election. They needed to have their Goku Uniforms tested by an opponent that could push them to their limits and Matoi was the perfect person for such a task. With the power of Senketsu at Matoi's fingertips, the vulnerabilities and weakness in her Elite Four's Goku Uniforms could be detected and fixed.

" *That line of thought only truly applies to Gamagori and Inumuta,*" Satsuki mentally corrected herself. Both Sanageyama and Jakuzure possessed upgraded versions of their original regalia, Mark II and Mark III respectively, and thus she did not need to test them for the same reasons as the other two. Sanageyama already fought Matoi in his Mark II and just barely managed to beat her. Satsuki was certain Matoi would know how to beat Sanageyama if they clashed for a third time. The issue bothering her was Jakuzure's Goku Uniform.

Jakuzure was testing a Mark III, which possessed a higher Life Fiber percentage than the other Three-Star Goku Uniforms. Satsuki was uncertain if activating such an article of clothing would have an adverse effect on Jakuzure's body but Iori and Inumuta's simulations suggest that since Jakuzure's resistance was high enough for her to potentially wear a Four-Star Goku Uniform, her Mark III should not mentally or physically affect her. However, just to be safe, Satsuki ordered Jakuzure not to activate her Symphony Regalia for a period of two weeks. That would give Iori enough time to go over the data concerning her Goku Uniform and make sure it was completely safe.

Just before Satsuki turned to Iori, who was standing patiently off to the side and awaiting her orders, Satsuki paused and asked, "Where do you think you are going, Ichigo?"

Already halfway to the elevator that would bring him down to the frenzy of students fighting in the courtyard below, Ichigo turned his head around and answered, "I have to catch a bus back to Karakura Town. You said I have until Friday so I'll be back here Thursday night."

"The price of your ticket shall be reimbursed," Satsuki said as she stepped closer to Ichigo. As her stern eyes locked with Ichigo's annoyed gaze, she explained, "As the Student Council Vice President, you are held to a higher standard than anyone else in Honnouji Academy excluding myself! If it became known that you left Honnou City for the duration of the Naturals Election, the credibility of my Student Council will be forever tarnished! You must stay within the confines of Honnouji Academy and allow yourself to be a goal for the masses to strive to overcome!"

Ichigo opened his mouth to respond but was forced to stop when he noticed that the Elite Four were no longer in front of him. Spinning around when he heard the doors to the elevator opening, he only caught a brief glimpse of the Elite Four before the doors shut once more and left him alone with Satsuki. As the sound of hydraulics screeched from somewhere far above him, he looked at Satsuki and asked, "What's going on?"

"Do not fret Ichigo," Satsuki gave Ichigo a smug look as she turned to Iori, "Iori, begin."

"Yes, Milady," The president of the Sewing Club gave Satsuki a small bow before pressing a finger against his ear, "Begin releasing the High Velocity Life Fiber Jammer!"

**" They're releasing a large amount of shredded Life Fibers into the air. Great, now I'm going to start sneezing,"** Mugetsu stared alongside Ichigo as twin jets from high atop the tower above them began spewing out concentrated streams of Life Fibers. As the glowing red threads surrounded the upper levels of Honnouji Academy in a virtually impenetrable hourglass-shaped barrier, Ichigo reached for Tournesol strapped to his back when Satsuki's voice cut through the air.

"I would not recommend that, Ichigo," Satsuki advised evenly. With her body covered in a faint red light due to the High Velocity Life Fiber Jammer surrounding them, Satsuki gave Ichigo a cursory glance before continuing, "The finely shredded Life Fibers in this

barrier circulate at speeds exceeding 200 meters per second. Even with the immense power of Mugetsu at your fingertips, you will find it impossible to penetrate."

"So you trapped me here with you," Ichigo's hand did not leave Tournesol's hilt. On the contrary, he began pulling the blade out of its sheath, "Do you have something planned against Ryuko? Even if this barrier is impenetrable, I'll still find a way through to stop you."

"Relax Ichigo."

Even as the sounds of fighting coming from outside the barrier intensified, Satsuki continued to look nonplussed. Turning away from Ichigo, her heels softly clicking along the roof as she went, Satsuki motioned for him to follow her. Ichigo, seeing no alternative due to the barrier preventing him from leaving, did so reluctantly with his hand ready to draw Tournesol if Satsuki tried to pull anything.

"You have my word that my Elite Four shall make no move against Ryuko Matoi or her friends during the Naturals Election," Satsuki stepped into her private quarters and gave Soroi, who was waiting for her to arrive, a curt nod. As Ichigo slowly walked in behind her, she sat down in a chair and calmly picked up the cup of tea from the tray Soroi was holding. Taking a small sip from the calming liquid, she motioned with her hand for Ichigo to sit down across from her.

"No thanks, I prefer to stand."

"As you wish, but you are going to be staying here from now on," Satsuki, upon seeing the reddening look on Ichigo's face, chuckled softly, "That is not what I meant. Soroi has prepared your quarters and Gamagori has already taken the liberty to transfer all your belongings. It is beneath your station as Vice President of Honnouji Academy to live in the dorms. Even the Two-Star students possess better accommodations. A wearer of a Kamui deserves better than that."

"It was fine to me," Ichigo countered without care. He had a vague idea why Satsuki was acting this way but it did not mean he was going to fall for it, "Don't think you're going to win me over like this. Ryuko, Mako and Ururu are my friends. Just because I'm working for you does not mean I'm on your side. I'm only your Vice President because we both know how dangerous Nui Harime is. If you try to do anything to my friends, I won't hesitate to stop you."

"Ichigo, I - "

Satsuki was cut off, a first to her, as Ichigo brushed off her words and left to go to his quarters. As Soroi sighed in anticipation of the trouble the orange haired youth was certain to be, Satsuki failed to notice the slight clenching of her fingers. When she heard the telltale sound of ceramic cracking, she looked and saw that her hand had accidentally crushed the teacup.

"Let me get that for you, Milady," Soroi quickly walked over and carefully began picking up all the pieces of ceramic. As he places the shattered remains of the teacup onto the tray, he asked, "Young Ichigo seems to be a headstrong boy, Milady. He reminds me greatly of his father, Master Isshin."

"I am aware that you have worked for my mother all my life but how well did you truly know Ichigo's father?"

Soroi gave a polite chuckle as he picked up the last piece of ceramic, "Master Isshin was always a pleasure to be around. In your mother's younger days before she met your late father, he was the only one that could make her smile. It's a shame that the passage of time changes us all."

"He will not be any trouble, Soroi," Satsuki propped her cheek against her hand as the sound of Ichigo closing the door to his quarters reached her ears. Letting an annoyed sigh escape her lips, she turned towards the windows, tinged red by the barrier, and explained, "Ichigo may be exasperated and irritated but he will not move against me. He is fully aware of the threat the Grand Couturier

represents and will work with me as long as I have my mother keep Nui away from Honnouji Academy."

"Please forgive me for what I'm about to say, Milady, but the Grand Couturier is a disturbed woman. No person should ever take pleasure from the things she does."

"It is fine, Soroi. I agree completely with you. Now if you will excuse me, I am feeling tired," Satsuki gave her servant a respectful nod as she stood up and made her way to her bedroom. As soon as she was alone in her room, she let out a tired sigh and began removing Junketsu from her body. Satsuki found it strange that the strain Junketsu put on her body abetted ever so slightly ever since Ichigo became her Vice President.

"Perhaps it is a previously unknown Kamui reaction," Satsuki mused to herself as Junketsu fell to her feet, leaving her almost completely naked. As the strain of pushing against Junketsu's bloodlust vanished, Satsuki let out a relieved sigh. If there truly was a connection between her Junketsu and Ichigo's Mugetsu that somehow tempered her Kamui's behavior, Satsuki wanted to know about it.

Giving one last scornful look at Junketsu, which she quickly placed in its protective bulletproof case, Satsuki walked to her bathroom to fresh up. The strain of Junketsu always left her body feeling tired and numb. She could not contemplate the endurance Ichigo or Matoi possessed to not only wear their Kamui's on a daily basis but do so without showing any strain. As she turned the faucet, causing hot water and steam to fill the bathroom, Satsuki thought back to Ichigo's behavior just a few minutes ago.

She knew he would be upset with her decision to trap him inside the High Velocity Life Fiber Jammer but she had done the same thing to herself. If anything were to happen to Honnouji Academy or Honnou City, Satsuki would be unable to respond until midnight on Friday, when the barrier would naturally dissipate. Satsuki expected Ichigo

to be open to a polite and respectful conversation between two equals but his hostile attitude made that highly unlikely.

*" I have four days to mend the hostility Ichigo feels. If I don't, then several of my plans will be in ruins,"* Satsuki leaned against the tiled wall and sighed angrily. As the hot water cascaded down her back, allowing her to momentarily forget the strain of wearing Junketsu, Satsuki felt getting Ichigo to see her point of view would be easier said than done.

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For most of her life, Ryuko had viewed her family's home as a stain, a part of her past that she never wanted to remember. Whenever she did think about her early childhood within the mostly empty and quiet halls and rooms, she would instinctively scowl as memories of a distant father too busy to play with his daughter came to mind. Sure, she had toys other childhood interests, but it just wasn't the same as having a father.

"Wow!" Mako stared at the burnt and ruined manor looming before her. Determined to get a full view of the large mansion, Mako tilted her head upwards and promptly lost her balance. Landing on her back with nary a groan, Mako let out a comforting laugh and asked, "Did you live here, Ryuko?"

"It's my family's house," Ryuko answered with a small shrug. She didn't have any connection to her first home now that her dad was gone. To her, it was nothing but burnt wood that contained nothing but bad memories. Walking past Ururu, who was helping get Mako back onto her feet, Ryuko placed her hand against the front doors and pushed. The aged doors, damaged by the explosion and subsequent fire, put up only a token effort before creaking open.

"Ryuko," Ururu's quiet voice broke the silence Ryuko was enjoying. The normally meek girl was really glad that Ryuko asked her to

come along on a trip to her house but she never expected to see something like this. A terrible thing happened here, Ururu could feel it in the air and see it on Ryuko's face, but she felt it wasn't her place to pry for answers, "What happened to your house?"

"You lived in a big house?" Mako, who had quickly recovered from her self-inflicted blunder with nothing more than a few scraps, was back on her feet next to Ryuko and Ururu. As the imaginative and happy girl stared at the mansion in awe, she seemed to realize something was wrong. The mansion was in ruins! Grasping both of Ryuko's hands in her own, she tearfully asked, "You lived in a wreck of a house like this? So you were poor, too!"

"I wasn't living in these ruins, Mako," Ryuko shook her head at her best friend's lack of attention, but allowed a small smile anyway. She wouldn't want Mako to be anything else even if she had all the power in the world. Stepping into the house and retracing the path toward the trapdoor near the back, she trailed her fingers against the ash-covered wall and said, "It was burnt down six months ago."

Ururu, her attention wavering as she sensed how Ryuko's home must have once looked, said, "It's almost as big as Uryu's house."

"Huh? Ryuko turned to Ururu, "Who is Uryu?"

"Uryu is Ichigo's friend from Karakura Town," Ururu explained briefly as her eyes caught sight of the golden evening sky through a hole in the mansion's roof, "So you lived here with your dad?"

"I wouldn't call it living," Ryuko grumbled as the memories, or lack thereof, of her father came to the forefront of her mind. Her talk with Ichigo's dad really helped put things in perspective. It lightened the burden on her shoulders to know that her dad truly loved her and was proud of everything she did. Perhaps things would have ended up differently if he had only known how to express it.

Noticing several blackened pictures on the ground, Ryuko knelt down and picked one up. Carefully clearing the scorched glass of

dust and ash, she stared at the picture of her dad smiling next to a much younger version of her, "Dad said mom died right after I was born and her death hit him hard. I think mom's death is what caused him to focus on his work. He was a scientist and while he tried his best to raise me, I don't think he could do it all by himself. He was proud of who I was but knew deep down that he couldn't take care of me. I think that is why he sent me away to the dorms once I went to grade school."

"That's so sad, Ryuko!" Mako's eyes had large tears in them as she listened to her friend's story.

"Yeah..." Ryuko bit her lower lip and let out a sad sigh, "Dad never said why I had to go away and for a while I hoped he would come pick me up. We were a family, so why would he just abandon me like that? After a few months without hearing from him I began acting out. I guess I was hoping if I got into enough trouble, the school would call him and he would have to come see me, but nothing ever worked. By the time I reached high school I just stopped caring and joined a gang. I thought once I graduated from high school I could leave and forget about him forever, but then six months ago I got a message from him. He wanted to talk to me and make up for lost time. It was really hard to believe that he wanted to see me but I was so hopeful that I want back home for the first time in ages. But when I got there..."

"He was dead, right?"

Ururu shrunk under the suspicious gaze from Ryuko and stared at her feet, afraid to look her friend in her eyes. She hadn't meant to offend Ryuko's feelings, so in a subdued tone she continued speaking, "I could tell something bad happened here the moment we arrived. You told us your dad was killed six months ago, so when you started talking about him I realized this must have been where he died. At first I didn't want to say anything because it was your dad, you know, but I'm sorry if I insulted you, Ryuko."



"No, it's not your fault, Ururu" Ryuko let out an exasperated sigh before continuing forward.

"Is this why you're always so angry, Ryuko?" Mako slid up next to a visibly saddened Ururu and gave her shy friend a big friendly hug to make her feel better.

"For a long time I thought I hated my dad," Ryuko momentarily ignored Mako and Ururu when she finally found the steel trapdoor that was the start of the whole mess. If she hadn't been standing on it during that rainy day all those weeks ago, she would never have found Senketsu. Tracing out the rusted edges of the entrance with her red Scissor Blade, Ryuko calmly stood next to the trapdoor and jammed her blade into the spacing between the two doors, "But once he died, I realized that even though he was my dad, I knew next to nothing about him. Ichigo's dad said he designed clothing, so who would want to kill him? I need to know what his last words meant and why he thought I should have this Scissor Blade. I also need to find out why my dad created you, Senketsu. Finally, I need to track down the bitch that killed him! There's a reason Nui Harime murdered my dad and once I find her, I'm going to demand she tell me why!"

"I-I've met Nui Harime..."

"What?" Ryuko's head twisted around so quickly that she was afraid she might snap her neck.

"I-I said I've seen Nui Harime before," Ururu raised a trembling hand to her mouth and subconsciously bit down on her finger. Looking away from a shocked Ryuko, her eyes began watering as she said, "I've run into her a few times at Honnouji Academy. I-I don't think she's a student, since she comes and goes randomly, but she's obsessed with Ichigo. I first ran into her during No Late Day. She was even there during Parent Student Day."

As her mind processed what she heard Ryuko's anger momentarily got the better of her. Clenching the handle of her Scissor Blade tightly with both hands, afraid of what she might do if she let go,

Ryuko took a series of ragged breaths in an attempt to calm down. After nearly a minute or so of trying to focus her mind on anything but her father's murderer, she felt as normal as she was going to feel.

Letting go of her Scissor Blade, her arms limply falling to her sides, Ryuko let out a loud sigh and asked, "What did she look like? Ichigo's mentioned her name but he's never told me what the hell Nui Harime actually looks like."

Ururu's eyes narrowed sadly, which was a bad sign, as she answered, "I-I thought you already knew. You were looking at her throughout the entire ceremony."

*" I was looking at her? Who could Ururu be - "*

It was then that the true gravity and weight of Ururu's words sunk in - that creepy blonde girl sitting next to Satsuki's mother was Nui Harime! She had been staring at her father's killer the entire night and she didn't have a damn clue!

*" She fucking knew who I was the entire time! She was sitting there smiling at me because she was gloating about murdering my dad!"* Ryuko's anger threatened to boil over and it took all her self-restraint to calm down. She could not get angry at her best friends for something they had nothing to do. As her lips trembled from anger, she remembered something else about that night. After Ichigo left, she had seen Satsuki and her mother talking to Nui Harime and from the way they were acting, it looked like Satsuki knew Nui quite well.

*" Satsuki had something to do with my dad's murder! I'm sure of it. She probably sent Nui Harime after him, but why? Why would she do it?"*

Ryuko wanted nothing else but to track down Nui Harime and make her pay for what she did, but her anger abated as she remembered what Ichigo's dad said to her. She wanted nothing more than to wrap her hands around Nui's throat and demand answers but what would

she become in the process? Her dad was dead and nothing, not even killing Nui Harime, would change that. Unable to think about what she would do if she ran into Nui, Ryuko decided to think it over for a while. It wasn't like she was just going to run into Nui right around the corner. She had time to think of a plan and, if that failed, get Ichigo to help her.

*"Ururu said Nui's obsessed with Ichigo. Perhaps he might know something about her that I could use to take her down."*

"Hey Ryuko, are we going down there?"

Ryuko turned her attention to Mako, who was staring down the open trapdoor with a bundle of rope wrapped securely around her arm, and gave a relieved laugh. She had originally planned on coming back to her home to find some answers about her father and why Nui Harime killed him, but with everything she just heard perhaps it was best she go back home. She still didn't know why her dad created Senketsu or the Scissor Blade but maybe it was best she not find that out right now. Knowing that Nui Harime was not only taunting her about murdering her dad, but walking around Honnouji Academy whenever she pleased, was far more important.

***"Your blood was almost boiling for a moment there, Ryuko,"***

Senketsu's deep voice helped to erase the last dredges of anger in her system. Her Kamui had warned what might happen if she got too angry but like an idiot she completely forgot about it. Ryuko knew she might snap if she ran into Nui, which was perhaps very likely, but she needed to do everything in her power to keep her anger under control.

"Yeah, you're right, Senketsu. I was being an idiot for a second," Ryuko apologized to Senketsu, who gave a satisfied grunt, and picked up her Scissor Blade. Collapsing the red Life Fiber weapon down into the palm of her hand and putting it away in her pocket, she pulled Mako back away from the edge of the trapdoor, "Nah, we don't need to go down there anymore Mako. I got all the answers I need for the moment."

"Aw," Mako pouted childishly, "But I wanted to go spelunking with you guys!"

Ryuko chuckled at her best friend's attitude. She appreciated how Mako always knew how to cheer her up when she was angry or nervous. Noticing Ururu standing a little distance away with a forlorn look on her face, Ryuko walked over to her and said, "Hey Ururu, I'm sorry I snapped at you. I shouldn't have gotten angry at you or Mako."

"It's ok, Ryuko, you didn't mean to get angry at me."

Ururu was grateful Ryuko wasn't angry anymore, but to be perfectly honest she didn't blame her friend for being angry with her in the first place. If she hadn't kept her knowledge of Nui Harime a secret from Ryuko, perhaps she wouldn't have snapped like she did. As she gave Ryuko a small smile, which seemed to be enough for Ryuko to turn and walk out of her home, Ururu's face quickly fell as she felt the guilt of lying to her friends circulate through her body.

*"How can I tell Ryuko the truth?"* Ururu thought miserably as she slowly followed after Ryuko and Mako, *"How can I tell her that I'm Nui's twin sister?"*

Even a week after the revelation that she and Nui were twin sisters, identical in nearly every single way, Ururu still wasn't over the initial shock. She wanted to deny it, but Mr. Kurosaki was the one to tell her and he was perhaps the most trustworthy person she knew. He would never say something as painful and hurting as that unless it was the entire truth. So since she truly was Nui Harime's twin sister, various questions plagued Ururu's mind.

*"Why did she turn out this way? If we're twins, shouldn't we be more alike? I-I mean Karin and Yuzu aren't exactly the same, but I'm not a violent killer like Nui. What could make her turn out the way she did?"*

"Hurry up, Ururu!" Mako's loud voice echoed throughout the landscape as she shouted back into the ruined mansion, "Ryuko wants to go home and the gas gauge says the scooter's full, so it's going to be a fun-filled road trip! We're even getting ice cream!"

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Tsumugu Kinagase stared in tense silence at the woman sitting across the table from him. The dim light of the interrogation room made it hard for him to make out the prisoner's expression, but that was not important. Folding his hands on the metal table in front of him, he stared at where he knew her eyes to be and said, "Let me tell you two pieces of useful information. First, your Sanguinaire Raiment is completely destroyed. In fact, several of our technicians are currently examining it. I see you are smiling about something. That brings me to my second piece of useful information. We've already located each and every bug, tracker, and piece of surveillance equipment placed upon your person - all twenty three of them. Ragyo Kiryuin does not know where you are."

"Do you really think I care about your useless information?" Jackie Tristan tried to lean forward but the shackles and chains holding her down prevented her from moving more than an inch. Even without her Life Fiber uniform to augment her strength, Nudist Beach was not going to risk assuming Xcution members were not taught other, more specialized, skills in case of capture, "Etes-vous un idiot? There's nothing you can do to scare me."

Tsumugu narrowed his eyes but did not say anything. Instead he opened a folder and spread its contents across the table. Staring deep into Jackie Tristan's eyes, he saw the dark-skinned French woman's expression harden.

"I see you understand what I'm showing you," Tsumugu lit up a cigarette using the lighter on his wrist. Taking a deep drag from it before sighing and releasing a large cloud of smoke, he gruffly said,

"That's yesterday's financial reports from Europe. As you can plainly see, Revocs share of the European market has dropped nearly eighty percent over the last week since we took out that Distribution Facility. 'Terrorism' they call it, but I bet Ragyo Kiryuin knows exactly who it was that failed her. She's going to be gunning straight for you, so you might as well tell us what you know."

For just a moment Jackie Tristan looked like she might actually speak but instead she spat at Tsumugu's face, "Aller en enfers. You won't get a word out of me, you Nudist pigs! I'd rather die by Lady Ragyo's glorious hands than turn traitor!"

"I see," Tsumugu wiped his cheek clean of the offensive substance and let out a disappointed sigh. Taking another drag from his cigarette to calm his nerves, he momentarily glanced at Jackie eyes before punching her in the face.

"C'est quoi ce bordel, c'est que pour?" Jackie shouted angrily as blood began leaking from her nose.

"I do not like being lied to," Tsumugu growled ominously as he ground his still lit cigarette between two fingers, "Do you think I came in here without any backup? This room is constantly being monitored by several operatives. We know everything that goes in here, from our pulses to the fact that for the last two hours you've been trying to pick the locks on your shackles with a hairpin. I would not bother continuing to try. Those shackles will not open without both the key and the concurrent release signal."

"You think you have me in your clutches, then?" Jackie Tristan asked sarcastically before rearing her head back and laughing. Giving the two guards at the door a sadistic grin, causing them to raise their Sewing Machine Guns at her in response, Jackie ignored the two laser sights hovering over her heart and leaned forward as much as she could, "C'est drôle! You beat me but what do you plan on doing now? Even that woman with her beautiful Kamui isn't enough to defeat Lady Ragyo! Xcution will hunt all you Nudists down and

slaughter you like the naked pigs you are for daring to stand against Lady Ragyo!"

"I see," Tsumugu's face was emotionless as he stood up to his full height. Without giving the imprisoned Jackie another glance, he turned and walked towards the exit to the room. Before leaving, however, he turned to one of the two elite Nudists guarding the captured member of Xcution, "Do not let your guard down for a second. That woman might not possess any more Life Fibers but that does not make her any less dangerous. If her shackles so much as jingle, you take her down. Understood?"

"Yes sir!"

Rapping his knuckles against the door, Tsumugu waited for the locks to disengage and let him out. Every interrogation room in the Nudist Beach headquarters had doors that did not allow anyone inside to leave. Tsumugu had been involved in enough hostage situations with Kiryuin spies to know that allowing the prisoner even the slightest glimmer of hope of escape was grounds for disaster. It was right as he stepped out of the room that Jackie's arrogant voice returned.

"Tell me one thing, Nudist." Jackie Tristan leaned back in her chair with her face framed by the shadows of the room and scoffed, "How many of your friends did I kill over the years? Was it ten or maybe fifty? I kind of lost track since you pigs all look alike to me."

The guards tensed up at the obvious bait but Tsumugu was more collected than that. With one hand placed firmly on the frame of the door, in case he lost control of his temper, Tsumugu turned one eye to an amused Jackie and said, "You, personally, have killed seventy three of my friends and colleagues."

Not wanting to stick around to hear the answer Jackie seemed to be on the verge of saying, Tsumugu left the room and waited until the door sealed shut behind him before reaching into his vest and pulling out another cigarette. Interrogations always made him want to

smoke and that woman was causing him to consider quitting cold turkey.

*"Damn it. Four days of interrogation and she still hasn't cracked. I thought for sure the Europe information would cause her to fold but it only seemed to harden her result. I'm running out of ideas,"* he thought in frustration as he walked into the observation room that was located right next to where Jackie Tristan was being kept. Strolling past the Nudist on shift in the room, he went to take a drag from his cigarette when a purple clothed hand grabbed the cancer stick out of his fingers and easily crushed it into a fine power.

"Those things are going to kill you."

Tsumugu gave Kinue a half-hearted glare before his expression softened, "At the rate things are going, the Life Fibers might just win over cancer. I did not know you were still here at base. The flight itinerary had you scheduled to head to Moscow yesterday evening."

"Command ordered me to stick around for a little while longer," Kinue rubbed her fingers to get the last traces of tobacco and nicotine off Danketsu before folding her arms. Jackie Tristan was an incredibly dangerous woman that was also extremely devoted to Ragyo Kiryuin and the Life Fibers, which caused Kinue to wonder. Did the woman chained down in the room in front of her actually know what Ragyo's plans are for the human race? A better question was whether or not she wanted to know the answer to that, "With the new prisoner, it was felt that the power and presence of a Kamui could help to boost morale and prevent her from attempting to escape."

"You know how I feel about Kamui," Tsumugu briefly glanced at Danketsu's eyes and narrowed his own. Pulling away from the Kamui's gaze, ignorant of the rather colorful language being thrown at him by the vulgar Life Fiber being, he stared at Jackie's injured body and asked, "Could I have beaten her?"

Kinue gave her brother a questioning look, "Why do you want to know?"



"That... woman," Tsumugu found it difficult to call Jackie Tristan a human after everything she's done, "Killed seventy three of my friends and fellow soldiers. I would have liked nothing more than to riddle her body with needles until she couldn't move."

"If you want the honest answer, Tsumugu, then no you could not," Kinue was always truthful with her brother. He may act tough and strict to his fellow Nudists but she knew that he was only like that because he didn't want anyone else to end up in her position - bound to a Life Fiber being for the rest of her natural days, or however long that was. In the ten years since the accident Kinue had noticed she'd barely aged at all.

"Her Sanguinaire Raiment would have outlasted you even with its obvious weakness," Kinue continued without delay, "Both her speed and strength were higher than anything possessed by Satsuki Kiryuin's Three-Star Goku Uniforms and her raiment's defense was strong enough to shrug off my Carnifex's needles. Don't take this the wrong way, brother, but a normal human could not have hoped to beat her."

"She must have given you a difficult time," Tsumugu commented as he subconsciously flexed the hand that he had used to strike Jackie Tristan. He had not meant to break Jackie's nose again and would need to have a paramedic be brought in to take another look at her nose, "Your report described how you broke her nose, but they failed to mention the stab wounds along her arms and legs. Even with that Kamui, I mean Danketsu, speaking with you, that level of violence is not something I've known from you."

Tsumugu noticed Danketsu looking up at his sister and assumed Kinue was listening to her Kamui. Even though the prospect of a human and a Kamui getting along still disturbed him, he could tolerate it a lot better than he used to. Ever since his foray to Honnouji Academy and the subsequent revelation that Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi were on friendly terms with their Kamui, Kinue had shifted back from the cold, unfeeling woman he had

grown used to towards something resembling the sister that he remembered.

"Jackie Tristan had Life Fibers sewn around the muscles in her arms and legs," Kinue answered after a moment, "By the strength of the weave and the difficulty I had in locating them, I would hazard a guess and say they were the Grand Couturier's work. I had to remove them while we were flying over the Mediterranean Sea to prevent Ragyo Kiryuin from tracking her. As for the multitude of wounds, let's just say Jackie did not appreciate what I was doing."

Kinue paused as a faint muttering began to fill the room and from the accent and pronunciation she could tell it was French. Turning towards the Nudist, a specialized translator brought in to deal with anything Jackie Tristan might utter in French, she asked, "What is she saying?"

"Just one moment, Colonel," the Nudist pressed a finger against his earpiece for several seconds before answering, "It's a little difficult to hear, but I believe the prisoner is saying, 'S'il vous plaît pardonnez à votre humble serviteur, ma dame,' which is French for, 'Please forgive your humble servant, my lady,' over and over again."

"That bitch is praying to Ragyo Kiryuin for forgiveness?" Tsumugu growled and slammed his hand against the table, startling the Nudist operative, "It's pathetic, but for all we know it could just be an act. We've had Revoc spies in the past try to pull a similar stunt. I bet the moment we let our guard down, that woman is going to get free and take down as many of us as she can."

"But sir," The Nudist turned and asked, "How can the prisoner get out? The door won't open unless done both manually and from this control panel, the air is circulated from a sealed reserve and even the guards cannot leave without your direct approval. Even if she does escape her shackles, we could just fill the room with knockout gas and get her back under."

Tsumugu tried to respond but found his sister's hand pushing back against his chest. Walking until she was only inches from the four-inch thick glass separating her from Jackie Tristan in the interrogation room, Kinue said, "We are not dealing with common criminals. That woman is a member of Xcution, the elite fighting force of Revocs, and has personally killed hundreds of our fellow soldiers. Unlike the Elite Four Satsuki Kiryuin's set up at Honnouji Academy, Jackie Tristan has been trained to kill using every part of her body. Just because she no longer possesses her Sanguinaire Raiment does not mean she is no less dangerous. She is actually more dangerous now than ever before."

"I-I don't understand ma'am."

"My sister is trying to give you two important pieces of information," Tsumugu reached for a cigarette, more out of habit than need, only to realize Kinue had stolen the carton when he wasn't looking. Scowling at his sister, who gave him a smug look in response, Tsumugu said to the Nudist, "The first thing is that when that woman had her Life Fiber uniform, we knew what she was capable of. If she still had her raiment and escaped, we would at least know how to deal with her. The second, and most important, piece of information is that I should not have to tell you, a seasoned Nudist operative, all that I just did."

The Nudist barely had a second to let Tsumugu's words sink in before Kinue's Genji blade was sunk into his body directly through his heart. As he slumped dead at the controls, Kinue pulled her blade out and looked down at the cooling corpse with a mixture of derision and pity.

"A spy, just like the others," Kinue said as she swiped her Genji blade through the air before sheathing it once more.

Tsumugu turned the body over and grimaced at what he found inside the man's body, "Life Fibers. He must have been Mentally Refitted recently, a day or two ago by the looks of it, our screening methods would have caught him if the Life Fibers were in his body for more

than a week. From the shoddy stitching pattern and the lack of subtly, it could only be the work of one man - Shukurou Tsukishima."

Shukurou Tsukishima was the only other member of Xcution, aside from the recently captured Jackie Tristan, whose abilities were known to Nudist Beach, and it was kind of hard not to notice. Tsukishima's *Mémoire Raiment* allowed him to inflict Mental Refitting on anyone his specialized sword cuts. While he was not nearly as fast or strong as Jackie Tristan, Tsukishima more than made up for it by constantly sending men and women to Nudist Beach bases as deep undercover spies.

"He's getting more brazen but his methods are getting sloppier. This man did not have an ounce of formal training before being Mentally Refitted. Tsukishima must be getting desperate," Kinue muttered as she turned the body over and look the spy in the face. After failing to recognize the man from anywhere in her past, she looked up at her brother, "It is likely Tsukishima sent him only after I captured Jackie Tristan. The fact that this man spoke fluent French and Japanese would have easily made him the interpreter or translator for any interrogations. He would have then been able to take the transcripts of anything Jackie, or you, said back to his master once he had freedom to leave."

Kinue pulled out a Life Fiber from the man's body before letting the glowing thread fall off her finger. She had met Tsukishima long ago, but at the time she hadn't known who he was. It wasn't until he tried to cut her with his katana that she recognized him and fought him off. She would have won if not for her unharmonious relation with Danketsu at the time, which limited the length she could fight. From what the Life Fiber technicians in Nudist Beach could figure out, Danketu's Life Fiber strength and density was so high that the Kamui was basically negating Tsukishima's Mental Refitting the moment his blade touched her body. That made Kinue the only person in Nudist Beach that Tsukishima was afraid to fight.

"We need to take him out. Now," Tsumugu's forceful voice brought several more Nudists to the room. Upon seeing their dead comrade,

and the Life Fibers inside his body, they began shouting into their earpieces about a potential breach of security. As a silent alarm rang out through the base, Tsumugu turned to his sister, "The General says you need to be on standby in case Ragyo Kiryuin pulls anything but that's bullshit. If we don't take Tsukishima down he will continue to send spies until he finds someone competent. The latest intent, from Isshin Kurosaki's sources, place Tsukishima somewhere in California. Go to the United States, track him down and kill him. No capture, no interrogation. The moment you spot Tsukishima you take him down."

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*We're on a drive, on a drive, on a drive down to hell!*

*Flying upside-down until we get there! Hey!*

*We've gone off the road and are flipping through the air!*

*You get a pileup when you crash into another car!*

*If you do all that, we're going to go to hell!*

*We're going on a drive, on a drive, on a drive down to hell!*

"Matoi, can't you make them stop singing that awful song? I'm going to break a tooth from constantly clenching my jaw."

"Do you think anything I say will make them stop?" Ryuko answered rhetorically with her head propped up against the side of Gamagori's car. Letting out a tired yawn, the day's events finally catching up to her, Ryuko glanced over to Mako and Ururu sitting next to her. While Mako had been the one to originally begin singing, her best friend had soon coaxed Ururu into singing along with her and Ryuko had to admit that Ururu had a great voice. It was better than Mako's at any rate, "Besides, I already asked them to tone it down a bit. Remember

how bad it was ten minutes ago? I thought I was going to have a stroke from the horrendous lyrics."

"Point taken," Ira Gamagori shuddered as the memories he had quickly suppressed came back to him. It was horrifying to realize that Mankanshoku and Tsumugiya's current singing was magnitudes better than what it he had been. Gamagori was beginning to think that there was a darkness lurking deep within Mankanshoku's subconscious, "Tsumugiya is an unstoppable force and an immovable object all rolled into one girl. Mankanshoku, on the other hand, has never had a red light in her life."

"That's right, Gamagori!"

Mako, who had stopped singing once she heard her name being used, flipped over the front passenger seat and sat down next to Gamagori, "Every traffic light in my life is yellow because I'm always on the move!"

"So you move through life with caution despite the urge to stop? I can see the wisdom in such a philosophical outlook," Gamagori chuckled in amusement before his expression hardened, "Put on your seatbelt, Mankanshoku, and in the future do not attempt such a dangerous maneuver while in a moving vehicle. As the Disciplinary Committee Chair, if something were to happen to you under my watch I would place the blame entirely on myself."

Mako smiled and raised her hand in a salute, "Ok, Gamagori! Mako Mankanshoku will place her safety in your giant arms!"

"That's not what I meant," Gamagori stated exasperatedly while Ryuko rubbed her hand over her face and Ururu let out a sigh. Rubbing the bridge of his nose with one hand and staving off the urge to reprimand Mankanshoku, which would probably amount to trying to empty the oceans with a bucket, Gamagori was about to ask her to buckle up when he saw another car pull up next to him with its honk blaring in the evening, "What's the matter with them? The rules of driving are clear that this is a no-passing zone!"

The driver of the offending vehicle turned his helmeted head towards Gamagori and made a gesture with his hand in the shape of a gun. Gamagori, seeing the rudeness in the gesture, frowned and shouted over the wind, "You're breaking the rules of the road! Slow down and fall back!"

Instead of listening to Gamagori, as the Disciplinary Committee Chair assumed he would, the driver accelerated and pulled to the left. As soon as he was fully in front Gamagori's car, the driver clenched his fist and immediately three people dressed identically to him stood up in the backseat and aimed their weapons at Gamagori and his passengers.

"What the hell?" Ryuko dove forward as soon as she saw the three men and quickly pushed Mako down to the floor. As airsoft pellets assaulted the vehicle, Ryuko kept one hand on Mako's head to hold her down and reached for her Scissor Blade, "Stay down, Mako! It's dangerous. Hey, wait a minute, where the hell's my Scissor Blade?"

"I'm sorry, Ryuko," Ururu's soft voice reached Ryuko's ears easier than should be possible, "But I'm going to borrow your Scissor Blade for a moment."

While Gamagori's car shook and vibrated as the three men continued to fire upon it, the airsoft pellets leaving visible and deep dents in the pink metal and shattering the windows, Ryuko looked and saw Ururu standing up in the backseat, "Get down, Ururu! You don't want to get hit by those things!"

"Thank you for the concern, Ryuko, but I'll be fine. Please keep Mako safe," Ururu gave Ryuko a friendly smile as she held up the Scissor Blade, already bleeding towards the familiar purple color Ryuko had seen the first time Ururu held the blade, and began swinging it through the air. There was a constant pinging sound as the airsoft pellets ricocheted off the Scissor Blade, which resembled a purple blur as Ururu moved it too fast for normal human eyes to see.

"W-What the hell is that girl?" One of the men stuttered as he ran out of ammunition and reached to his belt for another clip.

"Holy crap, that's Tsumugiya!" Another of the men shouted in fear as a streetlight illuminated Ururu's features, "S-She's the one that beat up Sanageyama with her bare hands and without a Goku Uniform!"

"That's impossible! There's no way a girl without a Goku Uniform could take down one of the Elite Four!" The first man answered back angrily as he resumed firing, "She's going down!"

Ururu had heard enough by this point. She had thought her display of strength would cause the three men to back down and retreat without a fight, but it seemed it had achieved the exact opposite. Taking a step forward, she pushed off into the air with enough force to cause Gamagori to temporarily lose control of his car for a second. Spinning through the air, her purple Scissor Blade slicing apart any airsoft pellet that was aimed at her, Ururu landed on the hood of the opposing vehicle with nary a sound.

"What the hell?" The driver's muffled voice shouted in surprise before he pointed at Ururu, "Shoot Tsumugiya, you idiots!"

While one of the men continued shooting suppressing fire at Gamagori's vehicle to keep the member of the Elite Four from retaliating, the other two turned around and opened fire at Ururu. However, it soon turned out to be a futile act as Ururu deftly spun the Scissor Blade through the air, deflecting and destroying all the airsoft pellets long before they had a chance to reach her. Once the sound of empty chambers reached her ears, a sign that the two men were finally out of ammo, Ururu readjusted her grip on Ryuko's Scissor Blade and said, "Please forgive me for destroying your car."

"Go to hell, Tsumugiya!" The driver pulled out an airsoft pistol and used it to smash through the windshield. Aiming the weapon at Ururu's forehead, he shouted, "You might have unnatural strength, but you can't block a bullet at point blank range!"



As the airsoft pellet left the driver's pistol accompanied by a bang of compressed air behind it, Ururu leaned her head to the right, allowing the projectile to pass within an inch of her head, before thrusting the Scissor Blade downwards through the engine. The Life Fiber weapon easily passed through the steel and metal of the engine before stabbing deeply into the road beneath. With its momentum abruptly brought to a halt by the combined strength from Ururu's body and the Scissor Blade, the car flipped upwards into the air before landing on its side.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," Ururu gave the four injured men a polite bow, but they were in too much pain to do anything but groan in response. Turning around, Ururu walked towards Gamagori, who had stopped the car once she jumped out. Hopping back into the backseat and giving Ryuko the Scissor Blade, Ururu saw Gamagori staring at her in stunned surprise and asked, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Gamagori stared passively at Ururu, hoping to see the familiar emblems of the Goku Uniform on her clothing, but the girl was wearing nothing more than a customized No-Star uniform. He still remembered what she did when Sanageyama had been ordered by Lady Satsuki to question her. No one should be as strong as Ururu without a Goku Uniform and yet he had just watched her do something that should have killed a normal human.

"Hang on Matoi!" Gamagori floored the gas, causing Ryuko to tumble backwards.

"Damn it," Ryuko rubbed the back of her head and turned around. Accelerating towards them down the highway was dozens of vehicles similar to the one Ururu took down. Standing on the back seat with her red Scissor Blade resting gently on her shoulder, Ryuko scoffed and asked Gamagori, "So who the hell are these guys?"

"The AAA Club," Gamagori explained as he swerved to the side to avoid a hail of pellets. As one of the vehicles accelerated until it was

side by side with them, Gamagori grunted and twisted the steering wheel to the left. The occupants in the other car were not prepared for their vehicle to be slammed against the highway barrier and spun out of control before crashing in a smoking heap. Staring at the wreckage in the rearview mirror, Gamagori finished by saying, "After Lady Satsuki announced the Naturals Election, the Automotive, Airsoft and Aeronautics Clubs merged together to form the AAA club."

"So what do we do?" Ryuko asked angrily, "These guys are starting to piss me off."

"You will do nothing," Gamagori ordered as he shifted gears and his car lurched forward, "It's my Three-Star Goku Uniform they're after. You, Mankanshoku and Tsumugiya are just unlucky enough to be caught up in all this."

"What about Senketsu?" Ryuko grabbed a handful of her Kamui, causing Senketsu to growl in annoyance at her rough handling, "Wouldn't a Kamui be a better prize than your Goku Uniform!"

"True, but Lady Satsuki's determined that no one else can wear your Kamui without dying. You must have remarkable constitution to wear such a draining outfit."

Ryuko blushed in embarrassment before a loud thrumming in the air drew her attention. Turning around, she instinctively ducked as two helicopters passed several feet over her head. With her hair whipping violently in the air from the violent wind being kicked up, Ryuko saw nearly a dozen AAA members hanging on ropes off the sides of the helicopters with airsoft rifles in their hands.

"What's the matter, Gamagori?" An obnoxious voice shouted through loudspeakers. As Gamagori's eyes narrowed, one of the helicopters turned partially to the side, allowing him to see a short and pudgy man with red flame-like hair in a white jumpsuit with the familiar Two-Star pattern embroidered on it standing with one hand gripping a rope to keep him from falling out. Grinning savagely, Ryusuke

Todoroki, the former captain of the Airsoft Club, raised his left arm and aimed his enormously oversized airsoft weapon at Gamagori's car, "Do you think that your wreck of a car will help you escape from me? I am the president of the AAA club, Ryusuke Todoroki, and your Three-Star Goku Uniform shall be mine!"

Todoroki waved his arm in the air and the other helicopter circled around until it was on the other side of Gamagori's car. As Ryuko's eyes focused on all the AAA Club members training their weapons on them, Todoroki's mocking voice shouted, "So you're Ryuko Matoi? Funny, I thought you would be taller. Wearing a Kamui would have been the ultimate prize but I don't feel like dying today, so here's the deal, Gamagori! You stop your car and throw the keys out onto the road where one of my members can pick them up. You will then step out of the car and place your hands over your head after handing your Goku Uniform over to me!"

Gamagori stared menacingly up at Todoroki, "And why should I do that?"

Todoroki snapped his fingers and instantly over a dozen airsoft rifles were trained on Mako, Ryuko and Ururu, "If you don't comply with my demands, my men will pump Ryuko Matoi and her friends full of holes!"

"Threatening students in front of the Disciplinary Committee Chair? You have some nerve," Gamagori shouted furiously. Ryuko Matoi might be in opposition to Lady Satsuki's plans but she had yet to do anything more than fight willing opponents. Unlike the barbarian of a student threatening him, Matoi was a very amiable woman off the battlefield and was not prone to involving innocent students in her schemes.

"Matoi," Gamagori slammed on the breaks, causing his damaged car to screech to a grinding halt. Taking the keys out of the ignition, he tossed them several times in the air before throwing them off to the side as requested, "I need you to do me a favor while I'm dealing with my mistake."

Ryuko, who was busy glaring heatedly at the AAA Club members that dared to threaten her friends, whispered back as her hand inched towards her Seki Tekkō, "What?"

"When I give the signal want you, Mankanshoku and Tsumugiya to get down," Gamagori's eyes were focused intently on the helicopter with Todoroki landing in front of them. If righteous glaring could set things ablaze, Todoroki would already be on fire, "Releasing my Goku Uniform will most likely result a lot of collateral damage. As the Disciplinary Committee Chair it is my duty that students do not get caught up in the crossfire."

Ryuko gave Gamagori a confused look, "But we're enemies. Why are you helping me?"

"We will have our fight, Matoi," Gamagori explained as he opened the drivers-side door and got out, "But it shall not be tonight! Lady Satsuki has given the students of Honnouji Academy leeway to fight one another for power and prestige, but threatening to kill a fellow student is inexcusable! It is my duty as a member of the Elite Four to make Todoroki see the errors in his judgment!"

Gamagori stepped around until he was in front of his car. With his massive arms folded in front of his body and an unamused look on his face he watched as Todoroki stepped off the helicopter. The former captain of the Airsoft Club pointed his excessively large weapon at Gamagori as his club members surrounded him, "I see you're a man who knows when he's beaten, eh Gamagori?"

"Do you think such a pitiful display of weaponry is enough to cause me distress?" Gamagori shouted angrily, "You are going to need a lot more guns to make me flinch!"

"How pathetic, Gamagori!" Todoroki shouted maniacally and snapped his fingers. As all his club members raised their airsoft weapons at Gamagori, he pointed his own and said, "But no matter how much you beg or plead there's no way I'm going to go easy on you!"

"It will take more than the likes of punks like you get me to beg!" Gamagori roared in retaliation as he stomped his feet and spread his arms out, "Someone like you, who threatens innocent students, is not even capable of getting me to fall to one knee! You are unworthy! Three-Star Goku Uniform: Shackle Regalia!"

An outpouring of light and four-pointed stars from Gamagori's body caused Todoroki and his club members to cover their eyes lest they go temporarily blind. Once the light died down enough to be able to see once more, the club captain saw Gamagori's transformed state but could not believe what his eyes saw, "What the hell is going on? He transformed into something like that?"

"What's the matter, Todoroki?" Gamagori's voice, muffled by the myriad of bandages and wraps covering his body, asked rhetorically, "Aren't you going to attack me?"

"Damn that smug bastard!" Todoroki sneered and ordered one of his men to fire several rounds at Gamagori. When the pellets did nothing more than bounce off Gamagori's Shackle Regalia, he raised his hand, "Stop. Something's not right."

The member that had fired at Gamagori turned and asked, "W-What do you mean, captain?"

"Gamagori's Goku Uniform is unlike anything we've seen before. Both Jakuzure and Sanageyama's Goku Uniform were combat-capable but Gamagori doesn't seem to be able to move. Not with all those bandages hindering him. There must be some sort of secret to his so-called Shackle Regalia," Todoroki weighed his options before coming to a quick conclusion. Gamagori was the largest of the Elite Four and therefore his Goku Uniform must be the weakest. His boasting must be to psyche his club members out of attacking him. Well it was not going to work.

"Nice try, Gamagori," Todoroki pointed his airsoft machine gun at Gamagori. As if obeying some unseen signal, every other member did the same as well. When he saw the two helicopters had their

airsoft guns trained on Gamagori's form, Todoroki grinned, "But I'm not going to fall for you bluff. Light him up boys!"

Roaring collectively, all the AAA Club members cocked their weapons and fired a veritable downpour of airsoft pellets at Gamagori's Shackle Regalia. Much to Ryuko's amazement, who had stuck her head up to see what Gamagori was doing, all the pellets did nothing more than bounce harmlessly off the bandages and wrappings before falling to the pavement.

"Damn," she muttered as Gamagori seemed to withstand a rocket to the face without flinching, "That thing's hard."

"It's not just hard, Matoi!" Ryuko's eyes stared transfixed on Gamagori as his body began to bubble and convulse sporadically. At first she was worried he was in trouble when he she heard him begin moaning sensually, she realized just exactly it was he was doing. Ururu seemed to know what Gamagori's moans meant as well. The notoriously shy girl had a large blush of embarrassment on her cheeks and was covering her eyes with her hands.

"What... the hell... is he doing...?"

"That's it! Punish me as much as you like! More! More!" Gamagori was shouting enthusiastically as he body seemed to tense up under the onslaught of airsoft pellets, "I've been very bad! Each time you hit me, it feels like my heart is whipped. Yes! Just like that! The more it's whipped, the stronger I become!"

"Oh god," Ryuko slid down the seat until she was thankfully unable to see Gamagori's twitching body, "He's a goddamn pervert."

"You are mistaken, Matoi," Gamagori said between groans of pleasure, "I am not a pervert."

"Gamagori is right, Ryuko!" Mako was the only one of the three of them to still be watching Gamagori, "He's actually a pervert with an old man's face!"

"I am neither an old man nor a pervert, Mankanshoku," Gamagori stated as his form began to grow in size, "I am only nineteen years old."

"I don't want to be here anymore, Ryuko," Ururu was now covering her entire face with her hands as she sat hunched over in the back of Gamagori's car. Even through her fingers, Ryuko could see the blush on the girl's face, "Mr. Urahara warned me about people like Gamagori. He said if I should run if I ever met someone who takes pleasure from pain."

"You need not fear me or my powers, Tsumugiya," Gamagori said as his body seemed to be on the verge of explosion. As the wraps covering his form began to fray and tear, he shouted, "The instant that my climax is reached, all the power that I've been saving inside my body will explode outwards in one massive strike!"

"Three-Star Goku Uniform: Scourge Regalia!"

In a shower of stars, Gamagori's body transformed a second time, sending out dozens of spiked whips similar to the ones he normally uses. Faster than Todoroki or his men could react, each and every vehicle owned by the AAA Club was destroyed in an overly dramatic explosion while all the members were stripped of their Goku Uniforms. Only Todoroki remained conscious long enough to view Gamagori's monstrous secondary form and the image he saw would be burned in his mind for weeks.

**" So it seems us Kamui are not the only ones capable of a secondary transformation,"** Senketsu muttered to himself.

"Yeah, that seems about right," Ryuko whispered back as she watched Gamagori take out the AAA Club, "Fighting someone like him is going to be tough, Senketsu, but he doesn't seem to have the same overwhelming aura as Sanageyama did that morning."

"I do apologize for tonight's events."

Gamagori's form rippled before he transformed back into his normal body accompanied by a burst of light and stars. Picking up his keys from the side of the road, he started his car back up and twisted his head around, "Now that I have dealt with that interruption, where would you prefer I drop you three off? Your scooter needs gas, correct?"

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Satsuki Kiryuin stared in disgust at the students gather below. Even from the height she was standing at she could sense the greedy and ravenous looks plastered on most of the students below. They were all hungry for the power of her Goku Uniforms and she knew they would do anything, accomplish any deed no matter how moral, if it meant having the power given by Life Fibers.

"Do you see them, Ichigo?" Satsuki asked quietly and contemptuously to her compatriot standing right beside her, "Every one of them would like nothing more than to once again obtain the power granted by my Goku Uniforms. Their expressions show that they lust for such power. It sickens me to see such behavior for the so-called rulers of the planet."

Ichigo didn't say anything as he gazed over the crowd. After a moment he turned his head and asked, "Is everything you said true?"

Satsuki was stoic as she turned her head into the wind. Many things had been accomplished in the four days Ichigo and her were safely secured within the High Velocity Life Fiber Jammer and while not all of it was good, she was not prideful enough to believe that for a moment, it was satisfactory. While she had not told Ichigo absolutely everything about her plans and motives, Satsuki was pleased Ichigo was able to piece everything together from what she did tell him. Even though she did not manage to get Ichigo on her side during



those four days, it had been enough to open his eyes to her reasoning.

"Yes. Every single word that left my mouth during our conversations was the truth," she said quietly after a moment of contemplation. As an unfamiliar ripple passed through her body, Satsuki recognized it as Junketsu readjusting itself, which was an entirely new feeling to the Student Council President. Neither Ichigo nor she knew what was going on, and Ichigo's Kamui seemed in the dark about it as well, but over the last four days Junketsu seemed to have become slightly more tamed in comparison to its old behavior. It was not nearly enough for Satsuki to let her mental and physical guards down, but the slight drop in blood draining would allow her to wear Junketsu for nearly half an hour more per day. A nominally small amount of time to a normal person but to someone like Satsuki Kiryuin, thirty minutes was everything.

"I see..." Ichigo still could not believe what Satsuki told him. While at first he had been dismissive, rightfully so, of her attempts to befriend him, he knew that she was not someone to lie. The fact her story about Life Fibers was so outrageous only helped to make her words seem more believable.

*"How could I think that Satsuki's mom is planning on using Life Fibers to convert everyone in Honnou City into more Life Fibers when she holds the Great Culture and Sport Festival?" Ichigo rubbed the back of his neck and turned away from Satsuki to look out over the bay in the distance, "I knew there was something off about that woman but to think she was insane and a monster? Damn it. Wait a second, if Ragyo's planning to turn people into clothes then why isn't the Soul Society stepping in to stop her? Something like that should have the Old Man gunning straight for Ragyo."*

***"I understand your confusion about the matter as well, Ichigo, but I think Satsuki is telling the truth. I did not like the feeling Ragyo Kiryuin emitted when we met her. I fully believe that woman is capable of something of this magnitude,"*** Mugetsu's voice brought Ichigo out of his thoughts and back to the real world.

"Dad must've known," Ichigo responded to his Kamui as he remembered the look on his dad's face around Ragyo, "I haven't seen him look that serious since the winter. He knew something was up with Ragyo."

Mugetsu looked up at her wearer, ***"What are you going to do about it?"***

"For now, I'll just wait and see what happens," Ichigo said with an annoyed groan, "Ragyo's all the way back at Revocs right now and it's not like I'm going to just go storm the company or anything. I don't like it, but my best bet to figuring out what exactly is going on is to stick close to Satsuki."

"Attempting a brash assault on my mother's company would be suicidal, Ichigo," Satsuki had easily overheard his one-sided conversation with Mugetsu and once again looked down at her own Kamui, "Even if you were to breach the front doors, you would be forced to contend with my mother's elite fighting force, Xcution. If, by some chance you defeated them, you would have to then fight the Grand Couturier and Rei Hououmaru before finally confronting my mother. Now stand at attention and keep your mouth shut."

Satsuki stepped forward and slammed Bakuzan on the podium, drawing the attention of the gathered students below, "I welcome you back, comrades of Honnouji Academy!"

Even though the hundreds of students made it impossible to visually count them, Satsuki could tell that approximately a quarter of those that were in attendance on Monday were standing below. It disappointed her that barely anyone recognized one of the secret tenets of the Naturals Election. One did not need to fight in order to win. Fighting would only tire one out and make them unable to compete in the Sudden Death Runoff. She was pleased to see her Elite Four and Ryuko Matoi in peak condition. They would need it for the next event.

"I will admit that you have surpassed my greatest expectations! To survive four days of nonstop fighting against your fellow peers is nothing to scoff at! Those of you gathered here for the Sudden Death Runoff Election are the best of the best! However, the last week of fight is only the first step! All of your battles have been closely monitored and investigated! With all that in mind, prepare yourselves for your next challenge! The process of choosing the new Three-Star students begins now!"

Satsuki slammed Bakuzan on the ledge in front of her and immediately the entire courtyard of Honnouji Academy began rumbling as six spiked pillars rose out of the ground. Giving Ichigo a tense look, Satsuki watched as Ichigo sighed before running forward and landing on the pillar right front of them.

"Each of these towers represents those that will partake in the new regime!" Satsuki noticed Ryuko Matoi staring up at Ichigo and was pleased that the deep anger she had come to be defined by had lessened over the week. Stepping forward until she was standing right on the edge of the platform, Satsuki pulled Bakuzan out of its scabbard and raised it up into the air, "I have not been deaf to your complains about Ichigo Kurosaki's ascension to the Vice Presidency of the Student Council! Each complaint against the Student Council is taken seriously and without humor! Therefore he will stand amongst the five that make it up as an equal. Show me that you deserve the position better than Ichigo Kurosaki and it shall be yours. Let the Sudden Death Runoff Election begin!"

"Damn it," Ryuko was getting more and more annoyed as her fellow students continued to hit her as they ran towards the five pillars. Raising her fist and slamming it into a One-Star's face before he could pass her, Ryuko narrowed her eyes as she saw students being blown off some of the pillars. Looking more closely, she noticed that on top of four of the pillars stood Satsuki's Elite Four.

"Ururu was right," she muttered angrily as she drew her Scissor Blade, "This whole Naturals Election is nothing more than a sham,

but if Satsuki wants to be devious then to hell with manners! I'll just have to play by my own rules!"

Letting out a loud cry, Ryuko held her Scissor Blade out and raged forward. Cutting down the students who unfortunately happened to be in her path, Ryuko quickly reached the only pillar that did not have Ichigo or one of the Elite Four standing on top of it. Without slowing down in the slightest, Ryuko pressed one of her white sneakers against the surface before she began sprinting up the vertical surface against the pull of gravity. Shouting angrily as she used her Scissor Blade to knock off any students still clinging onto the spikes jutting horizontally out from the pillar, Ryuko soon reached the top of the column. Gripping the edge of the top with her hand she flipped herself into the air before landing in a graceful crouch.

"That was a nice little scam you had going on, Satsuki," Ryuko shouted smugly as she pointed her Scissor Blade at Satsuki, "But I figured out this whole Naturals Election was nothing but a trick long ago!"

"Oh?" Satsuki raised an eyebrow, "And what makes you say that? Those already in position of power will have an easier time retaining power. That is a fact of nature someone like you should be intimately familiar with."

"Tch, whatever," Ryuko grunted in annoyance.

"I would show Lady Satsuki some respect if I were you, Transfer Student," Nonon Jakuzure's voice had returned to its characteristically sweet tone over the last four days. As a breeze kicked up, ruffling her blue Goku Uniform, Nonon pointed her baton at Ryuko, "It was only because of her that we're allowing you to partake in this election. If you keep being rude, I'm going to make sure you get kicked back down into the dirt where you belong."

"Is that right, Snake?" Ryuko smirked as Nonon's smile evaporated upon the mentioning of her hated nickname, "I'd like to see you try."

Ichigo beat you once already. I'm sure that fancy new Goku Uniform is simply compensating for your lack of power."

"Why you - "

"Lady Satsuki!" Gamagori's loud and boisterous voice cut Nonon off before she could spit out her first curse. After making sure his fellow member of the Elite Four was going to remain silent until he was finished speaking, Gamagori turned to address Satsuki, "I have spoken with my fellow members of your Elite Four over the course of the Naturals Election. It is by unanimous decision that I come forth to you with a proposition for a new rule for the Sudden Death Runoff Election!"

"Is that so?" Satsuki saw the looks of conviction on her Elite Four and closed her eyes. Taking in a deep breath before exhaling, she asked, "What is your proposition?"

"Our request is quite simple, Lady Satsuki," Uzu Sanageyama answered instead of Gamagori, "While each one of us wishes to fight Ryuko Matoi in single combat, we all have grievances against Ichigo Kurosaki as well."

"Indeed," Houka Inumuta added, "Please forgive my insolence, but while fighting Ryuko Matoi would be a fitting end to the Naturals Election, there are more pressing matters. It is our collective opinion that allowing Ichigo Kurosaki to be your Vice President was an error."

"He is strong, Lady Satsuki. There is no doubt about his combat abilities or power," Gamagori respectively continued, "But he lacks several key qualities that your second-in-command should possess!"

"We've known you for years, Lady Satsuki, but Strawberry's only been here for a couple of months," Nonon finished off with a bit of anger and envy in her voice, "Seeing someone like him promoted above us is an insult!"

"You all make valid arguments," Satsuki smirked at the audacity of her Elite Four to question her decisions. She knew they were unhappy with her announcement concerning Ichigo and that it was only a matter of time before they made their complaints public. Moving a strand of hair off her face, Satsuki looked at Ichigo before turning to each of her Elite Four, "Before I agree to such a request, I must know which two of you hold the most grievances against Ichigo?"

It was Nonon, who was expected, and Sanageyama, which was a surprise to Satsuki, that raised their hands. Upon seeing the two members with the most against Ichigo, Satsuki tilted her head back and chuckled, "Then it is settled. I will allow your request to go through."

The ground began to shake once more as a large platform rose up in the center of the courtyard, "The venue of the Sudden Death Runoff Election is as follows! Matoi, you and Ichigo will alternate opponents. Ichigo, if you win your battles against those that would see you toppled I will allow you step down from your position without any complaints. Matoi, if you emerge victorious I shall tell you who killed your father as well as where they might be found!"

Ryuko narrowed her eyes. So Satsuki was in league with Nui Harime after all. Such a notion wasn't surprising to her but nevertheless she nodded, "Fine then. Once I kick their asses I'm going to force you to tell me everything!"

When the screen on the side of the Naturals Election Polling Place lit up and announced that the first match would be between Inumuta and Ryuko, Ichigo was about to sit down and think about what he was going to do when a loud and familiar voice managed to make itself heard over the roaring of the crowd.

"Ichigo! Over here, Ichigo!"

Ichigo's head whipped around towards the voice and he was not the only one, Both Inumuta and Ryuko and paused in mid-stride upon

the voice announcing his name. Walking over to the side of his pillar, Ichigo scanned the crowd until he saw a familiar face in the audience. With an expression of both relief and confusion etched on his face, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Orihime? What are you doing here?"

Orihime Inoue, with her natural long orange hair, stood in the crowd wearing the Karakura Town High School uniform. She had tried to wear something else, but the mean guards at the entrance to Honnouji Academy had ordered her to remain in her school uniform. She hadn't caught most of it, due to being in awe at the large entrance to the academy, but it had something to do with making sure visitors from other schools were clearly visible.

"When your dad came home, he told everybody you were on the Student Council! So I came to Honnou City to cheer for you!" Orihime shouted back happily as she waved her arm. As her uniform hugged her ample chest, causing more than a few male students in the audience to ogle her, Ichigo groaned and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It appeared that Orihime was still as naïve and clueless as ever when it came to her body.

"Who is that girl?" Ryuko looked at the girl Ichigo was talking to and immediately felt that she was staring at Ichigo's equivalent of Mako, if Mako was a buxom orange-haired girl.

"The Transfer Student actually asked an intelligent question," Nonon didn't know who Orihime was, but for some reason just looking at the well-endowed teen was making her feel more and more inadequate by the minute. Stomping her foot on the ground and pointing her baton at Ichigo, she shouted, "Who is that girl and how the hell does she know you, Strawberry?"

Ichigo rolled his eyes at Nonon's demand, "She's a friend from Karakura Town. Hey Orihime, are any of the others here?"

Orihime adopted a pensive look before shaking her head, "I tried to get everyone else to come cheer you on but they were all super

busy! Chad volunteered to help the school put in the new swimming pool and couldn't take any time off no matter how much I asked! Tatsuki really wanted to come, but she found out that her Karate Championship in Osaka was this week and couldn't make it. I tried asking Uryu but..."

"Let me guess," Ichigo finished for her, "That four-eyed bastard came up with an excuse to insult me?"

"Well... not in so many words, but yeah!" Orihime chuckled nervously before noticing what Ichigo was wearing, "Oh! That uniform looks so pretty Ichigo! Is it custom made? It looks like it's staring at me."

"It's custom made," Ichigo hesitantly answered, much to Mugetsu's frustration at being referred to as a mere piece of clothing.

"Ok, I'll see you around Ichigo!" Orihime waved enthusiastically to Ichigo as she spotted someone in the crowd, "I'm going to go hang out with Ururu! We'll both cheer for you until you win!"

"Oh great," Ryuko sighed as Orihime left, "She is exactly like Mako."

**" *Concentrate on the upcoming fight and not on the girl,*"**  
Senketsu's harsh tone brought Ryuko back to reality, **"*Do you remember the power of Gamagori and Sanageyama's Goku Uniform? We cannot allow ourselves to hold back even for a moment.*"**

"Right," Ryuko nodded and jumped onto the stage, "Let's do this Senketsu!"

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**Kamui Tales #15 - Meetings in the Night**



## **Monday - 11:30 PM**

On Monday night Mugetsu relaxed in the luxury a Kamui such as her should have.

" ***Ah, this is the life,***" Mugetsu stretched out on the couch in Ichigo's room. It was quite considerate of her wearer to give her enough of his blood for her to move around. Mugetsu had felt a little guilty asking Ichigo, but he was more than happy to give her enough blood so that she could remain awake and mobile throughout the night.

" ***This almost makes me wish Ichigo and Satsuki weren't enemies,***" Mugetsu sighed and hung the top of her body off the edge of the couch. She might dislike Satsuki Kiryuin, but that butler of hers certainly knew how to iron a Kamui in all the right places. Mugetsu had thought Ichigo knew how to iron but Soroji was a master at the craft. The only way her ironings could get better was if Soroji's nephew didn't always try and observe her reactions.

" ***That Iori watches me like I'm some sort of animal,***" Mugetsu folded her sleeves behind her lapel and sighed. She didn't know how Junketsu put up with all the nonsense in Satsuki's life but it would be a lot easier if the Kamui would talk to her. How on Earth was she supposed to hold a conversation when Junketsu would simply stare at her silently? It was starting to get a little creepy.

Sensing something moving in the peripherals of her vision, Mugetsu turned her eyes towards the door to Ichigo's room and saw Junketsu peeking in. Once Satsuki's Kamui noticed it was spotted, it quickly ducked back out, leaving a very confused Mugetsu alone once more.

" ***It's too late to deal with whatever Junketsu's up to,***" Mugetsu yawned and closed her eyes, ***"I'll tell Ichigo about it tomorrow... maybe..."***

## **Tuesday - 11:30 PM**

It rained Tuesday night.

Mugetsu stood by the window in Ichigo's room and stared out into the storm. She really liked watching the rain for some reason, but the High Velocity Life Fiber Jammer circulating around the top of Honnouji Academy did a perfect job of keeping the rain and wind away, which caused Mugetsu to deflate sadly.

***" I wish I could see the rain. It's much better than looking at Life Fibers all the time,"*** Mugetsu concentrated and could barely make out the glow of fire through the red Life Fibers. It appeared that the Naturals Election was still going on and somewhere out there was Ryuko and Senketsu. Pressing her uniform up against the glass, she sighed and scratched her fabric, ***"I wonder how Senketsu is doing? I bet he's getting Ryuko into a lot of trouble without Ichigo and me to bail him out. Despite how much I don't like his childishness I would rather not see a fellow Kamui injured. There are only four of us in existence, after all."***

Mugetsu paused as she thought over something before adding, ***"But Danketsu can go to hell for all I care."***

When the door to Ichigo's room opened, creaking softly in the quiet night, Mugetsu's lapels perked up. Looking towards the door, she saw Junketsu hopping over to her. The mute Kamui did not look at her as it hopped onto the table next to Mugetsu and stared outside.

***" Aren't you going to say anything?"*** Mugetsu asked sarcastically. When Junketsu only stared at her for a moment before turning its attention back to the window and the storm raging just over a hundred feet away, Mugetsu sighed and groaned, ***"That's what I thought..."***

**Wednesday - 11:30 PM**

On Wednesday Mugetsu asked to sleep on a hanger.

Mugetsu might have preferred to sleep stretched out across any surface she wanted, but whenever she woke up there would be wrinkles in her Life Fibers that would only go away after being

ironed. While she did not mind one bit of Ichigo or Soroi ironed her, she knew too much of a good thing was bad.

As she slept peacefully on the hanger next to Ichigo's dresser, Mugetsu was woken up when there was a slight pulling on the hem of her pants. Waking up with a start and looking around for any possible intruder, Mugetsu quickly calmed down when she saw that the intruder was actually Junketsu staring up at her from the floor.

**" *This is starting to get annoying,*"** Mugetsu looked over at Ichigo, who was thankfully still asleep, before focusing her gaze on Junketsu, **"*I don't mind hanging out with you but the silence is really starting to creep me out. Why don't you just talk and say what's on your mind or something? Kamui are incapable of being mute, after all.*"**

When Junketsu hopped back and seemed to avert its gaze, Mugetsu noticed something incredibly familiar about the Kamui's behavior. Pulling herself off the hanger with ease, she landed in front of a startled Junketsu and began examining her fellow Kamui's uniform. Yes, now that Mugetsu had a closer look at Junketsu's untransformed state, she could see just why the Kamui's behavior seemed so familiar.

**" *I think I understand why you do not talk,*"** Junketsu's uniform tensed up as Mugetsu threw her sleeve over her shoulder epaulets and sighed, **"*Your behavior is just like Ichigo's friend, Ururu, so that means you're really shy, right? Oh, I can't wait to tell Ichigo about this! Who would believe Satsuki Kiryuin's Kamui would be extremely shy?*"**

Before Mugetsu could continue, Junketsu pulled itself free and fled the room, slammed the door in the process.

"Mugetsu?" Ichigo let out a yawn as he sat up in bed, "What are you doing up?"

Mugetsu stared at where she last saw Junketsu before turning to her wearer, ***"I thought I heard something."***

"It's probably Iori trying to install bugs in my room again," Ichigo groaned tiredly as he laid back down, "If I ever catch him doing it, I'm going to beat the crap out of him..."

#### **Thursday - 11:30 PM**

On Thursday Mugetsu decided to take the initiative.

As soon as Ichigo fell asleep, Mugetsu pulled herself off her hanger and left the room. Walking down the room, giving a friendly salute to Soroi, who stared back with a blank expression at the freely moving Kamui passing by, Mugetsu eventually reached her goal. Opening the door to the room where Junketsu was kept, Mugetsu looked out over the moon-filled sky before focusing on her goal.

***" I see you're awake,"*** Mugetsu stared up at Junketsu, who looked back down. While Junketsu's eyes looked to be stoic and aggressive, as Satsuki had come to know her Kamui, Mugetsu could see that Junketsu was actually quite nervous right now. From the number of restraining bolts pinning Junketsu into the case, it appeared that Satsuki had found out about her Kamui's late night strolls.

***" I want to apologize for last night,"*** Mugetsu rubbed her lapels and sighed. She really wasn't that good at apologizing for anything. Senketsu was the one who always apologized for what he did, and didn't, do, ***"I didn't know you were actually afraid of talking. I mean Senketsu talks all the time and I can't get him to shut up and Danketsu is just a pain in the ass to listen to. It seems that every other word out of Danketsu's mouth is a curse. If we Kamui actually had mouths, I would force Ichigo to wash hers out with soap and water just for good measure."***

When Junketsu's posture relaxed, Mugetsu gave her fellow Kamui a salute, ***"So while our wearers don't like each other, what do you***

***say we be friends? I have nothing against you even if you might be as strong as me."***

The voice that eventually reached Mugetsu was not what she expected. She would have thought Junketsu, with her aggressive bloodlust and fighting power would be male like Senketsu, but the voice that she heard was definitely feminine. Even though she was pinned down, Junketsu's uniform rippled until an identical fang-filled mouth to Mugetsu's own appeared, ***"I would like to be friends."***

***" Ok, good. For a second there I thought you were going to be just like Danketsu! Boy, that's a relief!"*** Mugetsu waved goodbye to her fellow Kamui and turned to leave, ***"I guess this means you won't stalk me every night from now on, right?"***

***" What do you mean?"*** Junketsu's soft voice asked in honest confusion, ***"I've been told that stalking is the appropriate method when dealing with family. We are both true Kamui and are therefore siblings."***

Mugetsu did not like the sincerity in Junketsu's voice. The Kamui actually believed what she was saying, ***"Who taught you that?"***

***" My mother, Ragyo Kiryuin, taught me. I may have been created by two humans but it was mother who sewed everything I needed to know into my Life Fibers, "*** Mugetsu inwardly cringed at the mention of Ragyo. When she had been near that woman, it felt like every Life Fiber in her being was being energized in a completely wrong way. It did not help that Ragyo wanted to turn everyone in Honnou City in Life Fibers, even though Mugetsu didn't know how she planned to do something like that.

***" If we're going to be friends, I'm going to need to teach you a few life lessons. Lesson number one is..."***

That conversation lasted until the early dawn hours. As Mugetsu dragged her tired body back to Ichigo's room and collapsed on the couch, she had a strange inkling that Junketsu didn't learn a damn

thing. As unconsciousness claimed her, Mugetsu could not forget that Junketsu was paying more attention to her than to what she was saying.

# Bad Moon Rising

*Wow, Chapter 28 was finished much sooner than I thought. I guess it's because I'm getting right into the fighting scenes and away from story-building and character development. I'm sure none of you care about that since you're going to enjoy reading both the chapter and the omake. This chapter is the one that also pushes the total word count of the story past 300,000 words with 900 reviews and 900+ Favorites and Alerts. I thank each and every one of you that takes the time and effort to write a short response to my work. If you are impatient about the details for the next chapter, I do post ongoing snippets of the chapters on Spacebattles and Sufficientvelocity on a daily or two day period. So sit back and enjoy the chapter!*

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## Chapter 28 - Bad Moon Rising

### **Moscow, 9:45 PM MSK - Two Days before the Sudden Death Runoff Election**

The man sitting behind the command terminal in the Revocs Server Room ran a hand through his dark hair as he impatiently watched the progress on the screen. It had taken every last resource he had in his possession, but he had managed to influence Revocs security to avoid the room for eleven minutes. That gave him more than enough time to log into the secure terminal, pop in his flash drive and download everything that he needed to do.

***Download Progress - 85.2% (358.31MB / 420.55 MB)***

***Estimated Time Remaining - 51 Seconds***

"This would have been a lot harder if my security wasn't already top level," the man muttered quietly to himself before his eyes narrowed. He needed to keep the noise he made to a minimal. Turning his eyes up into the darkened corner of the room, the man saw the faintest glimmer of sliver in the shadows.

*" An acoustic sensor capable of detecting a person's speech over the sound of the servers..."*

Ragyo Kiryuin's security, both human and technological, was notoriously tight, especially after her daughter's information specialist, Houka Inumuta, hacked into the servers. Ragyo wanted to crucify the boy to make him an example to the rest of the world for what happens to those that try to harm Revocs. The man didn't know what it was Satsuki told her mother, but at the end of the day Inumuta was still alive and had all his limbs.

***Download Progress - 97.9% (411.72 MB / 420.55 MB)***

***Estimated Time Remaining - 5 Seconds***

The man impatiently tapped his finger against his leg as he watched the meter on the monitor finish. As soon as the message 'Download Complete' appeared, he quickly pulled the flash drive out of the computer and placed it securely in a hidden pocket in the lining of his jacket. Turning to leave, the man checked his watch and noticed he had just over a minute until security began making their first rounds.

"That's plenty of time."

The information he was carrying was very important and needed to get to Nudist Beach as soon as possible. He had risked more than just being killed obtaining it. If Ragyo Kiryuin figured out what he was doing, the full wrath of that woman would come crashing down so hard that the man wouldn't have an afterlife to look forward to.

Carefully opening the door to the server room, the man glanced back and forth in the empty hallway and once he saw the coast was clear,



walked out and locked the door behind him. Walking slowly past the darkened windows showing the snowy Moscow night, the man placed his hands in his pockets. He didn't need anyone, especially Raygo Kiryuin's cameras, picking up on the faint trembling of his hands. Even if the security wasn't observant enough to detect such minute movements, the man wasn't going to take his chances with someone like Ragyo.

"Yo, Ginjo! Long time no see!"

Kugo Ginjo calmly turned around and gave a friendly wave to the approaching Moe Shishigawara. He was the newest member of Xcution and among the youngest as well. There were a few younger than him but none of them had been given as much power right after joining than Shishigawara. His strength was so great that within weeks of being inducted into Xcution, Shishigawara had been granted command of the entire Russian Security Force by Ragyo Kiryuin herself. However, despite all his power Shishigawara was still new and thus did not possess the experience necessary to see through Ginjo's deception.

"Oh, I didn't see you Shishigawara," Ginjo chuckled amiably at his fellow Xcution member's exuberance, "If I knew you were around I would have brought some ramen or something. Besides, it's only been about a month since I last talked with you in person."

"Ugh, you know how much I don't like ramen," Shishigawara grimaced in disgust as he skidded to a stop in front of Ginjo and leaned over to catch his breath. While he was a member of Xcution, the seventeen year old Shishigawara sometimes overexerted himself, often to comedic effect when he would be running down a hallway to somewhere important and suddenly drop to the ground from exhaustion. Blinking in thought as something passed through his mind, Shishigawara ran a hand through his mostly shaved head and asked, "Yo man, I thought you were still in Buenos Aires. Why would you leave the beaches for someplace miserable like this? Man, why would Lady Ragyo dump me off in something like this frozen wasteland is beyond me."

"I would be careful of what you say about Lady Ragyo," Ginjo's face was stoic as he chastised the younger member of Xcution, "Comments such as that could be grounds for punishment."

"R-Really?" Shishigawara began to sweat nervously until he saw a smile spread across Ginjo's face. Huffing in embarrassment he punched Ginjo in the shoulder with his tape-covered left hand, a reminder of his years as a kickboxer, and snorted, "Damn it! How'd you get so good at lying? You used to not be able to lie to save your sorry ass!"

Ginjo shrugged, "I've been practicing. How else am I supposed to pick up women at the beach?"

"You're one lucky bastard," Shishigawara huffed and adjusted the tape on his hands. They always seemed like they were coming loose, "So why are you here anyway? Are you ready to spar against my Loterie Raiment again? I'll win this time for sure! I've been practicing on controlling my power and I'm certain the collateral damage will be low. Man, Hououmaru was so scary when I accidentally destroyed one of Lady Ragyo's private helicopters with my power. That woman can yell like a banshee. My ears were ringing for days afterwards!"

Shishigawara was one of the more normal members of Xcution and Ginjo liked to take some small amount of credit for that. He was, after all, the one to help Shishigawara survive the brutish and hellish initiation into Xcution. It was not enough for one to have abnormally high resistance to Life Fibers to be inducted. They also had to pass a series of tests and programs to see how to best fit them with specialized raiment. That would be difficult enough on its own but the proctor of the initiation was Nui Harime.

The Grand Couturier took great pleasure in breaking down as many recruits as possible as she test fit raiment on their bodies. That was why out of the twenty or so Xcution recruits per year only one or two survive to join the group. That small number of people is almost always mentally broken down by Nui's methods to the point they see Ragyo Kiryuin as some sort of living goddess whose every step was

holy. Ginjo was glad that when he was the second to join Xcution nineteen years ago Nui Harime had not yet appeared out of whatever hellhole spawned her.

"Hououmaru does have a voice on her for being such a small woman," Ginjo chuckled before his expression hardened, "And while I would like to spar against you to see how you've improved I can't. I only stopped by to say hello before heading over to Europe. With Jackie captured by Nudist Beach, Lady Ragyo wants me to take command of the European Security Force."

"Damn Nudists," Shishigawara spat on the ground and cracked the knuckles on his right hand, "How the hell did they even take down Jackie? Her Sanguinaire Raiment was powerful as hell! I sure as hell couldn't beat her in a straight up fight without getting in a lucky shot or two. How did those Nudists do it?"

Ginjo checked his watch and saw that the pilot of the helicopter, who he had bribed tremendously to defect, would only remain for another fifteen minutes before departing, "I don't have much time but I suppose I could fill you in on a little secret. While Jackie was taken before reporting what was happening, Hououmaru's analysis of the scene suggests that a Kamui was involved."

"A Kamui?"

Shishigawara staggered back. Of course he knew the legendary Kamui made up of purely Life Fibers but he never thought Nudist Beach would have something like that in their possession. The only question was how Nudist Beach got their hands on one of the sacred garments. There were three Kamui in existence and all of them were at Honnouji Academy, which Lady Ragyo had declared forbidden to each and every member of Xcution for unknown reasons.

"That's right," Ginjo narrowed his eyes and whispered, "I would keep my eyes and ears open, Shishigawara. If someone as experienced with her raiment as Jackie was taken down, then it is likely any of us

could be defeated as well. Don't get cocky and full of yourself or you might find yourself defeated."

Shishigawara gave Ginjo a respectful salute, "Of course, Ginjo! I won't let you down."

"You really need to lighten up. We're both members of Xcution after all," Ginjo waved to Shishigawara as he turned to head towards the roof and the helicopter. Once he was in the air, he would breathe a sigh of relief but until that point he would need to be on his guard.

*" This would have been easier when Ragyo Kiryuin and the Grand Couturier were both at Honnouji Academy but I could not make a move without being spotted,"* Ginjo typed in the passcode to the elevator and waited until the doors shut before closing his eyes. Absentmindedly patting his jacket where the flash drive was, Ginjo leaned against the side of the elevator and folded his arms, *"Jackie's capture could not have come at a worse time. Ragyo's guard is going to be up now that Nudist Beach possesses the power to take down a member of Xcution. Hopefully what I got will be enough to even the odds."*

When the elevator doors opened, Ginjo involuntarily shivered. The night was getting colder and it was only a matter of time until the main brunt of the blizzard hit Moscow. If he could leave before then, it would work to help delay any retaliation from Revocs until the storm passed. Zipping up his jacket and folding his hands in his pockets, Ginjo calmly walked across the snowy rooftop towards the helipad. Even now, when things were almost over, he needed to keep a clear head. Ragyo Kiryuin and those working for her needed him to let his guard down for only a second. Ginjo wasn't about to give them that chance.

"It's good to see you, sir," The pilot slid the door on the side of the helicopter open and offered Ginjo a welcoming hand, "Are you all finished? I would like to leave before the storm hits. The latest forecast puts the storm less than twenty miles to the west of the city."

"There's no need to wait," Ginjo sensed something in his peripheral vision. Turning his head slightly so as to not draw suspicion, he glanced over the quiet and empty roof, "In fact, we should probably leave right now."

The pilot snapped off a quick salute before hurrying back into the cockpit. As the rotors above the helicopter whirled into life and began to spin, disturbing the snow that had fallen on them, Ginjo stood near the open side of the helicopter and braced his hand against the cold metal. Someone very familiar and extremely dangerous was quickly making their way towards his location. Already his ears could pick up the sounds of an explosion in the distance. From the lack of subtlety in his pursuer's actions, it was clear to Ginjo that Nui Harime was not particularly pleased to hear of his treachery.

*" The question is how she knew what I was doing. I didn't doubt that my flight from Argentina would be quickly noticed by Ragyo Kiryuin, but for her to send out the Grand Couturier with such frightening precise timing means my plan was compromised from the very beginning."*

Ginjo knew from the moment he decided to do what he did that if he ran into Nui Harime there would be way he would get out alive. The Grand Couturier would give him some small glimmer of hope before crushing it beneath her overwhelming power and strength. That was why he chose to enact his plans tonight. The blizzard approaching Moscow would limit visibility from the air and with his sabotage of the only other helipad at the Revocs compound, Nui Harime would be forced to land at Domodedovo International Airport nearly six kilometers away. Six kilometers might seem like a lot, but it would only buy him about two minutes to escape from the Grand Couturier.

*" I have about a minute,"* Ginjo breathed a sigh of extreme relief as the helicopter began lifting off the ground. Sixty seconds would be more than enough time to get out of range of all of the Grand Couturier's abilities. With any luck, he could fly far enough into the storm that she wouldn't be able to give chase from the ground.

Clasping a shaking hand around his X-shaped pendant dangling freely from his neck, Ginjo was well aware that his Cuirassé Raiment did not stand a chance against Nui's power. Her Scissor Blade, compounded with her strength and speed, would easily tear through his raiment's armor with one clean blow.

*" I don't think I've ever been this frightened of an opponent before,"* Ginjo looked down at the retreated rooftop with a nervous expression. He remembered quite vividly what happened after his rebellion against the Soul Society after their false accusations. He thought after everything he did for the Soul Society as a substitute shinigami they would believe his word. He couldn't have been more naïve but even staring down three captains, including Jushiro Ukitake, as they forcibly removed his shinigami powers did not cause him to feel nearly as much fear as fighting a pissed-off Nui Harime.

As the blowing snow began to obscure the ground below, Ginjo saw a pink figure appear out of nowhere on the roof below. Even though he was unable to see the Grand Couturier's face, Ginjo could sense she was looking directly at him and the intent behind her stare was enough to force him to break out in a cold sweat. Sliding the door of the helicopter closed and sitting down in a chair, Ginjo breathed a sigh of relief knowing that he had gotten away.

That was until a purple Scissor Blade skewered upwards through the helicopter's floor in front of his leg and everything quickly went to hell.

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Ryuko Matoi stared at the teal haired teenager across the ring from her with barely concealed suspicion.

*" So what does he have up his sleeves?"* Ryuko's eyes dropped from Houka Inumuta's smug expression to the PDA held in his left hand. The Information and Strategy Committee Chair seemed to be more

focused on whatever was on his little device than the upcoming fight. Out of all the Elite Four, Inumuta was the only one she hadn't really come in contact with. She had already fought Sanageyama's Blade Regalia twice, witnessed Jakuzure try to sneak attack Ichigo in the hallway in her Symphony Regalia and got a personal showing of Gamagori's Shackle Regalia two nights ago.

*" Whatever it is, I 'm willing to bet that it has something to do with technology,"* Ryuko was starting to get annoyed at Inumuta's ignorance of the upcoming fight in deference to his PDA, *"Damn it, don't tell me he's one of those snooty 'I know everything about you' people."*

*" **The taste of your blood has changed, Ryuko,**"* Senketsu's steady voice brought Ryuko out of her thoughts, ***"Is something wrong?"***

Ryuko huffed and groaned, "This guy is really starting to bug the hell out of me, but his aura is nothing like the other three. It's almost like he not even close to being on the same level as the rest of Satsuki's little goon squad."

Senketsu's eye narrowed in understanding, ***"I've noticed the same thing, but you should not let your guard down. Satsuki Kiryuin might have chosen him to be on her Elite Four for reasons other than power."***

"You got a point there." Ryuko took a calming breath to steady her nerves. This was what she had been waiting for. While she already knew who killed her dad, she needed to know Satsuki's relation to Nui Harime and why she did it. If she didn't find out the answer, Ryuko knew it would bother her for the rest of her life, "I'm ready when you are, Senketsu."

"Such valuable data..."

Inumuta's off-hand remark brought Ryuko's attention away from Senketsu and completely on him, "Huh? What are you muttering

about?"

"Oh, forgive my commentary," Inumuta tucked away his PDA and absentmindedly adjusted his tinted glasses. Giving a light chuckle, he explained, "I could not help but record your one-sided conversation with your Kamui just a moment ago. Please do not give me that surprised expression, I've already seen and recorded Ichigo Kurosaki doing the same thing with his Kamui. It is very exciting to capture such valuable information. Do you mind satiating my curiosity and describing what your Kamui's voice sounds like? I find all my sensors unable to pick up a single acoustic sound."

"Go to hell," Ryuko muttered and spat on the ground. There was no way she was going to tell someone like Inumuta anything about Senketsu, "Why don't you just ask Ichigo if you're so goddamn curious?"

Inumuta's body seemed to tense up and his mouth disappeared as his high collar snapped shut in front of it, "Unfortunately my methods of collecting data surrounding Ichigo's Mugetsu has been complicated by the difficulty of the task."

" ***Hmm...***" Senketsu seemed puzzled by Inumuta's explanation, "***I wonder what he means by that.***"

"He means that the last time he tried to do anything to Mugetsu I threatened to destroy his laptop," Ichigo shouted from the pillar he was sitting down on. Seeing the pointed glares from Jakuzure and Gamagori, he returned the favor with an annoyed look of his own and turned his attention back to the upcoming fight.

"T-That's beside the point," Inumuta's composure nearly slipped as he remembered Ichigo grabbing his laptop and threatening to tear it in two. He would have tried to call Ichigo's bluff by threatening to report his actions to Lady Satsuki, but Inumuta realized something important in that instance of seeing his most precious computer held just out of reach - Ichigo wouldn't care in the slightest.



"Oh really? It doesn't seem like it's not important," Ryuko had a smug grin on her face as she drew her Scissor Blade from the pouch on her hip and willed it to extend to its full size.

"Say what you will, Ryuko Matoi, but I've been reviewing your combat data," Inumuta's expression hardened slightly at her mocking of him. No one would get away with insulting his reverence of data and information, "Your Kamui's transformation against Sanageyama's Blade Regalia was truly intriguing. I wonder how such a configuration would work against an opponent who knows what to look for."

Ryuko pointed her Scissor Blade at Inumuta, "Let's fight and find out! I'll show you just how much Senketsu can kick your ass!"

Satsuki watched the exchange between Ryuko and Inumuta before raising her voice and calmly stating, "The first round begins... now."

"Understood, Lady Satsuki," Inumuta smirked as his eyes were hidden behind a glare reflecting off his glasses, "Shall we get started, Ryuko Matoi?"

Without waiting for Ryuko's answer Inumuta threw his arms out to his sides as the three black stars emblazoned on his Goku Uniform lit up. Ryuko was forced to squint slightly as the bright light enveloping Inumuta's body shone across the stage. As the light died down just moments later, Ryuko stared on in veiled interest as Inumuta emerged from his transformation and said, "Three-Star Goku Uniform: Probe Regalia."

"Probe Regalia, huh?"

Ryuko was expecting something large and intimidating like the other three members of the Elite Four, but Inumuta's Probe Regalia seemed to go in the opposite direction. His Goku Uniform covered his entire body apart from his mouth and hair and had a predominantly dark blue coloring with green holographic keyboards lining his thighs and arms. As Inumuta began weirdly typing on the

keyboards in various positions, Ryuko's eyebrows rose and she folded her arms, "Is this it? It's nothing like the other three. Actually, now that I think about it, it looks like it came out of a show I saw a while ago with giant robots."

**" Whatever the case may be, I'm getting a strange feeling. It's almost as if I'm being stripped bare,"** Senketsu growled irritably as a confident smirk came from Inumuta. He didn't know what the Information and Strategy Committee Chair was thinking but it made him feel uneasy. Shuddering as a sense of being violated coursed through his uniform, causing Ryuko to glance down at him in concern, Senketsu turned his eye up to his wearer and declared, **"Finish this before I feel any more violated. If we lose here Mugetsu is never going to let me live it down."**

"No need to tell me, Senketsu," Ryuko raised her forearm and gripped the pin on her Seki Tekkou. Grinning confidently as she pulled the pin out, she added, "After all, I wouldn't want to make you look bad in front of your crush. Life Fiber Synchronize: Kamui Senketsu!"

As she was clad once again in Senketsu's transformed state and felt her Kamui's power, along with hurriedly denied remarks of his relationship with Mugetsu, course through every fiber of her being, Ryuko let out a deep sigh and gripped her red Scissor Blade with both hands. The Information and Strategy Committee Chair had yet to do anything in their fight apart from continuously typing on the green keyboards lining his body in strange and disturbing poses. While she still didn't have a clue about what tricks and abilities Inumuta had, based on his Probe Regalia she figured it had something to do with computers and information.

"So you automatically transform into your initial state?" Inumuta rhetorically asked as he took in every detail from Ryuko's body. Every screed of visible information he could get from Senketsu was being stored within his Probe Regalia's hard-drive for Iori to go over later on. Giving a pleased grin, made even more apparent by his hidden eyes, he said, "While your standard combat configuration is

impressive, I would have preferred you go right to your Senkou mode."

Ryuko narrowed her eyes and scoffed, "Like I give a damn what you want! I'm not going to let a data fetishist like you tell me what to do! In fact, I'm going to beat your sorry ass without using Senkou just to piss you off!"

Inumuta grinned savagely as he typed feverously on his Probe Regalia, "Come then, Ryuko Matoi! Show me the power of your Senketsu!"

As Ryuko gave a battle-shout and flew across the stage towards Inumuta, twin blasts of energy rocketing out from the backs of Senketsu's eyes, Orihime Inoue was watching the fight with a visible blush stretching across her face, "Mako, shouldn't Ryuko be embarrassed to wear such a... um... revealing outfit?"

"Not at all," Mako exclaimed proudly to her new friend from the No-Stars section of the stands. Raising her arms excitedly and clapping her hands together, she explained, "Ryuko has a great body and is proud of the way she looks! Senketsu may expose her body for the rest of the world to see but Ryuko is confident about her appearance! She shows off her body and great rack for the rest of us to admire! There is no reason to not show off what you got, after all!"

"Ryuko named her uniform Senketsu?" Orihime cutely raised a finger to her lip as she pondered what seemed to be an important enigma. Unbeknownst to her, the action inadvertently caused several nearby male students to faint from blood loss, "That's strange... I wonder if it has anything to do with Ichigo naming his Mugetsu?"

"Of course it does!" Mako explained passionately, "Both Senketsu and Mugetsu are Kamui, school uniforms made of Life Fibers that give their wearers super-duper powers!"

Orihime was confused about what Mako was talking about. She remembered Uryu mentioning something similar to Life Fibers when

she asked him about his summer job last year but Uryu had seemed to come up with excuses involving his dad dying whenever she asked. Honnou City was a really amazing place, but then again Karakura Town didn't have the high school perched at the highest point in the city, which was an awesome idea. It would be just like a fortress that could keep out invaders and anyone trying to take control of the city!

"Wait a second! That's it!" Orihime slammed her fist into an open palm and shouted triumphantly, "You're saying that Ryuko and Ichigo can transform their Kamui into new uniforms with superhuman powers and abilities? I thought it was strange Ryuko would wear something other than the Honnouji Academy uniform but now it makes perfect sense! Ryuko must secretly be a Sentai who goes around solving crimes and saving people and Ichigo must be her newly inducted and unwilling recruit!"

"That's exactly what Ryuko does!" Sparkling stars surrounded Mako's eyes as she locked hands with the equally imaginative Orihime. Almost as if it was a reaction waiting to go off, as soon as the two overactive teens locked hands they were surrounded by a bright pink backdrop of light not too different from Satsuki's own but at the same time nearly twice the intensity. While everyone nearby was forced to move away lest they go blind from the light, Mako smiled and said, "Ryuko and Ichigo are like superheroes that are thrust into an impossible world against villains that keep getting stronger and stronger!"

"I know," Orihime happily agreed, memories of her time in the Soul Society and Hueco Mundo coming to the forefront of her mind. While those memories weren't one she particular enjoyed, especially the ones in Hueco Mundo, the past was the past and therefore shouldn't be dwelt upon. Aizen was defeated and his army vanquished, "You've been here the entire time, Mako, so do you know if Ryuko or Ichigo have catchphrases or poses?"

"Hmm..." Mako pursed her lips and the pink backdrop died down momentarily before resuming its usual intensity, "Nope, but they

have their own transformation sequences and everything!"

Orihime blinked as her mind tried to process what Ichigo's Mugetsu transformation might look like before she noticed something and looked around. She had been so engrossed in her conversation with Mako that she missed seeing Ururu leave, "Hey Mako, did you see where Ururu went?"

"Oh! She left to go get some snacks!" Mako answered with a gluttonous look on her face. With a trail of drool leaking from her mouth, she began listing off all the food Ururu was going to buy with the money Ichigo gave her from his Vice President stipend, "She's going to go get popcorn, corndogs, crackerjacks, hot dogs, hamburgers and every other food I can't remember!"

"That sounds wonderful, Mako!" Orihime joyfully agreed, "So while we wait for Ururu to get back with the snacks we should think of a nemesis for Ichigo and Ryuko to constantly battle. They can't be superheroes without a villain. You have anyone in mind?"

"What about Lady Satsuki?"

The bubble voice coming from right next to Mako caused both girls to turn around and the pink backdrop to vanish once and for all. Sitting right next to Mako with a pleased expression on her face and her hands clasped firmly behind the nape of her neck was Nui Harime.

"You look familiar," Mako's eyes narrowed in rare suspicion before the familiar happy expression returned to her face, "Have we met before?"

"Maybe..." Nui drawled up secretly as she stuck her tongue out cutely before turning her singular sapphire eye up to Ryuko's fight against Inumuta. She really did not care to watch Ryuko beat Satsuki's little goon. What she was looking forward to was seeing Ichigo utterly destroy the humans and their Goku Uniforms with the awesome power of Mugetsu. Giving a girlish chuckle from the

anticipation, she tilted her head to Mako and answered, "But then again, I just have that kind of face, you know."

"Lady Satsuki?" Orihime looked puzzled at the honorifics given to the name, "Isn't she the Student Council President and Ichigo's boss? You know something, Uryu's the Student Council President back in Karakura Town but everyone just calls him Uryu even though his family is rich. I think he would be really embarrassed if I called him Lord Uryu."

"Uh huh," Nui nodded and filed away that particular piece of information. Orihime was one of Ichigo's friends from Karakura Town, so he probably had some sort of friendly feelings for her. She would refrain from hurting or killing Orihime unless absolutely necessary since it would make Ichigo upset and Nui did not want to upset someone she loved as much as her cousin, "But there's a reason I mentioned Lady Satsuki. I heard that she knows the identity of whoever killed Ryuko's dad but she won't say who it is. That's why Ryuko's fighting her quirky miniboss squad, you know."

"Ryuko's dad is dead?" Orihime was visibly saddened by the news and promised to comfort the girl when she got the chance. Turning her attention back to the fight as a curse echoed through the stadium, courtesy of Ryuko, Orihime folded her hands across her lap and wished Ryuko the best of luck.

"God damn it!" Ryuko shouted as her red Scissor Blade was avoided when Inumuta spun out of the path with barely an inch of space, "Your Probe Regalia is really starting to piss me off!"

Inumuta leapt away from Ryuko and quickly began typing on his keyboards. As Ryuko continued to get more and more frustrated with her failure to hit him, her accuracy would begin to suffer. As his sensors predicted another attack, Inumuta leaned to the side and out of the way of Ryuko's Scissor Blade, "At your current level there are no way you can hit me. I've already analyzed the data from your battle against Sanageyama's Blade Regalia and while your speed may be slightly greater than my own, I can still predict and thus avoid

your attacks. You might as well use Senkou since there is no way you - "

The Information and Strategy Committee Chair was silenced as a black and red fist slammed into his face and catapulted him backwards through the air before he landed on his back. With her fist smoking and an angry glare on her face, Ryuko snorted and shouted, "People like you piss me off! You're one of those people that think just because they've analyzed everything that they can anticipate every move their opponent makes!"

*" I underestimated her,"* Inumuta pulled himself up and took a ragged breath. As the physically weakest of the Elite Four, his stamina and endurance were magnitudes less than Gamagori's. A few more hits like that and he would be down for the count, *"She's even faster than my data predicted? Has her connection with her Kamui increased in the last few weeks to this point? I'll need to up my output if I hope to collect enough data about her Kamui for Lady Satsuki."*

"There's only one way to beat the crap out of someone like you!" Ryuko continued as she stared down Inumuta. Gripping her Scissor Blade tightly in both hands, she pointed the weapon at her opponent and shouted, "And that is to be as reckless in battle as possible! You cannot predict my moves if I don't know them myself!"

Rushing towards Inumuta in a burst of speed, her red heels pushing off the ground hard enough to crack the stone composing the stage, Ryuko quickly and suddenly switched her footing around just as she was about to reach Inumuta before sprinting past him. The Information and Strategy Committee Chair was unprepared for such an abrupt change in her battle strategy and was forced to dedicate more and more of his Probe Regalia's processing power to analyzing her new battle pattern.

"Do you think because you can think on your feet I cannot follow your movements?" Inumuta gloated as his furiously typed on his keyboards, "I've already analyzed your new strategy and stance. I cannot be hit by you any - "

Inumuta's smug gloating was interrupted as Ryuko recklessly dropped her guard, switched her Scissor Blade to her left hand and smashed her fist into the bottom of his chin, causing spittle to fly freely through the air.

"That is what happens when you try to analyze everything in battle!" Ryuko shouted as Inumuta's body bounced away from her before he managed to regain his bearings and land on his feet. As his feet left twin trails of dust along the ground as he skidded to a stop, Inumuta took a ragged breath and wiped away a small amount of blood that was leaking from his lips. Staring at her through his visor, Inumuta saw Ryuko grin and point her Scissor Blade at him, "Is this seriously all you can do? At this rate I won't even need to break a sweat to defeat you."

"I see what's happening," Inumuta said after catching his breath. Quickly moving his hands around his keyboards as data streamed down his visor, he grinned and ignored the beads of sweat dripping down his face. Ryuko's strength was greater than his data indicated. If he was hit with a few more of those attacks there was a great risk of his data being lost or corrupted, "Every few seconds you are shifting your stance and boosting your reaction speed to overcome my Probe Regalia's ability to predict and counter. How intriguing. While Goku Uniforms are capable of temporarily boosting their Life Fiber connections, the effect for a Kamui should be many times greater, but I wonder..."

Ryuko scoffed and spun her Scissor Blade around her wrist, "What are you muttering about?"

"I'm curious as to how long your body can withstand your current rate," Inumuta explained as his body slowly began to fade away from in front of Ryuko. Just before he vanished completely, Inumuta gave Ryuko a wide smile and shouted, "The concept of how a human can move like you do simply by donning clothing composed of Life Fibers is inconceivable. Show me how strong someone can become when wearing a Kamui, Ryuko Matoi!"



"What the hell?" Ryuko stepped back and fervently looked around the stage for her opponent, "He disappeared?"

"Camouflage, eh?"

Sitting on top of his pillar, Ichigo narrowed his eyes as he watched Inumuta fade away into the air. His camouflage was nearly perfect and Ichigo was certain if he was fighting the teal haired teen, he wouldn't be able to see even the faint outline his eyes were currently tracking. It took time and effort for him to notice the barest of changes in the light coming from Inumuta's movements and that was time he would not have in a fight.

"So you've noticed it, Ichigo Kurosaki," Gamagori respectfully acknowledged Ichigo even as he kept his attention on the fight below. Matoi's battle against Houka Inumuta was not going exactly as planned. The goal of the first match was to test the limits of Inumuta's Probe Regalia while collecting data on Matoi's Senkou configuration. Out of the three Kamui at Honnouji Academy Matoi's was the only one with an additional combat mode, but at the rate the battle was going she was going to defeat Inumuta without using it. Folding his arms and glaring at Inumuta, in the hopes his fellow Elite Four would understand his mental directions, he added, "But I'm afraid Matoi has lost the battle."

Ichigo turned his focus away from the fight, and Ryuko's attempt to locate Inumuta, to ask Gamagori, "What the hell are you talking about? The hacker can't even lay a hand on Ryuko."

"You have yet to see the full power of Houka Inumuta's optical camouflage!" Gamagori boasted loudly enough that Ichigo almost moved to cover his ears, "When his Probe Regalia shines with the light of a thousand suns, white butterflies will gather and rest their wings on a snowman!"

There was a sudden and awkward silence as not only Ichigo, but Jakuzure and Sanageyama, looked at Gamagori. The silence was broken when Ichigo shook his head and said, "I have no idea what

the hell you're talking about. How are butterflies related to camouflage?"

"Oh? Even Strawberry doesn't understand your stupid metaphors, Froggy. Perhaps you should learn to speak normally," Nonon drawled out sarcastically and watched Gamagori's face redden from both anger and embarrassment.

**"He vanished completely from sight, Ryuko,"** Senketsu warned, **"Be careful."**

"I admit I underestimated your cunning," Inumuta's voice echoed from behind Ryuko but when she twisted her body around she saw no one there. When Inumuta spoke again his voice came from her right, "But when dealing with haphazard and dangerous attack from an opponent like you, I find the most effective measure is not to block or counter, but to avoid and dodge. It takes more processing power to derive a counter to an attack than to simply avoid it."

Ryuko avoided the first attack through sheer luck. Inumuta had been close enough that as he went to punch her he barely touched her Scissor Blade, allowing Ryuko to notice his presence and duck below the blow. The second strike to her stomach and the subsequent dozen blows did not fail to connect. Blow after blow rained down on her and while the damage and pain were low thanks to the defensive properties of Senketsu's armor it was still enough to force her back to the edge of the stage.

"Damn it," Ryuko wiped a small trail of blood from her lips as she glanced over the edge towards the ground far below. As she was contemplating what to do, her ears picked up the subtle sound of motion just a few feet away from her. Snapping her leg out, she was luckily greeted with a cry of pain as the invisible Inumuta was blasted back and away from her.

"What?" Inumuta's voice rang out from beneath his optical camouflage, "How did you hit me?"

"I heard Gamagori mention your technique was called optical camouflage. That means you turn invisible, right?" Ryuko asked as she thrust her Scissor Blade into the ground and closed her eyes. As she strained her ears to their limit, Senketu's assistance only further boosting the limit of her hearing, she added, "But I can still hear you! Now that I can tell where you're going to be from your footsteps, your little invisibility trick is pointless!"

" *Such valuable data,*" Inumuta thought stoically as he invisibly walked around Ryuko from a safe distance. His eyes narrowed beneath his visor as his sensors picked up Ryuko's eyes somewhat accurately following his footsteps, *"Allowing Ryuko Matoi to gain such an easy avenue to attacking me would be bad. I suppose I will have to kick things into third gear to protect the data I've gathered."*

"I did not expect your Kamui to heighten your senses so drastically," Inumuta admitted and briefly flinched when Ryuko's eyes focused directly on him. Regaining his composure, he quickly typed several macros and command into his Probe Regalia and smiled as a high-pitched whine emanated from his Goku Uniform. Noticing the perplexed look on Ryuko's face, he smirked and said, "What you just heard was my very own Acoustic Cancelling software. Now you won't be able to hear anything from me but my voice."

Instead of getting angry, Ryuko pulled her Scissor Blade out of the ground and held it horizontally in front of her body. As she was surrounded by a faint red aura, she scoffed and said, "That's fine with me. If I can't hear or see you, then I'll just have to attack everyone at once! Senketsu Senkou!"

In a brief flash of light Senketsu was transformed into his more armored and powerful Senkou form. As twin bursts of steam shot out of her shoulders and hips as she became accustomed to the power circulating through her body, Ryuko held her Scissor Blade up, red and black jagged lines covering it once more. Taking a moment to steel her nerves, she let loose a loud cry and ran towards where she last heard her opponent before skidding to a stop and swinging her Scissor Blade horizontally in the air.

"This is what I've been waiting for, Ryuko Matoi!" Inumuta shouted triumphantly as the sensors in his visor picked up the invisible blade extending out from Ryuko's Scissor Blade. Leaping into the air, his legs tucked up as far as they could go, Inumuta laughed as he avoided the attack that nearly destroyed Sanageyama's Blade Regalia Mark I, "The data on your Senkou configuration is simply astonishing! Show me more of this hidden form!"

"Go to hell!" Ryuko shouted as Inumuta continued to avoid her attacks. Even if she could no longer hear his footsteps, she could still faintly hear his breathing and that was good enough for her to aim with. Judging by how Inumuta's breathing was getting faster and faster, Ryuko figured her attacks must be getting more accurate.

*" Her attacks are getting more accurate. How can she still hear me?"* Inumuta gasped in shock as one of Ryuko's Senkou attacks raged towards him. Improvising a defense by leaning back and planting his hands on the ground, he was stunned when a thin line appeared on his Probe Regalia. After running a quick system check, and breathing a sigh of relief when his scans said his data was not compromised, Inumuta tried to formulate a plan, *"This is getting too dangerous. My processing power cannot keep up with this level of fighting for much longer. Matoi's attacks are getting more accurate and my evasion rate is falling exponentially. I have perhaps a minute before it will be impossible for me to evade her attacks. I should consider forfeiting to preserve the data I've collected."*

"This is getting far too dangerous. I can see that I am no match for you," Inumuta announced as he deactivated his optical camouflage, "Perhaps it is time that I resigned myself to my fate. I, Houka Inumuta, do hereby..."

While Inumuta was mulling over the various methods he could end the fight without risking damaging his Probe Regalia, Ryuko was doing some heavy thinking of her own. She was trying to come up with a way to hit someone that could predict and avoid her Senkou strikes. Senkou wrapped her Scissor Blade in a layer of invisible

energy that greatly increased its range and cutting power but it was useless if she couldn't hit anything with it.

*"Damn, and here I thought Sanageyama was the only one that could dodge Senkou."* Glancing down at her Scissor Blade and noticing just a small piece of cloth hanging off the edge of the weapon, Ryuko grinned. Even if she couldn't hear Inumuta's footsteps any longer her attacks were getting more and more accurate with every swing. That last attack had barely nicked Inumuta's Probe Regalia and it was only a matter of time until she got a solid hit.

*"It sucks that I don't have time,"* she thought annoyed as she glanced around the arena for any sign of Inumuta. If she could simply see through his optical camouflage then she wouldn't need to overthink things and could simply hit him. Fighting an invisible opponent was starting to really piss her off, *"And I'm running out of options. Every time Senkou misses I waste the energy and blood Senketsu's stored and I don't know what other tricks the four-eyed bastard has in his Probe Regalia. If it comes down to it, I suppose I could always use that..."*

"Hey Senketsu," Ryuko whispered to her Kamui, causing him to look at her. Grimacing nervously, she said, "I have an idea but it's risky. Do you remember what I tried doing during our second fight against Sanageyama?"

***"Yes. I remember that attack quite well. I warned you it was dangerous and yet you still used it,"*** Senketsu's pupil narrowed as he recalled their defeat. When they woke up at Mako's house after collapsing unconscious on the ground, they had no idea how they got there. It was only later on that Mako said a strange woman dropped them off and Ichigo explaining who it was that did it, ***"Please don't tell me you plan on using it again. The last time you tried it used up so much of your blood and energy that you were knocked unconscious by it."***

"I know," Ryuko admitted quietly. She remembered just how much pain she had been in after using the attack and was not keen on doing it again. She had forced Senketsu to go through with her plan despite his warning and they both suffered because of it, "I know the technique's risks and how much energy it uses. I'm asking you if you're up to trying it again."

Senketsu was shocked that Ryuko was putting her trust in him and he would have started crying if they weren't in the middle of a battle. Taking a second to compose himself, Senketsu said, **"Yes. I'm willing to do that technique once more, but this time it will be different. You remember the toll it took on your body and know what to expect. I'm certain if use it you'll be exhausted and forced back to my basic transformation but this time you will still be conscious. Just try not to miss..."**

"Tch," Ryuko took a deep breath and scoffed, "Don't worry, Senketsu. I know better than to miss with this technique. With everything riding on this fight I can't afford to miss."

**" Agreed, I'm ready when you are. Let's make it count, Ryuko!"**

As Ryuko was enveloped in a turbulent red aura, she noticed Inumuta reappear across the arena and raise his arms. He was mumbling something but she couldn't hear him, so as she raised her Scissor Blade into the air above her head. Unlike the first time she used this technique, Ryuko was much better prepared for the heavy toll Niban Genkai would take on her body. Already she could feel her energy being sapped away, drawn up into her Scissor Blade to increase the overall power of the attack. Gritting her teeth to deafen the pain she was beginning to feel, she let out a shout as jets of steam shot out from her Kamui, "I can't hear a word you're saying but I don't care! Just try to dodge this attack you annoying, invisible bastard! Let's go Senketsu! Senkou - Niban Genkai!"

**" This isn't in my data!"** Inumuta was forced to cover his eyes as the jagged red and black lines covering Ryuko's Scissor Blade began shining brightly enough that it seemed her entirely blade was

glowing. As his visor's sensor adapted to the change in brightness, he involuntarily took a step back, *"This is the same attack she used against Sanageyama's Blade Regalia Mark II but it's on an entirely different level. The energy flow and density are on an entirely different level from the data I've collected. I need to surrender now before she attacks."*

"There's no need to use such a powerful technique on me," Inumuta announced with false bravado as a fierce wind appeared, "I know when I've been beaten."

"What?" Ryuko shouted as the last of the red aura surrounding her body was sucked up into her Scissor Blade, which had transformed into a large glowing two-handed version of itself, "I still can't hear a word you're saying!"

"W-Wait!" Inumuta pleaded indignantly as he moved to deactivate his Probe Regalia and surrender, "I give up!"

"Like hell I'm going to allow a coward like you to surrender!" Ryuko raced across the arena, twin jets blasting out from her back, before leaping into the air. As she reached her apex, she let out a roar as she swung her Scissor Blade downwards, "Take this! Seni-Soshitsu!"

Inumuta never had a chance to evade the attack. By concentrating everything she had into that one attack, Ryuko not only increased the power of the attack but also its width. Even as he began running to the side to avoid the attack, Inumuta's sensors were all blaring alerts that the probability of avoiding the attack was zero.

"No! No! No!"

The attack hit him with the force of a small explosion and it was only by the great power granted to him by his Probe Regalia and Ryuko's lack of a desire to kill him that Inumuta survived. As his body was enveloped in the energy detonated by Ryuko's attack, Inumuta could only scream as his Probe Regalia was torn apart at the seams and all the data he collected during the fight was deleted.

"Ha... ha... ha..."

The world briefly wavered around her and Ryuko collapsed down to one knee, her Scissor Blade helping to prop her up, as gentle wisps of steam rose from Senketsu's creases and folds. She was still conscious, which was a lot better than what happened during her fight against Sanageyama. When she tried using Niban Genkai all on her own, it left her so drained that it knocked her unconscious, but when she asked Senketsu to help her it only left her utterly exhausted. Perhaps she would need to listen to Senketsu's advice more in the future. As every muscle in her body protested her actions, Ryuko stood back up.

"At least I took that guy down," Ryuko took a ragged breath and grinned when she saw Inumuta's naked but otherwise uninjured form laying on the stage in front of her. As the Life Fibers that were woven into Inumuta's Probe Regalia drifted through the air and were absorbed into Senketsu, causing her to briefly glow with a red aura, Ryuko smirked at a visibly scowling Satsuki and raised her fist, "That's one down, Satsuki Kiryuin!"

"Indeed," Satsuki answered back passively before turning her attention to Sanageyama, "Your match against Ichigo Kurosaki will begin in ten minutes Sanageyama."

The blind kendo user nodded and stood up, "Yes, Lady Satsuki. I shall go prepare my Blade Regalia Mark II."

Back down in the arena, Ryuko was feeling the first dredges of energy returning to her. Taking a calming breath and transforming Senketsu back into his normal uniform, she turned to walk back to her pillar when her Kamui asked, "***Niban Genkai?***"

"Hey!" Ryuko gave Senketsu an annoyed look and pulled at his fabric, "I had to come up with a name for that attack in the middle of a battle! I thought something like 'Second Limit' sounded really cool! Besides, I didn't hear you offering any suggestions."



" ***Perhaps,***" Senketsu conceded before adding, "***But I come up with the name for the next technique.***"

Ryuko huffed and said, "... fine."

As she walked up the collapsible flight of stairs so conveniently provided for her by Satsuki Kiryuin, Ryuko noticed Ichigo walking down for his upcoming back. Flashing him a confident and victorious smile, she gave him a thumbs-up and said, "That's one down."

"I saw," Ichigo smirked as he remembered the look on Inumuta's face as Ryuko ignored his surrender. It didn't take Ichigo long, especially since he was privy to all of the Student Council meets due to being the Student Council Vice President, to see why someone like Inumuta, who had an obsession with collecting and analyzing data surrounding Kamui and Goku Uniforms, would agree to a king of the hill battle. His goal had to be collect data on Senketsu and then surrender so the data could be analyzed by Iori. Ryuko's destruction of his Probe Regalia was probably the worst thing that could happen to the teen hacker.

"Niban Genkai, huh?" Ichigo looked over Ryuko's shoulder at Inumuta. The teal haired teen had regained consciousness and was putting on a tracksuit being handed to him by a One-Star student. Ignoring Inumuta whining over his lost data, Ichigo said, "Interesting choice for a name. I suppose I should get ready for my fight against Sanageyama. The bastard's going to be tough."

"I know," Ryuko's eyes narrowed as she recalled her second fight against Sanageyama, "His Shingantsu is really something, Ichigo."

"Don't worry about me," Ichigo waved off Ryuko's worries and walked past her, "I have a plan."

Once they were out of Ryuko's earshot, Mugetsu turned her eyes upward and asked, "***You have a plan?***"

"No," Ichigo admitted with a carefree shrug, "I know firsthand that plans never last long. I'll just see how strong Sanageyama really is and wing it. That's always worked for me before."

***" And here I thought you knew what you were doing." Mugetsu commented sarcastically, "Just don't lose. I want to be able to gloat to Senketsu that I defeated an opponent that he could not."***

"Relax, Mugetsu," Ichigo stared up at Satsuki, who seemed to be looking directly at him as well. Turning his gaze away from Satsuki, Ichigo could not help but feel as if something bad was going to happen. Over the past few weeks, he had come to associate such a particular feeling with a certain blonde girl. He couldn't see her watching him but Ichigo could sense that Nui Harime was nearby. If he knew the Grand Couturier as well as he thought he did, Nui probably had something in store for him.

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"Way to go, Ryuko! You won! You won!" Mako jumped in the air and cheered as she watched her best friend in the entire world defeat Inumuta. While Orihime was clapping happily besides her and with a smile on her face, it was Mako that was constantly replaying the awesome fight in her head over and over again. The way Ryuko jumped into the air and hit Inumuta with a Scissor Blade made out of pure energy was like something out of a movie. It even had a name!

"That was amazing, Mako," Orihime was suitably impressed by the power displayed by Ryuko's Niban Genkai attack. While her ability to sense spiritual pressure did not seem to work on Ryuko or anyone in Honnou City for that matter, she could sense that her Kamui was incredibly power. If she had to guess, Orihime would say that Niban Genkai could have taken out someone like Renji or Rukia if Ryuko managed to hit them.

*" You know it's strange. Ever since I left Karakura Town to come cheer Ichigo on I've noticed how... different the rest of the world was."*

It was almost like a veil was lifted from her eyes the moment she stepped outside of Karakura Town. It was strange, and highly ironic, that compared to the rest of the world Karakura Town was relatively normal looking. When she turned to ask Mako a question, Orihime noticed something odd about the way Nui Harime was watching the fight. At first it looked like the blonde haired girl was simply fixated on Ryuko's battle but the intensity in her single eye frightened Orihime. Quickly composing her nerves before she was seen, Orihime gently shook Mako's jittering shoulder and asked, "Hey Mako, are Life Fibers really this powerful?"

"Life Fibers can do anything!" Mako explained happily before noticing Orihime's confused expression, "That's a silly question to ask! You should already know all about Life Fibers since Revocs puts them into all their clothing. I've seen some of their advertisements on the television Matorou stole. Revocs, which is owned by Lady Satsuki's mother, says all their clothes have a small amount of Life Fibers to 'prevent wear, tear and other clothing-related problems.' It's kind of strange you don't know that already, Orihime."

"Well..." Orihime scratched her chin and looked away, "The thing is, I've never heard of Life Fibers until my friend Uryu came back from his summer job at Revocs last year. I wanted to ask him all about his job for my summer essay but he was all hush-hush about it. He wouldn't say anything about Life Fibers other than that they were some corporate secret or something!"

"There's no Revocs-brand clothing in Karakura Town? How odd," Nui Harime said with fake surprise. She, of course, knew exactly why anyone from Karakura Town would not know about Life Fibers. Ichigo's dad was doing an impressive job at keeping Lady Ragyo's influence out of his town. It was funny to think in the entire world

Karakura Town was the only place that was entirely free of Revocs clothing.

"I have a question, Orihime!" Mako had moved on from the issue of Orihime not knowing about Life Fibers and was already focusing her attention on something that was apparently far more important, "How long have you known Ichigo? I met him all the way back on Student Evaluation Day. This was even before I met my best friend Ryuko! Ichigo is my first friend and Ryuko is my best friend because she saved me from being dipped like a French fry in a vat of boiling oil, which would have ruined my reputation since I did not have my sexy panties on that day!"

Orihime smiled sadly at Mako's imagination and said, "It's actually rather sad to think about my first time seeing Ichigo. When I was twelve years old my older brother got into a car accident. I carried him to the nearest doctor, Ichigo's dad, but they weren't able to save him before the ambulance came. It wasn't until a few months later I found out that the boy who answered the doorbell and tried to help save my brother was actually Ichigo."

"That's really sad, Orihime," Mako was beginning to comically cry after hearing the story.

"Please don't cry, Mako! That happened a long time ago and I'm quite over it!" Orihime exclaimed in embarrassment. When she saw Mako still was about to cry, she looked around and let out a happy gasp, "Look, Ururu's back!"

Immediately Mako's mood shifted from sad to happy. Whipping her head around so fast that an audible crack should have been heard, Mako saw Ururu walking towards them and gasped in shock, "You're right! Ururu's back with the snacks and it looks like she got one of everything just like we asked!"

Ururu walked through the stands towards her friends while balancing two stacks of food in her hands and apologizing every few seconds whenever she accidentally bumped into someone. When she finally

reached Mako and Orihime, she looked over the side of the food and snacks and her expression immediately hardened upon seeing Nui Harime sitting around looking innocent, "What are you doing here?"

Orihime looked from Ururu to Nui and then finally back to Ururu, "You know her, Ururu?"

"There's no reason to be such a stick in the mud. I'm here for the same reason you are," Nui explained coyly as she ignored Ururu's suspicious gaze. Cutely sticking out her tongue, she saw Ururu's expression hadn't changed and giggled, "I'm here to watch Ichigo fight. He is my cousin and I should be here to support my family. You really should be doing the same thing, you know."

Ururu passed off the food to an expectant Mako without taking her eyes off Nui, "I don't believe you."

"Gosh, that's really mean of you to say, Amu. Are you trying to hurt my feelings?" Nui whined childishly before her attitude perked up. Clapping her hands in front of her body and puffing her cheeks out, she looked away from Ururu towards Mako and said, "I really thought you would understand my motives."

"I didn't know Ichigo had a cousin," Orihime was confused. If Ichigo had a cousin then why hadn't she heard of her before? Ichigo wasn't someone to hide family and Orihime knew for a fact his dad would have told everyone in earshot, "You don't look anything like his dad so are you related to his mom?"

For a moment Nui's face shifted and changed before the saccharine smile appeared once more, "That's an awfully rude thing for you to suggest. There's no way I'm related to someone that common."

Ururu continued to stare at Nui despite knowing the Grand Couturier wasn't going to do anything anytime soon, "What do you want with Ichigo?"

"Gee, it's bothersome to repeat myself," Nui pouted and began idly kicking her legs, "I already told you I'm just here to watch my cousin have some fun! I pinky-swear that I will not lay a finger on Ichigo for the entire day just so you can relax and smile instead of being all gloomy. It's just so depressing to see that frown on your face every time we see each other."

"If you try anything - "

"Hush!" Nui exclaimed joyfully as she appeared in front of Ururu and placed a finger on her lips, "Ichigo's fight is just about to start and I don't want to miss seeing my cousin have lots of fun!"

As Nui giggled and slide back next to Mako, she failed to notice the slightly disturbed expression on Orihime's face. The normally happy and carefree girl had sensed something off about Nui ever since she appeared and her interaction with Ururu, someone Orihime knew to normally be stoic and hard to provoke, made her skin crawl. Rubbing her hands over the goose-bumps forming on her arms, Orihime watched as the images on the screen changed to show Ichigo and Sanageyama.

*" Please be careful, Ichigo."*

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"I've been waiting for this battle for quite some time, Ichigo Kurosaki."

Uzu Sanageyama had his hands tucked into the pockets of his Goku Uniform as he descended the steps opposite that of Ichigo. Stepping gently into the recently rebuilt arena, he turned towards his opponent and gave a satisfied smirk. His Shingantsu was telling him Ichigo's heart rate was calm and steady but that he was cautious and tense at the same time. It seemed Matoi had told Ichigo of her fight against the Athletic Committee Chair and the power of his Blade Regalia

Mark II. That was good. It meant Ichigo knew the power he possessed and yet was truly willing to face a power capable of clashing with a Kamui.

"Is that so," Ichigo responded rhetorically as his hand inched towards Tournesol sheathed on his back.

"Yes," Sanageyama laughed as he pointed at Ichigo, "It was thanks to your advice that I've managed to come to this point."

"I gave you advice?" Ichigo scratched the back of his head as he tried to recall telling Sanageyama anything important. The only time he could have given him some advice was after Ryuko managed to beat him but he couldn't have possibly taken what he said to such a literal extreme.

"It was after my defeat against Ryuko Matoi!" Sanageyama shouted angrily before calming down and composing his features. Scoffing and whipping his head toward the pillar where Ryuko was standing, he continued, "It was thanks to your advice that I learned how to see the world as it truly is. With my eyes sewn shut all my other senses have expanded to the point where nothing can remain hidden from me! So because of how you helped me I'm going to fight you fairly. This match will be no tricks, traps or secrets. We will fight with nothing more than our skills with a blade!"

"Back up just a damn second," Ichigo rubbed the bridge of his nose and he tried to process what Sanageyama was saying. There was no way that Sanageyama was so desperate for a rematch against Ryuko that he would sew his own eyes shut. Who in their right minds would think that was a good idea? Dragging his hand down his face, he said, "When I told you that, I was telling you that your reliance on seeing everything led to your defeat and that you should think about training your other senses to match your eyes. I was suggesting you wear a blindfold or something. Why would you think blinding yourself was a good idea?"

There was a tense silence throughout the stadium as Sanageyama seemed to ponder Ichigo's words. Before he finally answered, Sanageyama glanced up at Satsuki, "Sometimes you need to sacrifice something important to you in order to gain something of far greater value. I am quite aware that I could have done other things besides sew my eyes shut but my loss to Matoi was not the only thing I lost that day. I also lost my honor as one of Lady Satsuki's Elite four. By sewing my eyes shut and casting away Tengantsu for Shingantsu, I've proved to her my undying loyalty."

Sanageyama's mood shifted as he grinned manically and threw his arms out, "Did we come here to talk or fight Ichigo? Prepare yourself! Three-Star Goku Uniform: Blade Regalia Mark II!"

In a bright flash of light the large and imposing form of Sanageyama's upgraded Blade Regalia crashed onto the stage in front of Ichigo. The Blade Regalia looked different than the last time Ichigo saw it. While it wasn't nearly as bulky as its original form Ichigo could sense its power was greater. Staring up at the armored green form looming over him, Ichigo reached for the spaulder on his left shoulder, "Get ready, Mugetsu. This fight isn't going to be easy."

**"His aura is strong but nothing we cannot handle,"** Mugetsu commented dryly. She didn't know why Ichigo was worried. There was no chance that Sanageyama would be nearly as difficult as Nui Harime. Telepathically sighing and rolling her eyes, she added, **"The problem is going to be his Shingantsu. If he can truly detect everything around him, he will be able to detect and predict our attacks long before we can hit him. You have any ideas?"**

Ichigo gave his Kamui a confident smile as he slammed his hand down on the spaulder, "If Sanageyama can truly see everything, then we'll just have to attack faster than he can react. Let's do this! Life Fiber Initial Release: Kamui Mugetsu!"

A gust of wind blew ominously through the stadium built in Honnouji Academy to accommodate the final battles of the Naturals Election. As Ichigo, clad in Mugetsu, stared up at the much larger



Sanageyama and his Blade Regalia, he readjusted his grip on Tournesol and slid his left foot back. Gently concentrating on pushing power to the Life Fibers in Mugetsu's legs, Ichigo stepped to the side and abruptly vanished from sight.

"Oh?" Satsuki's mouth quirked upward in silent satisfaction. She was intrigued that Ichigo was using the same high speed technique that failed against Junketsu against Sanageyama's Blade Regalia although as she watched afterimages of Ichigo form around the arena she could not feel envious that Junketsu was incapable of such feats. Was it still true that she alone possessed a true Kamui or was the opposite now true? Both Ichigo and Matoi's Kamui have shown the ability to change into configurations beyond the initial transformation and yet Junketsu has shown no inclination of doing so.

*" They converse with their Kamui on a daily basis but Junketsu remains eternally silent to my ears,"* Satsuki's hands tightened against the hilt of Bakuzan as her failure to elicit even the most basic of communication from her Kamui was thrown back in her face. How was she supposed to face what was to come if she had to fight Junketsu for control every time she wore it? Both Ichigo and Matoi were beginning to surpass her and she was unable to keep up.

"This must be the high speed technique you used against Lady Satsuki. It's impressive," Sanageyama complimented as various afterimages of Ichigo appeared around him. He had witnessed Matoi use a similar technique but it was not nearly as fast or perfected as Ichigo's. Even his Shingantsu was having trouble pinpointing Ichigo's location as every time he would turn to where Ichigo would be the orange haired teen would adjust his speed and throw off his game, "But it's not enough!"

Spinning around faster than his Blade Regalia suggested he could move, Sanageyama struck out with his massive shinai and managed to parry Ichigo's Tournesol before it could hit his back much to the former substitute shinigami's surprise. As Sanageyama adjusted his grip on his shinai to release a counterattack, Ichigo modified his

speed in mid-step and calmly spun around the wooden weapon before vanishing.

" *Damn,*" Ichigo cursed as he was almost hit by Sanageyama, *"His Shingantsu really is something special. That was the speed I used to hit Satsuki with but Sanageyama was able to evade and counter without any problems. I should push Mugetsu a little more but I need to test out something before I do."*

Sprinting around Sanageyama until he was once again behind him, Ichigo shifted his weight onto his front foot to slow down before blasting off towards his opponent with Tournesol raised above his head. Just as he was within inches of landing a solid blow on Sanageyama's Blade Regalia, his opponent twisted his body to the side, leaving a small series of illusionary afterimages behind him, before slamming his shinai into Ichigo.

" ***Ichigo!***" Mugetsu shouted in concern as her wearer tumbled along the stage before coming to a stop.

"Nothing's broken, Mugetsu," Ichigo answered bluntly and without a hint of pain as he stood back up, much to Sanageyama's surprise. The Athletic Committee Chair had gotten a solid hit on Ichigo's torso and yet Ichigo didn't seem any worse for wear. Rubbing his side and letting out a small grunt as he felt a tender spot, Ichigo turned back to Sanageyama and told Mugetsu, "I was just testing something out."

"Huh?" Sanageyama could not hear Mugetsu but he inferred from Ichigo speaking that he must be talking to his Kamui, "What are you talking about?"

Ichigo looked at Sanageyama but did not say anything as he once against drifted to the side before abruptly vanishing. However unlike the previous time Ichigo's speed was being pushed to the limit. "Do you like it?" Ichigo's voice echoed from several different places at once. With several of his images speaking in conjunction, he said, "It took some time but I finally managed to figure out the limits of your Shingantsu. Even if you can hear, feel or sense everything around

you there is still one thing holding you back - your reaction time. Even if your Shingantsu can detect me, if you can't react in time then you can't stop me!"

To prove his point Ichigo turned in mid-step, causing a small crater to form in the ground from the force, and left a large gash along the side of Sanageyama's Blade Regalia before quickly resuming his movement. Forced to step backwards from the power of Ichigo's strike, the sound of creaking metal and steel reverberating through the area in the process, Sanageyama forced one foot down and gripped the giant shinai in his hand as tightly as he could.

*"Ichigo is right," Sanageyama admitted as he felt another gash appear on his left arm before he could react, "His speed is greater than when he fought Lady Satsuki, which means Iori and Inumuta's battle data is useless. I thought my Shingantsu would be perfect for dealing with Ichigo but he takes one look at me and breaks down my technique in seconds. Ignoring his speed for the moment, what I can sense tells me that nothing is being wasted. His movements are more fluid and precise than Mato's and barely any energy is wasted on superfluous actions. It is almost like I'm fighting Lady Satsuki."*

It was not until Sanageyama felt Ichigo cleave through part of his faceplate, leaving a large gash and causing part of the covering to fall loudly to the floor, that he decided enough was enough. Sanageyama struck the ground with both of his feet to increase his footing and slammed both of his armored gauntlets together in front of his Blade Regalia. As his hands disappeared and were replaced by a large shinai nearly three times the size of the one he had just been using, Sanageyama roared, "I expected nothing else from the man who has gained the favor of Lady Satsuki but this is where it ends, Ichigo Kurosaki. I might respect you as a fellow swordsman but I must defeat you for Lady Satsuki's sake! You've shown me your power so let me return the favor and demonstrate the resolve of a man who is willing to sacrifice!"

*"What's he doing?"*

Ichigo stopped running and jumped away from Sanageyama until he felt he was at a safe distance. As he witnessed the Blade Regalia's hands vanish only to be replaced by a much more massive shinai, he tightened his grip on Tournesol and tensed his muscles, *"That cannot be good. Ryuko almost lost to this guy and she never mentioned anything about this attack so he must have not used it against her."*

***"His power is growing, Ichigo,"*** Mugetsu muttered in a tone filled with suspicion and dread. While the power coiling up inside Sanageyama's Goku Uniform was nowhere near the level of power she had felt behind every one of Nui Harime's strikes, it was still something they shouldn't ignore, ***"Be on your guard. I'm willing to bet my stitching that Sanageyama is preparing to unleash everything he has to finish the fight. Blocking it is out of the question. The energy I feel is similar in nature to Senketsu's Niban Genkai and thus highly dangerous."***

"You don't need to tell me to be careful, Mugetsu," Ichigo answered without diverting his attention from Sanageyama. "I would need to be an idiot to think I couldn't be hurt just because you're a Kamui. If anything, I need to be careful not to get cocky. Get ready. Here it comes."

"Embrace the power that I sacrificed my eyesight for, Ichigo Kurosaki!" Sanageyama raised his massive shinai over his head as his Blade Regalia pushed itself into overdrive. In a massive and onetime burst of speed that could not be replicated without overheating his Goku Uniform, Sanageyama dashed across the arena and swung his shinai towards the surprised Ichigo, "Take this! Hissatsu: Isshin Zenzanken!"

Events seemed to move in slow motion to Ichigo as he watched Sanageyama swing his shinai downwards. Even with the burst of speed he used it was not enough to fully close the distance between them, which meant there was a good three meters between the spot where the shinai would hit the ground and where Ichigo was standing. Quickly realizing that there was no way he could dodge to

the side or parry the strike, Ichigo did the only thing he could possibly do and threw his body backwards into the air directly away from Sanageyama just as the shinai impacted the ground and everything exploded in a blaze of green and white.

Ryuko was forced to cover her eyes as the massive explosion blanketed the arena in a cacophony of light and sound. Once the light died down enough for her to look, she glanced fervently over the arena for any sign of Ichigo and shouted, "Ichigo!"

"Don't tell me that's all it took," Nonon sarcastically quipped as she crossed her arms and pouted childishly. She wanted to be the one to kick Strawberry's ass, damn it! Pointing her baton down at the arena, she growled, "How dare you take my victory away from me, Wild Monkey! I was supposed to be the one to kick that stupid Strawberry's ass, not you!"

"Watch your tongue, Jakuzure," Gamagori growled menacingly to his fellow member of the Elite Four. His personal beliefs about Ichigo Kurosaki aside, he was still Lady Satsuki's Vice President and thus was deserving of a respectful tone and manner. As the Disciplinary Committee Chair, it was his duty to uphold the rules and regulations of Honnouji Academy even if he did not personally agree with them. Rules were derived for a reason and without them everything would devolve into anarchy as he witnessed during the Naturals Election, "This fight is not yet over."

"Huh? What are you smoking?" Nonon tilted her head towards Gamagori in disbelief before scoffing, "There's no way Strawberry could have survived an attack like that. Even if he does have a stupid Kamui he should still be on the ground unconscious and in a lot of pain."

"Gamagori's words hold the truth, Jakuzure," Satsuki's voice cut through their argument with ease, causing both members of the Elite Four to turn upwards, "Sanageyama's Hissatsu: Isshin Zenzanken is indeed a powerful move but it requires connecting directly with his

opponent to achieve maximum effectiveness. Watch and take note of what happened."

There was a shifting in the air before Ichigo emerged from the top of the massive explosion clad in Mugetsu Gufū. After flying nearly fifty feet into the air he turned around and landed roughly on the edge of the arena furthest away from Sanageyama. Collapsing down to one knee as Mugetsu reverted to her base transformation accompanied by a sparkling of blue stars, Ichigo stabbed Tournesol into the ground as he gulped in much needed air.

"Damn it, that hurt like hell," he sputtered as several trails of blood leaked down his face. While Mugetsu's form was covered in scorch marks and burns from the explosion, his split decision to jump into the air and activate Gufū saved the both of them from getting any serious injuries. By throwing himself away from the blast, Ichigo limited the impact of the heat and shockwave on his body, allowing him to escape with relative minor injuries. Pushing his body back onto its feet and pulling Tournesol out of the ground, Ichigo wiped some of the blood that was getting into his eyes onto the back of his arm, "I don't want to get hit by something like that again. Are you alright, Mugetsu?"

***" I feel like I was just run through a dryer but I'll be fine,"***

Mugetsu sarcastically answered as she regained her bearings. That explosion had taken a toll on her coordination and the world seemed to still be spinning, ***"The better question is how you're doing, Ichigo. As a Kamui my pain threshold is naturally greater than a human's."***

"I'll be fine," Ichigo answered gruffly as he rubbed a kink in his neck. Already he could feel the pain in his body beginning to abate, which continued to strike him as odd. Even when he was a shinigami, something like Sanageyama's attack should have hurt him for a while. There was no logical reason why he was feeling better so quickly except if Mugetsu was healing his body without realizing it. Placing Tournesol on his shoulder, Ichigo's brow creased as he thought for a moment before asking, "I hate to admit it but I don't

think my speed is going to be enough to defeat Sanageyama. Every time I hit him I could tell his reactions were getting quicker and more accurate. His Shingantsu really is something if he's able to keep up with us. You got a battle form up your sleeves like Senketsu's Senkou I can use?"

**" Unfortunately it's not that simple,"** Mugetsu explained with venom in her voice. She did not like being reminded of the fact Senketsu was able to unlock a battle configuration before she could. She and Ichigo were the ones to fight Satsuki Kiryuin and survive against the monster that was Nui Harime. It was wrong on so many levels that they still didn't have the equivalent of Senkou. Shivering in suppressed anger, Mugetsu turned her eyes to Ichigo and growled, **"While I don't like that Senketsu managed to have a battle configuration before me, it's not as simple as just wishing it into existence."**

Ichigo began to see Sanageyama's massive form appear from gaps in the smoke and dust, "What's the problem?"

**" An advanced configuration requires a specific stimulus,"** Mugetsu explained, **"You are able to use Gufū because during our fight against Jakuzure you needed to be able to fight her in the air. My Life Fibers responded to your mental request and adjusted themselves and evolved to counter the problem. Senketsu's Senkou is no different. Ryuko needed to be able to hit Sanageyama through his Tengantsu and thus Senketsu responded to her mental desires. If you truly are in need for a battle configuration all you need to do is imprint your mental desires and wishes upon my Life Fibers. I will do my best to consciously open my Life Fibers to your request to speed up the process, but you need to mentally dominate and force your ideas onto them for the configuration to be created. Are you ready?"**

"Sorry Mugetsu, but that just doesn't work for me."

Ichigo held Tournesol in front of his body and took a deep breath as memories of his time as a shinigami filtered through his mind. He remembered the night that started it all and how he gladly been willing to risk his very life to save his family from a hollow. He recalled storming through both the Soul Society and Hueco Mundo to save his friends despite people telling him it was suicidal. Closing his eyes, his body enveloped in a blue aura with the same coloring as the blade in his hands, Ichigo thought back to his final clash against Aizen, the man who wanted to be a god, and how he sacrificed his powers to stop the mad man. As the aura continued to intensify around him, Ichigo recalled the words Zangetsu said to him during his battle against Kenpachi.

*" Can you hear his blade mourning, Ichigo? He has never listened to that voice. If a shinigami and their zanpakuto do not trust each other and work together, then their strength will be diminished. For someone who believes in his own strength, it is impossible for him to understand such a fundamental concept."*

"Forcing my ideas and beliefs on anyone just doesn't sit well with me," Ichigo announced as Mugetsu's power continued to shift and contort. As his orange hair began shining with a bright blue light similar in color to Tournesol, he said, "If you say that's the only way for me to get stronger then forget about it. You're my friend, Mugetsu, and I would never force you to do anything even if you wanted me to. You can yell at me for being stupid or idiotic but I'm just that kind of person. If you are still able to create the new form, then I want it to be one where I can use your power to protect my friends from those that would hurt them. I don't need to be any stronger than that!"

" **Ichigo...** " Mugetsu was shocked at Ichigo's response and her eyes began tearing up as a wave of emotion hit her. Quickly clamping down on the feeling before she began blubbering and crying like Senketsu was so often doing, Mugetsu's eyes widened as a burst of power shot through her Life Fibers, **"Very well then! You can leave**



***this to me, Ichigo! I know what I must do so call out the name of the configuration and I shall forever refer to it as such!"***

"Thanks, Mugetsu," Ichigo grinned and turned towards the awaiting Sanageyama, "Sorry for the wait but I'm going to have to end this fight now. Mugetsu Zangetsu"

In a burst of blue energy and light Mugetsu's form around Ichigo shifted and changed. The white armor covering his arms and legs body from his neck down thinned out and looked to be more streamlined while the shoulderpads Mugetsu's eyes rested upon now jutted upwards and greatly resembled Junketsu's. As his hands clenched tightly around Tournesol, wisps of blue-colored steam rising randomly off the hardened Life Fiber blade, Ichigo felt Mugetsu's energy and Life Fibers connect with the Life Fibers in Tournesol. While the blade did not change its overall appearance, it was now faintly glowing with the same coloring as Mugetsu's power.

"This is the thrill I've been waiting for, Ichigo Kurosaki!" Sanageyama shouted as he beheld Mugetsu's new form, "I would not want to defeat you unless you are at your very best!"

He couldn't believe that Ichigo was not only conscious but able to fight after getting hit by his Hissatsu: Isshin Zenzanken. All of Iori and Inumuta's tests suggested that the power output of the strike would be more than enough to incapacitate a Kamui wearer of Matoi's level with a direct hit. Swinging his shinai to disperse the remaining dust and smoke, he stabbed the weapon through the air at Ichigo, "You were smart enough to avoid getting directly hit by my Hissatsu: Isshin Zenzanken, but I'm glad I missed! It was only because I missed that I'm now able to witness your new form! Zangetsu, was it? Well then! Show me the power of your Zangetsu! Hold nothing back because I sure as hell won't!"

Ichigo shifted his feet and smirked at his opponent, "Heh, I didn't expect you to, Sanageyama."

Out of the entire Elite Four, Sanageyama was the only one that Ichigo had mutual respect for. Gamagori was a stickler for rules that disliked Ichigo because he was under the notion Ichigo needed more time and maturity to be Satsuki's Vice President, Inumuta disliked him because Ichigo threatened to break his laptop and Jakuzure loathed him for too many reasons for Ichigo to list.

"I'm going to be honest with you," Ichigo said as he tensed his legs while Sanageyama did the same, "I just figured out how to use Zangetsu so I really don't know how powerful Mugetsu is going to be. I don't want to accidentally kill you or anything."

"Do not think I am unwary of your power, Ichigo Kurosaki!" Sanageyama smashed his gauntlets together once more. Raising the powerful shinai over his head, he continued, "To not be cautious would end in my defeat! That is why I am going to end this with every last bit of power my Blade Regalia possesses! I do not care if it leads to the destruction of my Goku Uniform! Defeating you would more than make up for such a loss! Let's end this, Ichigo! Hissatsu: Isshin Zenzan - "

Sanageyama's words were chocked off as Ichigo vanished from both the sight of those observing the fight as well as his Shingantsu before abruptly reappearing inside his Blade Regalia's guard. While Mugetsu's Zangetsu configuration was her battle form, his Kamui's specialty would always be speed. Each Kamui had one specific trait or ability that they excelled in more than any other Kamui. Senketsu had the greatest overall raw strength, Junketsu had the highest endurance, Danketsu had the greatest defense and Mugetsu had the highest speed. These traits would always influence the battle form of the Kamui once they were unlocked and acquired while helping to make up for the deficiencies in their base form.

Senketsu's Senkou configuration helped to increase Ryuko's speed, which was the slowest of the three Kamui at Honnouji Aacademy, while augmenting her natural strength with a blade of invisible energy. Mugetsu's Zangetsu was no different. In his Zangetsu mode, Ichigo's strength, defense and overall endurance did not increase or

decrease in the slightest. While he was already naturally tenacious and strong, what changed was that his speed, which was already the fastest, boosted up to the level that shattered Sanageyama's Shingantsu wide open.

"Sorry about this," Ichigo apologized as he reversed his grip on Tournesol as the Life Fiber blade was covered in a turbulent sheath of blue energy, "but it's time to finish this! Getsuga Tenshou!"

Everyone, from the students in the stadium to Ryuko, Satsuki and the remaining members of the Elite Four, watched as the energy around Ichigo's Tournesol detonated in a massive explosion of blue energy reminiscent of a nuclear explosion's mushroom cloud. As the shockwave of the attack reached the stands, blowing dozens of students out of their seats, the smile on Nui Harime's face continued to widen with absolute glee.

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## **Kamui Tales #16 - Do Not Pass Go**

Satsuki stood in front of the modest house with a mixture of confusion and suspicion on her face. She did not expect to come to Karakura Town so soon after adjusting her plans for the School Raids Trip, but with Honnouji Academy on a three day break for Culture Day with many of the students going home for the extended weekend, she had ample time to scout out the town. Perhaps she should have ordered Inumuta to collect more data on any traps because as soon as she entered the boundaries of Karakura Town a shock raced through her body and she found not only Junketsu but every single Goku Uniform had been rendered powerless by some immense force.

While her Elite Four were worried about the ramifications of not having their Goku Uniforms working, Satsuki assuaged their fears by reminding them that they were not here for battle. This was simply a

scouting mission to test and collect data on any measures Karakura Town might have in advance of the School Raids Trip. Knowing the city had an Anti-Life Fiber barrier was immensely valuable.

"Gamagori, if you will."

"Yes, Lady Satsuki," Gamagori strutted forward towards the door in front of the house. Swallowing nervously as he anticipated what lay behind the threshold, he raised his hand and rang the doorbell of the Kurosaki household.

"Go answer the door, Ichigo," A female voice unfamiliar to Gamagori shouted from inside the house.

"I'm not going to answer it. It's my freaking turn!" Ichigo's voice answered back, "If you're so interested, then why don't you go answer it, Tatsuki?"

"Because it's not my damn house," the newly-named Tatsuki countered loudly. As Gamagori, along with Satsuki, Inumuta and Jakuzure, listened they heard a loud crash before Tatsuki added, "I'm just about to kick your ass so like hell am I going to get up and answer the door!"

"If I may make a suggestion to end this foolish argument about who's going to answer Ichigo's door," A voice Satsuki recognized as Uryu Ishida spoke up, cutting Ichigo off before he could argue back, "Why not just let Chad see who is at the door? He just finished his turn and thus is the one who needs to wait the longest before going again."

"... fine," A deep voice conceded before a series of footsteps approached the door. Stepping back as the door opened, Gamagori was greeted with the stoic visage of Sado Yasutora, better known as Chad to his friends. Staring at the nearly equal in height Disciplinary Committee Chair from behind messy brown hair, Chad asked, "Can I help you?"

"I'm afraid not," Gamagori folded his arms behind his back and swept his arm around towards the waiting Satsuki, "Lady Satsuki wishes to speak to Ichigo Kurosaki and thus he is the one she will talk with. Please retrieve him for us."

There was a loud shout of dismay from the room, which caused Chad to turn and look at what was happening. After a few seconds he turned back to the waiting Gamagori, "I'm sorry, but Ichigo is a little busy at the moment."

"What the hell is Strawberry doing that's so damn important?" Nonon growled in annoyance while stamping her foot impatiently on the ground, "We came all the way out here to see his stupid face so he better have a damn good reason for ignoring Lady Satsuki!"

"You want to know what Ichigo is doing?" Chad slowly and patiently asked, causing Nonon to grit her teeth in anger. After a moment of looking at the four people outside Ichigo's house, he answered, "... he's playing Monopoly and I think he just landed on Boardwalk."

"Ha!" Satsuki slammed her hand against the table, "You landed on Boardwalk! Pay up Ichigo!"

"Oh, damn it," Ichigo muttered, "Fine, take my money. I'm going to see what's taking Chad so long."

Ichigo appeared at the door a moment later and a scowl immediately formed on his face as he saw who was out there, "What are you guys doing here and how the hell did you know where I lived?"

"As the Vice President of the Student Council your address is required in case an emergency appears at Honnouji Academy," Gamagori explained quickly before stepping to the side, "But that is not important compared to the matter at hand. Lady Satsuki would like to speak with you in private."

"If Satsuki has anything to say, she can say it in front of Chad," Ichigo argued and pointed to the stoic teen, "I trust him with my life."

Something about the way Ichigo said that startled Gamagori, but Satsuki began speaking before he could ask what Ichigo meant, "Good afternoon, Ichigo. Since Honnouji Academy is closed due to Culture Day, I've decided to visit Karakura Town."

Ichigo looked past Satsuki at Inumuta, who was typing on his PDA, and Jakuzure, who seemed to really not want to be here, before asking, "Really? And did you have to bring your entire entourage with you?"

"Wherever Lady Satsuki goes, we go!" Gamagori declared.

"Calm down, Gamagori," Satsuki raised her hand and Gamagori immediately deflated and stepped back, but he was not oblivious to how Chad took a few steps forward. Once she was certain Gamagori would not act on his own, Satsuki continued, "I want you to give me a tour of the city. As a resident of Karakura Town you know most of the landmarks, locations and points of interest."

"I'm actually quite busy today," Ichigo was a little annoyed how Satsuki managed to find him. He came home during the holiday just so he could get away from her for a few days and yet she still managed to track him down! Sighing loudly and rubbing the back of his neck, he knew she would not take no for an answer and he did not feel like fighting her on his doorstep, "But if you think I'm going to give you a tour, you can - "

"You cheating son of a bitch!"

Ichigo was cut off as Uryu was thrown through the front window of his house before the quincy slid painfully across the road. As he stared in shock at the damage to the window, a foot appeared in the broken frame and a second later a royally pissed off Tatsuki Arisawa jumped outside. Without even giving a cursory glance to the four complete strangers in front of Ichigo's house, she grabbed Uryu's arm and began painfully twisting it behind his back, "Did you think I wouldn't notice you stealing from the bank? Just because you're the

heir of the Ishida Conglomerate does not mean I'm going to go soft on you!"

"It wasn't cheating," Uryu answered as he managed to throw Tatsuki off his body. Standing up and wiping dust off his clothes, Uryu waved to Satsuki before turning back to a still angry Tatsuki, "It was merely sound investment, but that's not something I would expect someone like you to understand. Besides, it appears something rather important has come up."

"What are you talking about?" Tatsuki turned and followed Uryu's gaze towards Satsuki, "Oh. It's her, but who the hell are the other three and does that girl seriously have pink hair?"

"What was that, you commoner?" Nonon shouted indignantly at Tatsuki.

"They are the Student Council of Honnouji Academy," Uryu answered tiredly as he held Tatsuki back from physically kicking the crap out of Jakuzure, "Satsuki Kiryuin is the Student Council President."

"Oh," Tatsuki calmed down before she shrugged and walked back towards Ichigo's house. As she stepped onto the destroyed window, she turned to Chad and said, "When you're done talking with them or whatever out here, it's your turn."

"Ok," Chad began to follow Tatsuki, but through the front door, and turned back to Ichigo before leaving, "... call if you need any help on the tour."

"Wait, you think I'm going to actually do it?" Ichigo asked.

"But of course," Uryu smirked as he patted Ichigo on the back, "You are the leader of our group and as the leader it is your solemn duty to take control of the situation."

Ichigo glared at Uryu's retreating back before turning to Satsuki, "So, you want to get this tour started or what?"

"Yes," Satsuki closed her eyes in order to get a grip on the questions and emotions raging through her body. She did not know how to react to the knowledge that Ichigo's friends were similar in both personality and temperament to her own Elite Four. As much as she wanted to interrogate Ichigo as to the exact relationship he had with his friends, she had come to Karakura Town for a reason. Turning her body to the side and allowing Ichigo to walk ahead of her, she said, "Since you are familiar with the layout of Karakura Town I'll let you take the lead."

As Ichigo grumbled and began walking down the street with Satsuki and her irate Elite Four, or rather three, following him, Satsuki's joyful shout could be heard down the block, "That's one more victim on Park Place! Time to pay up, you four-eyed bastard!"



# God Save the Queen

*So here is Chapter 29 and I must say things are beginning to reach a crescendo. I would like to mention that there is a potential time error. In the original anime, the first fight against Gamagori took place at 1:00 PM sharp while Ryuko was ready at 8:55 AM. Since Inumuta went first (and he doesn't care about such things as a schedule), the entire fight sequence has been moved to the morning. Several things have been changed, all of which are good or bad for the various protagonists and antagonists. This chapter also starts off with another Isshin flashback so enjoy and don't forget to read and review!*

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## Chapter 29 - God Save the Queen

*Twenty Years Ago*

*Consciousness returned slowly to Ragyo Kiryuin. As her eyes slowly opened and her pupils adjusted to the lighting in her bedroom, Ragyo thought back on everything that happened prior to her regaining consciousness. Out of all the events of the night the only things that she remembered with distinct clarity were a soothing voice drawing her to the Original Life Fiber that promised the world and wanted nothing in exchange and Isshin Shiba at her side. When she tried to recall what may have happened in the intervening time or why Isshin was at her home, Ragyo found her mind drawing a blank.*

*"What happened last night?" she wondered with a lack of emotions in her temporarily weak voice. Ragyo knew she should be more worried about her lack of memories but some small part of her mind was telling her that it wasn't prudent to press the issue for the time*

*being. That same voice, in the soothing tone Ragyo had herself used years ago when Revocs was just starting out as a major player, was saying that she shouldn't be so worried since she was alive and uninjured.*

*" Thank the stars you're awake, Milady," Soroi Mitsuzou breathed a loud sigh of relief as he quickly entered Ragyo's bedroom. He had been in and out of the bedroom several dozen times in the hours between Isshin storming out of the basement with Ragyo in his arms and Ragyo waking up in her bed. As he walked past the large windows where the first traces of dawn were already beginning to break over the eastern horizon, Soroi put the phone back down onto its receiver. He had mentally vowed that he would respect Master Isshin's wishes to not call the hospital unless Lady Ragyo did not wake up for eight hours.*

*" Is that you, Soroi?" Ragyo turned her eyes towards her servant before focusing her attention once more on the ceiling. Thoughts were beginning to swirl inside her head and she was starting to have difficulty differentiating what was real and in front of her from the things she was seeing in her mind.*

*" If you were expecting Miss Hououmaru, I'm afraid you are going to have to wait until the afternoon," Soroi explained in his characteristically calm tone of voice. As he began pouring a cup of tea, bitter like Ragyo preferred, he noticed Ragyo's attention had drifted away from him and towards the sun rising over the horizon. Picking up the tray and walking over to Ragyo's bedside, Soroi continued speaking as he prepared everything, "Miss Hououmaru was so worried about you that she drove all the way to Karakura Town and informed Master Isshin. I dare say from the way his car was parked half on the front lawn, the news must have been quite dire."*

*" Isshin is here?"*

*Ragyo's mind was beginning to pull itself together and things were starting to become a lot clearer than they ever have before. She now*

*remembered Isshin accompanying her down to the lowest level of the basement housing the Original Life Fiber and trying to tell her something. Ragyo's eyes narrowed imperceptibly as she tried to remember what Isshin might have said but it was just no use. As much as she knew she should be at least a little worried about what may have happened to her, Ragyo felt absolutely no sense of worry or nervousness. In fact, she felt nothing but a sense of serenity and calmness that would have caused her to pause and take notice any other day.*

*" Last I checked Master Isshin is pacing back and forth in the front foyer. He will be happy to hear that you've recovered from your ordeal," Soroi explained to his mistress as he handed Ragyo her tea.*

*The beginning of a smile adorned her face upon hearing of Isshin's worry for her. As Ragyo sat up to take the cup of tea, a bright rainbow light immediately filled the room. The light permeating every shadowy corner of the room was so intense that Soroi involuntarily let go of the tray in order to cover his eyes lest he go blind. Even as the sterling silver tray clattered noisily to the ground, hot tea soaking into the sheets near her body from Soroi dropping the tray, Ragyo seemed strangely unconcerned about the accident. Instead, as her eyes stared at the rainbow light emanating from somewhere behind her with admiration, she pulled the blankets and sheets off her body and stood up.*

*" Please forgive me, Milady," Soroi apologized profusely as he tried to look up at Ragyo but was constantly forced to avert his gaze.*

*" There is nothing for you to be sorry for, Soroi," Ragyo calmly stated as she walked completely naked across her room until she was standing in front of a full length mirror. For a long time Ragyo stared at her reflection, her mind examining and investigating every aspect of her new body. Her once beautiful and silky black hair that Isshin joked must take her hours every morning to get just right, now shone with a lustrous silver color but it was the rainbow undertone that her once sapphire blue, now maroon, eyes focused intently on. Curling a finger inside the locks and watching the rainbow coloring shifting and*

*morphing around as she did so, Ragyo let her arm drop down to her side.*

*" Where is Isshin, Soroi?"*

*Ragyo hadn't meant it, in fact she couldn't understand why she did it, but her tone towards Soroi had been cold and demanding, which was completely unlike how she usually was. Immediately regretting it upon seeing her friend and servant flinch away, she ignored the voice telling her not to worry about what other people thought of her and asked, "I'm sorry Soroi. I must still be exhausted after what happened. You said that Isshin was in the foyer. Do you think he is still down there? I would like to find out what happened to me and it seems like he's the only one that knows."*

*" Yes. The entire time that you have been resting Master Isshin has not left the confines of the foyer apart from checking up on you approximately every hour," Soroi explained with a slight nod. For just a second, when Ragyo asked him where Isshin was, Soroi was convinced that someone else was talking. The sheer coldness and callousness in Ragyo's voice was like nothing he'd ever heard from her.*

*" I see..." Ragyo's eyes dropped down away from the mirror towards her hands.*

*There was something different about her body despite its nearly identical appearance to how it used to look. As she clenched her fist, careful not to hurt herself, Ragyo felt power course through her limb. She could not explain how she knew, but some small part of her mind was whispering to her that the Original Life Fiber had imparted into her a small piece of itself. Unclear as to what that meant, Ragyo made a mental effort to turn her gaze away from the mirror in order to get dressed. As she slipped the simple robe over her nude form Ragyo experienced a moment of clarity, the first one since she regained consciousness. She needed to speak to Isshin as soon as possible and for some odd reason the voice in her head was in complete agreement with her.*

*As her delicate hand clasped the door to her bedroom, Ragyo paused in mid-step, "Soroi, let Rei know that if the trip back to the manor is too taxing at the moment, she can spend the night at Isshin's house. I'm sure Masaki would be more than willing to let her stay for the night."*

*" I'll do so right away. I'm sure Miss Hououmaru will be most pleased to hear the news of your hasty recovery."*

*As Ragyo left her bedroom, and Soroi, behind to search for Isshin, she could not explain the feeling of anger welling up in her chest after mentioning Masaki. She had no qualms with the woman. They were friends after all and while she would always be upset that she lost Isshin to Masaki, Ragyo was not angry about it in the slightest. So why did the thought of harming Masaki for daring to touch Isshin pass briefly through her mind?*

*While Ragyo was coming to terms with what happened to her, a worried Isshin Shiba was pacing in the front foyer of the Kiryuin Manor. He did not know how long he had been walking back and forth but his feet were beginning to leave wear marks in the ornate rug and Ragyo was sure to be upset about that. Letting out a loud sigh, a sign of the annoyance he felt at the situation he was currently in, Isshin looked at his cell phone held gingerly in his palm before clenching his hand around it. He and Masaki had agreed to buy one of the expensive devices, which Kisuke offered to pay entirely for, so that if an emergency came up he could call Masaki and tell her what has happened. Given the connection between his gigai and the hollow inside Masaki's soul, it seemed like a rather sound idea at the time.*

*" What should I do?" Isshin muttered to himself as he ran a hand through his new silver hair for what seemed like the hundredth time.*

*Isshin had no idea how or why it happened. After he regained consciousness from whatever the big ball of yarn downstairs did to him, Isshin carried Ragyo upstairs as quickly as he could. That should have been the first sign something was wrong. Even though*

he was in a special gigai with enhanced strength and endurance, running up the enormous flight of steps with Ragyo on his back should have left him winded at best, but when he escaped from the basement he wasn't tired at all. He would have chalked it up to the adrenaline coursing through his body but when Soroi brought out a mirror to show him his new appearance, Isshin's skin nearly went as white as his new hair.

The black hair that Masaki always said was too oily and needed a good scrubbing was now completely silver like Toshiro's. When Isshin saw what his hair became, he fell to his knees and pounded the floor in despair, completely unaware that he was causing the wood to crack and buckle. Isshin knew that if Toshiro, or even Ryuken, saw his newly silver hair they would either laugh at him or welcome him to their little club.

" That's not the worst part," Isshin mumbled as he looked into a mirror and stared at the rainbow light shining out. Grabbing one of the glowing locks, he pressed his face against the polished surface and groaned, "I look like a freaking Christmas tree! I don't know what the hell the Original Life Fiber did to my hair, but why on Earth would it think making my hair glow in the dark like a rainbow was a good idea? I need to tell Kisuke what happened but how?"

When he had been dragged into the Original Life Fiber alongside Ragyo, visions of what that thing intended to do to humanity and the planet were seared into Isshin's memory. He could not allow any of what he saw to happen. Isshin needed to tell someone like Kisuke what he saw so that some sort of countermeasure could be created. The Original Life Fiber needed to be destroyed at all costs or, if that was impossible based on what he saw, sealed away for all eternity. The only problem with Isshin's fool-proof plan was that he literally could not tell anyone of what the Original Life Fiber had planned.

At first he tried to call Kisuke up to tell the former captain what happened to him but as soon as he grabbed his phone to dial Kisuke's number, something within Isshin's mind blanked out and he completely forgot Kisuke's number. Worried slightly at that point, he

*remembered that he had Kisuke's number in his list of contacts but just as he selected the number and pressed to call, Isshin found his hand completely unresponsive. It was only after he tried to write down what happened down in the basement and what he saw that Isshin realized that the Original Life Fiber was insidiously clever. It put some sort of failsafe into his body that prevented him from doing anything against it. Isshin realized that as soon as he picked up a pen and immediately forgot how to read or write. It was only when he dropped the pen on the floor that he remembered he was literate.*

*" Ok, let's think this through," Isshin collapsed onto a couch and placed his cellphone on the table in front of him. He needed to think things over and he didn't need the Original Life Fiber to get involved. Remembering a trick Kisuke taught him about how he once bought Yoruichi a birthday present without the sneaky captain catching on, Isshin said out loud, "Apparently I cannot mention or communicate anything about a... certain activity... to anyone else. I'm going to need to be extremely clever about this if I'm going to get anything done."*

*Frowning when a lock of silver hair fell in front of his eyes, Isshin was just about to blow it out of his face when the room he was in was illuminated by a rainbow light that was, for once, not coming from his own hair. Realizing that Ragyo must have awakened, he turned around and quickly blushed when he saw her in nothing but a thin silk robe that hugged her body way too much.*

*" Hello Isshin."*

*Ragyo ignored Isshin's embarrassed sputtering as she walked past the man and sat down next to him. After a couple of seconds of awkward silence, she turned to him and asked, "Do you remember what happened to us?"*

*Isshin blinked and scratched his chin, "You mean before or after we were eaten by the living ball of thread downstairs?"*

*" Its name is the Original Life Fiber! You will address it by its proper name!" Ragyo snapped fanatically before immediately calming down. Staring at her trembling hands, when she spoke again her voice came out in a whisper, "I'm sorry for that Isshin. I'm just confused by what's happened to us. Our hair and eyes have both changed color but it was the things I remember dreaming about that envelop the entirety of my attention."*

*" So you saw the visions as well?" Isshin asked carefully. He did not why Ragyo snapped at him about his casual nickname for the Original Life Fiber but it was best that he not antagonize her until he's figured out what happened.*

*" Yeah," Ragyo refused to look at Isshin, instead keeping the sole focus of her now maroon eyes on her hands clasped firmly together on her lap. She did not know why she snapped at him for what he called the Original Life Fiber, but for some reason as soon as he mocked it an intense feeling of rage welled up inside her. She was angry that he was desecrating its greatness and he needed to know that.*

*" So what do we do now?" Isshin leaned back and blew a strand of silver hair out of his eyes. The fact that he could mention the visions to Ragyo implied that he could communicate the Original Life Fiber's plans and motives to anyone that already knows about them. That might make things easier in the long run, "You said the Original Life Fiber has been downstairs for generations, right? I'm starting to wonder just how old that thing actually is. Do Life Fibers even age?"*

*" The Original Life Fiber's mortality cannot be measured by humans," Ragyo answered stoically as the knowledge of what Isshin sought suddenly appeared in her mind. She knew of where the Original Life Fiber came from and how long it has been around. Compared to humans Life Fibers were effectively immortal, which caused a feeling of awe to well up deep inside Ragyo, "What are we going to do, Isshin? Rei and Masaki are going to ask questions about our change in appearance and that's not mentioning the world at large."*



*Even though he was slightly worried about Ragyo's quick and abrupt changes in persona, Isshin nevertheless kept a straight face, "Well, the first thing I'm going to do is figure out a way to dye my hair and dim my newly discovered headlights. I'm way too young to have silver hair and I would rather go bald than look anything like Ryuken. Once that's taken care of we can figure out what to do about the Original Life Fiber. That thing's been down there forever so I don't think a few more days are going to bother it too much. Now come on, you shouldn't be walking around right after waking up. I'm sure Soroi is worrying his head off."*

*Ragyo nodded as she allowed Isshin to wrap her arm gently around his shoulder. As he helped her walk back to her room, Isshin was unaware of the sly smile beginning to spread across Ragyo's face. He was equally unaware of the way her hand was slowly caressing his shoulder.*

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"Getsuga Tenshou!"

It was the utterance of those two words that ended the fight between Ichigo Kurosaki and Uzu Sanageyama. As the former substitute shinigami seemed to teleport inside the Athletic Committee Chair's guard and carved a deep gash in his opponent's Blade Regalia Mark II, the energy being fed through Tournesol's Life Fibers exploded outwards in a titanic explosion on a scale not unlike Ryuko's Niban Genkai and put Sanageyama's Hissatsu: Isshin Zenzanken to shame. It was no small wonder why Sanageyama, who was unable to react in time to the attack even with his Shingantsu, wasn't able to dodge the Getsuga Tenshou or even mitigate the damage.

While the attack's name was unfamiliar to every observer apart from a select few, Ichigo's new Getsuga Tenshou, even though it shared the same name, was inherently different from what stemmed forth from his shinigami powers. While it seemed like both attacks

released a crescent arc of energy that enveloped anything they hit in a massive explosion that could only be mitigated by a superior defense, Mugetsu's Getsuga Tenshou was actually an attack that combined the Life Fiber severing power of Tournesol with the Ichigo's blood and energy that coursed through Mugetsu's Life Fibers.

When Mugetsu's Getsuga Tenshou manages to connect with a target, the massive wave of energy will split apart into thousands of smaller blades too small for the eye to see. Each of these smaller attacks will then instantaneously strike every exposed surface on Ichigo's opponent's body before going critical and exploding in a massive eruption powerful enough to create a mushroom cloud tinted deep blue and large enough to cover nearly the entire battle arena in the explosion.

"How did Strawberry manage to hide something this powerful up his sleeves?" Nonon Jakuzure growled as she watched the explosion through squinted eyes. Tilting her drum major's hat downwards until it covered her pink eyes, Nonon seethed as she realized Ichigo was still stronger than her. If Ichigo was capable of unleashing an attack like that, which most likely obliterated Sanageyama, than her Symphony Regalia Mark III wouldn't fare much better.

"God damn you, Strawberry!" Nonon stomped her foot angrily on the ground as her face flushed from embarrassment at being shown up. Pointing her baton at where she assumed Ichigo was standing, she shouted, "Don't think this changes anything! Even with your strength I'm still going to kick your sorry ass!"

Subtly listening to Nonon's angry rambling, Satsuki Kiryuin stared at the ever expanding cloud of dust and smoke on the battle arena in front of her with a mixture of wonder and interest. For barely a second, just when Ichigo's Tournesol connected with Sanageyama's Blade Regalia, Satsuki felt his power skyrocket until it eclipsed what she was capable with Junketsu. Looking sparingly down at her Kamui, she saw Junketsu's eyes focused on where Ichigo had last been seen.

*" So even Junketsu is aware of the power Ichigo's Kamui possesses,"* Satsuki turned her attention back to the battle arena before glancing over at Matoi. Ryuko was staring at the fight, most likely enraptured with what Ichigo had just done, and Satsuki could not blame her. If she was a woman with less self-control, her mouth would be agape and she would be wondering out loud the full extent of Ichigo's powers.

*" It is not just Ichigo, but also Matoi,"* Satsuki corrected her line of thinking as she recalled watching Ryuko's Senkou configuration. While her plan had always been to push Ryuko along so that she would be strong enough for the fights to come, Satsuki did not appreciate being left behind. Configurations like Senkou and Zangetsu were powerful but Satsuki knew that ingenuity could win out over raw power and speed given the right environment and intelligence. She had even begun to contemplate the drawbacks to Ichigo and Ryuko's powerful attacks. The problem Satsuki was facing was not as complicated as Life Fiber attacks. It had to do with her inability to force Junketsu to adapt and evolve into similar fighting configurations.

*" What do Ichigo and Matoi possess that allow them to order their Kamui to transform?"* Satsuki's eyes refocused as the dust began to clear and two figures emerged, *"I am aware they can mentally listen to their Kamui and communicate with both their own Kamui as well as each other's. I've tried asking Ichigo to listen to Junketsu but he's said my Kamui does not talk. Could there be something wrong with Junketsu?"*

As the smoke and debris from the Getsuga Tenshou began dissipating into the surrounding environment, two figures began to emerge with the first being Ichigo. Knocked out of Mugetsu's Zangetsu configuration by the amount of energy the Getsuga Tenshou required, Ichigo barely took three steps before he began stumbling forward.

"Like hell I'm going to lose!" Ichigo grit his teeth as he stabbed Tournesol deep into the arena's floor to keep himself from collapsing

to the ground, "I'm not going to fall here!"

" ***I'm sorry, Ichigo,***" Mugetsu's apologetic voice reached Ichigo moments before he was surrounded by blue stars and realized Mugetsu had transformed back to her normal uniform. Turning her tired eyes up to her wearer, the Kamui said, ***"That Getsuga Tenshou used up most of my stored blood and energy. If I had remained transformed for a few more seconds I risked sucking your blood dry. I'm sorry."***

Ichigo didn't respond to Mugetsu's apology as a series of wracking coughs tore forth from his chest and spittle mixed with blood sprayed on the floor in front of him. His Getsuga Tenshou, which he somehow instinctively knew was designed to destroy Life Fibers, had only scraped him when it connected with Sanageyama. Mugetsu hadn't complained about the hit apart from a slight muttering of pain so why the hell did he feel like crap?

"... Ichigo..."

Sanageyama's pain-filled voice tore Ichigo's attention away from his own problems. Twisting his head around, his eyes wide in shock at the fact his opponent was still conscious after being hit point blank by his Getsuga Tenshou, Ichigo saw Sanageyama still standing in the midst of his attack. The Athletic Committee Chair's body was covered in cuts and bruises and aside from several stubborn pieces his Blade Regalia was virtually destroyed. Taking in a ragged breath as his senses returned to him Sanageyama managed a single step towards Ichigo before another piece of his green armor cracked apart, fell to the ground and dissipating into its component Life Fibers.

"What..." The green-haired swordsman took another step and his bandanna, already burnt and frayed by the power of Ichigo's Getsuga Tenshou, split apart, showing his scarred eyes for all the world to see. Unconcerned about his appearance Sanageyama raised his shinai, the wooden weapon torn off roughly halfway up the blade, and raised a shaking arm at Ichigo. Taking a moment to

steady himself on his feet, Sanageyama stared at Ichigo and asked, "... what... was that attack?"

Feeling the pain in his own body beginning to abate, Ichigo pushed himself back onto his feet and said, "It's called Getsuga Tenshou."

"Moon Fang Heaven-Piercer, huh?" Sanageyama grinned as he collapsed to his knees. Now completely naked as the last of his Blade Regalia dissipated into nothingness, Sanageyama had a satisfied look on his face as he fell backwards into unconsciousness.

Ichigo continued to stare at Sanageyama's unconscious form before a loud buzzer rang through the stadium, signaling that the match was over and he had won. As several One-Star students associated with the Medical Relief Club appeared on the battle arena to check on Sanageyama, Ichigo turned towards Satsuki with a look of annoyance on his face. The Student Council President stared directly back at him, never lowering her gaze or showing a single emotion on her face. Eventually Ichigo turned away and walked back to his pillar to rest for his second fight against Nonon Jakuzure. Sanageyama was a difficult opponent but at least he was honorable. Nonon, on the other hand, had a grudge against him and Ichigo knew that would carry over into their battle.

Satsuki watched Ichigo for a few seconds, her hands tightening around Bakuzan's hilt as she beheld the accusatory stare returned to her. Expressing not a single emotion on her face, she turned her gaze to Gamagori and spoke, "Gamagori, due to necessary repairs your match against Matoi will be delayed one hour. It shall begin in ninety minutes instead of thirty. Prepare yourself accordingly."

"Understood, Lady Satsuki," Gamagori respectfully bowed to Satsuki before sitting down on his pillar. Folding his arms across his massive chest, a frown of displeased seemingly etched on his face, Gamagori was not pleased with how the Sudden Death Runoff was proceeding. The matches were supposed to begin at 1:00 PM sharp but Inumuta had the nerve to start his fight against Matoi at 8:55 AM. Did the former member of the Elite Four not realize that schedules and rules

were put in place to keep order amongst the chaos? Gamagori wanted to protest to Lady Satsuki about the changed time but when Satsuki allowed the first fight to commence, he knew his words would have no weight. If Satsuki thought Inumuta's fight should begin early in the morning than he would stand aside and respect her verdict.

Gamagori took a calming breath as he mentally prepared his mind and body for his match. Ignoring Inumuta disregarding the established venue time for the moment, he focused on the true purpose of the matches against Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki. The Three-Star Goku Uniforms of the Elite Four may be more powerful than anything else at Honnouji Academy barring the Kamui wearers and Ururu Tsumugiya, but there were those out there with more power. The true purpose of the Sudden Death Runoff was for their Goku Uniforms to be tested for flaws and weaknesses in the stitching. Apart from the unintended destruction of his Probe Regalia, it was expected for Matoi to defeat Inumuta in battle but none of them expected Ichigo to win the way he did.

The simulations Inumuta had shown to the rest of the Elite Four indicated Ichigo would beat Sanageyama, much to the Athletic Committee Chair's irritation. It was predicted based on his Kamui's known strength, as well as the recordings of his fight against Satsuki, that Ichigo would win but only after a long and brutal battle that would allow valuable information and data to be collected on his Kamui. Sanageyama's new Blade Regalia Mark II in conjunction with his Shingantsu was supposed to be able to stand up against the phenomenal speed of Ichigo long enough for Inumuta and Iori to collect what was needed, yet Ichigo not only managed to win but he also completely destroyed Sanageyama's Blade Regalia with a previously unseen attack.

*" I should have fought Matoi first! Rules are meant to be enforced, not disregarded at the first sign of trouble! Inumuta should have known better!"* Gamagori snorted at the cowardly way Inumuta tried to back out of his fight against Ryuko. The king of the hill battles

were designed to be fought until one opponent falls unconscious or has their uniform destroyed, neither of which happened to Inumuta. Gamagori would never say it, but the Disciplinary Committee Chair was satisfied when Ryuko ignored Inumuta's surrender.

*"Unfortunately the data Inumuta's Probe Regalia collected about Matoi's Senkou mode was lost when his Goku Uniform was destroyed," Gamagori noted in dissatisfaction, "His Goku Uniform's power would have been valuable in figuring out just what Ichigo Kurosaki did to defeat Sanageyama. The way Ichigo moves and fights cannot be explained by what Inumuta dug up on him. Where did he receive such advanced training?"*

"Way to go!" Mako Mankanshoku cheered jubilantly from the stands, "You're number one, Ichigo!"

Mako was ecstatic throughout Ichigo's entire fight against Sanageyama and even Orihime joined in towards the end. That final super awesome attack Ichigo used to create the picturesque blue mushroom cloud was cool and all but it would always be second to the enormous blade of energy Ryuko used against Inumuta.

"Please lower your voice," a snobbish voice sarcastically said, "Even though it is impossible, your shrilling tone is actually interfering with my sensors."

Sitting in the stands right next to Orihime was Houka Inumuta, the now former Information and Strategy Committee Chair. Clad in a spar red tracksuit with a high collar that rose until just above his nose, Inumuta looked a little worse for wear after his fight against Ryuko. His face, at least what could be seen above the zipped up tracksuit, was covered in small bandaged and he was currently forced to wear his second pair of glasses after Ryuko destroyed his favorites.

"So you are the one that Ichigo Kurosaki was talking to before my fight against Ryuko Matoi," Inumuta mumbled as he fervently typed on his laptop. The loss of his Probe Regalia and all the data held

within it was staggering and Inumuta hoped Iori was able to salvage something from the security feeds of the fight. Pressing one key before reaching up and unzipping the collar of his tracksuit so he could speak, Inumuta turned his attention to Orihime sitting next to him, "The colors and style of your uniform indicate you go to Karakura High School. Just how well do you know Ichigo Kurosaki?"

"Oh... well..." Orihime tapped her fingers together in embarrassment and looked away from Inumuta, "Ichigo is my friend and since I had some time off from school I thought I should come by and cheer him on. His dad said Ichigo would benefit from having a friend here to cheer him on and that I was the best person to go."

"I see," Inumuta rapidly typed in what Orihime was saying into Ichigo's profile in the Honnouji Academy database. After seeing Ichigo demolish Sanageyama and his Blade Regalia, Inumuta was starting to believe the history he gathered on Ichigo was woefully lacking in detail and substance, "Please go on. The data I'm gathering from this conversation is most enlightening. I would prefer if you could tell me where Ichigo might have obtained his fighting skills and instincts. Please do not skimp out on the details and be as specific as you can."

"You want to know about Ichigo?" Orihime hummed quietly to herself as she thought about Inumuta's question. It wasn't like she could tell him about Ichigo being a shinigami and fighting supernatural villains bent on becoming a god, but then again Orihime never expected Life Fibers to be able to grant people superpowers. Still, Orihime didn't think Ichigo would appreciate her talking about him behind his back, "Actually, it's very complicated. You see it all started when - "

"Hang on just a minute!"

Mako suddenly appeared between Inumuta and Orihime, causing the latter to nearly fall off her seat in surprise. As Orihime managed to regain her composure, Mako crossed her arms over her chest and gave the teal haired teen a piercing stare, "It's wrong to ask a girl you just met such personal questions! You need to go on a date first



and get to know her before even thinking about asking her stuff like that. I've known Ryuko for a while now and there are still things she won't tell me about herself despite my best attempts at bribing her with food and affection! Besides, have you even stopped to consider how your philandering ways are hurting Jakuzure's feelings?"

"Like I care what Jakuzure thinks," Inumuta scoffed and adjusted his glasses with the tip of a finger. Rolling his eyes as Mako stared at him with her cheeks puffed out, he turned back to his laptop, "I have a lot to do and your rambling is beginning to get on my nerves. Why don't you go annoy your other friends and leave me in peace?"

When he still felt Mako's gaze lingering on him, Inumuta turned to chastise her again but froze when he saw who was on the other side of Orihime. Sitting happily with her hands clasped on her lap was a very familiar blonde haired girl.

" *The Grand Couturier is here?*" Inumuta thought in a subdued panic while relieved Mako had turned to blabber to Orihime, *"I thought Lady Satsuki said Nui Harime was forbidden from returning to Honnouji Academy by her very mother? This is not good. I need to tell Lady Satsuki."*

Inumuta moved his finger to press the hidden emergency signal on the bottom of his laptop when Nui, without turning her attention away from the battle arena, stared at him with her single sapphire eye. As the smile on her face widened every so softly upon noticing his panic, Inumuta fully comprehended what Nui was telling him. If he tried to so much as warn Satsuki about her presence, Nui would cleave a path through as many humans as necessary to kill him.

" *Damn.*"

Inumuta gripped his laptop to steady his shaking hands. Risking a glance back at the Grand Couturier, Inumuta noticed that Nui was no longer looking at him but he did not think for a second that her attention had moved on. He knew without a doubt that the Grand Couturier was still paying close attention to his every move.

*"Ok, think carefully," Inumuta took a second to calm his racing heart, causing Orihime to glance over the top of Mako's head. Ignoring her question of whether he was feeling alright or not, Inumuta closed his eyes and thought carefully on what he should do, "Ururu Tsumugiya is the key to telling Lady Satsuki. She seems to be able to keep up with the Grand Couturier in terms of strength and speed. If I set up the board just right I could force Nui Harime to deal with Ururu's interference while I make a break for Satsuki."*

"Planning things behind my back isn't very nice, you know," Nui's childish and happy voice cut through Inumuta's line of thought like a sharp blade, "That's the sort of thing that can get people into all sorts of trouble!"

As his heart pounded against his chest, Inumuta turned his head and saw that Nui was not speaking directly at him. Ururu had noticed Nui focused completely on Inumuta for some reason and tried to take advantage of her lapse of attention and steal the purple Scissor Blade away from the Grand Couturier. Although she did not understand how she knew, Ururu could sense where Nui was hiding the hardened Life Fiber blade and knew just what to do to steal it away from her twin sister.

"That was a nice attempt. Really, it was!" Nui laughed and stuck out her tongue as her hand grasped tightly around Ururu's wrist. As she stared into a pair of blue eyes that were so familiar to her own, Nui pouted cutely and giggled, "I love how you're trying to bond and all that, but we can always do that later when we get to know each other a bit more."

"You're planning something," Ururu accused stoically as she tore her wrist free from Nui's grip.

"You give me far too much credit," Nui closed her eye and looked up at where Ichigo was standing. It was almost time for the big surprise and she couldn't wait to see the look on everyone's faces. Giving her twin another glance, Nui continued, "I already gave my promise to

not touch Ichigo and I always keep my promises, you know. So why are you all hot and bothered, Amu?"

Ururu saw Orihime had turned away from Mako towards them as soon as Ichigo's name was mentioned. In an uncharacteristically emotional outburst Ururu's eyes narrowed and she said, "I know you are planning something. If you try to hurt any of my friends I will make you suffer."

Nui was about to respond with a childish laugh at Ururu's threat but stopped as she realized just how familiar her twin's tone of voice was to her own on the rare occasions when things did not go her way. The Grand Couturier locked gazes with Ururu's sapphire eyes and saw the same look of promised rage her own eye had possessed after the man who called himself Isshin Matoi destroyed her left eye. Easily hiding the foreign feeling of nervousness deep beneath layers of saccharine joy and psychosis, Nui sighed dramatically and huffed.

"You sure do like to talk!" Nui glanced over at Inumuta and giggled when the teal haired teen flinched, "But talking is talking and fighting is fighting! Our hearts may be like two peas in a pod but I would never do anything to hurt my favorite cousin. You can count on that!"

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"My, my," Aikuro Mikisugi muttered to himself as he ran a hand through his shaggy blue hair, "Things are really starting to get interesting down there."

Aikuro leaned over the railing far above the crowd of spectators below as he watched Ichigo demolish Uzu Sanageyama and his Blade Regalia with a single attack. That last attack Ichigo used, the Getsuga Tenshou, seemed extremely powerful and something Aikuro needed to be wary of in the future. All the experiments and tests Nudist Beach did on Danketsu's Life Fibers, with Kinue's consent of course, indicated that when a Kamui evolves too quickly

it's stitching can become unstable, which can lead to the wearer losing control over the Kamui's power. Senketsu and Mugetsu's powers were increasing too quickly for their own good. If either of them were to lose control, it would be a repeat of what happened ten years ago.

"Well, I don't ever want that to happen again," Aikuro quietly scoffed. Peering at the arena through a set of binoculars, Aikuro zoomed in on Ryuko and then Ichigo before scratching at his hair. Truth be told, he found Ryuko's Senkou attacks fascinating from a scientific point of view. It was quite ingenious of her to use her imagination to shift the outputted power of Senkou into various powerful attacks.

"Ryuko could stand to learn some self-control, especially with the Grand Couturier focused on her," Aikuro concluded with a sigh as he lowered the binoculars. Leaning over the railing and looking at Satsuki Kiryuin across the stadium, he asked, "Shouldn't you be hiding? The last time I checked little Miss Satsuki was still trying to catch and dissect you."

"Humph!"

Kon stepped out of the shadows where he was most definitely not hiding from Satsuki Kiryuin. Walking over to Aikuro, the disguised nudist sparing the mod soul a quick glance, Kon leaned against the railing and scoffed, "Ichigo's dad sent me here to keep an eye on him. How can I do that when I'm certainly not hiding from Satsuki? Besides, there's no way I can enjoy the view of Ryuko's fine body from inside the air ducts!"

"Please consider what you say about Ryuko," Aikuro's voice was cold as ice as he menacingly waved several needles at Kon, "She is the daughter of a dearly departed friend, so if you keep trying to sneak glances at her I will be forced to do something terribly nightmarish to you."

"You don't need to worry about doing anything to my vulnerable body. I've already learned my lesson," Kon shivered as he recalled

how Ryuko hunted him down and almost killed him three times already. The first time he thought she was just overreacting but after the next two times Kon concluded Ryuko was going to kill him if he tried again so he made sure that he was never in a place where she could think he was peeping on her. If he was sitting on the floor when Ryuko walked into a room, Kon would quickly get up and move out of the way.

Jumping up onto the railing and wiping dust off his plushie body, Kon pointed his stub of an arm at Aikuro and asked, "Anyway, Ryuko's going to fight next, right? That means she's going to be up against that large and scary man sitting down way over there. Ichigo's fight was fun to watch and all but it was just so predictable. I knew he was going to kick Sanageyama's ass from the moment the fight started. You know anything about that Gamagori bastard?"

Aikuro shifted his eyes to look at Kon. He was still trying to get used to the idea of conversing with a Life Fiber being that was not trying to assimilate him as a power source. Professor Matoi notes and Isshin's information about Ragyo's plans indicated that Life Fibers needed a living human to function as a mobile power source, but Kon was able to function and move around on his own. It was a fascinating subject that Aikuro would have preferred to learn more about but Isshin had personally vouched for Kon's loyalty and so he was forced to push away any disgust he had for Kon in order to focus on the matter at hand.

"It's hard for me to say," Aikuro shrugged and sighed lazily, "I'm just a lowly teacher so I really haven't been able to see any of the Elite Four's Goku Uniforms apart from when they fought Ryuko or Ichigo. First there was Jakuzure's Symphony Regalia, then there was Sanageyama's Blade Regalia and we both just saw Inumuta's Probe Regalia. Truth be told, I don't even know what Gamagori's Goku Uniform looks like."

"Goku Uniforms are really strange," Kon's beady eyes focused on Satsuki Kiryuin before he looked away. He didn't want that ruthless woman finding him again.

"Every Goku Uniform is stitched by the President of the Sewing Club, Iori Shirou, to match the inherent qualities and abilities of the student," Aikuro explained, "Going by his self-proclaimed title of Satsuki's impenetrable shield, Gamagori's Goku Uniform must have something to do with defense or protection. Ryuko's going to need to think on her feet if she wants to win. Raw power might not cut it this time."

Kon tapped his head in thought as he walked back and forth on the railing. Ever since he woke up he'd been having a really bad feeling that something was going to go wrong. His encounter with Nui Harime was still giving him nightmares. Despite her outward appearance as a relatively normal-looking teenage girl Kon was able to see that she wasn't human and that scared him more than any hollow or arrancar. How anyone could look that cute and be that psychotic boggled Kon's mind but the mod soul wasn't about to go ask Nui why she was insane. If he ever saw the Grand Couturier again in his long lifetime it would be too soon.

"There's nothing to be worried about," Kon spun around and pointed at Aikuro, "Ryuko is plenty strong and way too stubborn to give up. If she could chase me down for over ten minutes just for accidentally peaking up her skirt than she should have no trouble taking on this Gamagori guy!"

"I've been looking everyone for you, Aikuro. I even checked the teacher's break room for you but they said you weren't there all day."

Aikuro chuckled at the gruff voice as its owner made his way towards the undercover Nudist Beach operative. Lighting a cigarette and taking a deep drag, Tsumugu Kinagase paused as he let smoke drift out of his mouth before speaking, "Let me tell you two pieces of useful information. The first is that you should take off that depressing outfit as soon as possible. It's making me feel suicidal just by looking at it."

"Hey now, I made this disguise myself! It's not that bad, is it?" Aikuro let out a nervous chuckle as Tsumugu mocked his getup. He needed

to go undercover at Honnouji Academy for Nudist Beach so what better way to do so than as a lazy and scruffy teacher? Rubbing the back of his neck, Aikuro muttered, "Besides, I'm undercover, remember? It wouldn't be good for everyone to see my full nude glory."

Tsumugu purposely avoided answering Aikuro's rhetorical question as he noticed Kon watching their conversation. He had been briefed about the Life Fiber plushie's loyalty to Isshin and his son and thus had not immediately pumped it so full of needles that he resembled a pincushion. Clenching the cigarette between his teeth, Tsumugu said, "The second is that I do not trust the creature standing beside you. Even though Isshin vouched for its loyalty, I will be keeping a close eye on it."

"Yeah, well, I don't like you either," Kon grumbled and hopped onto the ground accompanied by a soft squeak.

Kon had only the faintest of ideas why everyone thought just because there were Life Fibers in his plushie that he was dangerous. Life Fibers really didn't stack up compared to some of the things he's witnessed in the last few years. That did not mean the mod soul wasn't thinking about them. Life Fibers were what made Senketsu and Mugetsu powerful and sentient so Life Fibers must somehow be alive, which made Kon wonder how something that was essential yarn be alive in the first place. There was something the mod soul was missing and Kon had a strange feeling Isshin sent him here knowing full well what was going on. This was the last time Kon was going to do Ichigo's dad any favors even if there were hot girls involved!

*" Boy would I love to just tell these people that I'm a mod soul and not a Life Fiber creature or whatever. The looks on their faces would be priceless but why did Ichigo's dad have to stitch my pill into this body?"*

Tsumugu gave the mod soul another glare before reaching up and clicking on the buckle holding the large silver case on his back. As

the case crashed to the ground with a soft thud, Tsumugu turned around and undid the latches holding it closed. Flipping the lid up with one hand and flicking his cigarette away with the other, Tsumugu began assembling his customized M-98 Window Anti-Life Fiber Model Type-3. While clicking the various components into place, Tsumugu began talking to Aikuro, "Headquarters got your request yesterday. They were not pleased with what you were asking, especially since Isshin's forbidden us from going after Masaki's son."

Aikuro reached into his pocket and handed Tsumugu a recording of Ryuko's fight against Inumuta, "Ichigo's power concerns me but it's Ryuko that I'm worried about. I'm certain if push came to shove Ichigo could control his Kamui but Ryuko is still holding onto a lot of pent up anger and emotions. I would have warned her against participating in the king of the hill battles but little Miss Satsuki had to push up the time from 1:00 PM to 9:00 AM. If Gamagori's fight was first, it's likely he would have forestalled the first fight, allowing me a chance to talk to Ryuko."

"You don't need to say any more," Tsumugu cut in as he finished assembling the sniper rifle. Leaning his forehead against the Anti-Life Fiber weapon, he reached inside his shirt and pulled out a simple necklace with a familiar bullet hanging gently off it. Staring at the bullet that nearly ended everything a decade ago, Tsumugu said, "I promised Kinue I would save this special adhesive bullet for the time when she finally lost control of her Kamui and went on another rampage. If anyone was going to finally give my sister the rest she deserved it was going to be me. Even though Kinue's no longer in danger of losing control to her Kamui, I'm still wary about letting you use this bullet."

"Think of it as a precaution in case anything goes wrong," Aikuro said with a shrug, "If it makes you feel any better, I'm sure we won't end up having to use it."

"Let's hope not. Tell me, have Matoi and Kurosaki gotten that strong that even someone like you is worried?" Tsumugu growled.



Aikuro leaned back on the railing, "Both of them managed to easily secure wins against Three-Star Goku Uniforms using attacks that concentrated all the energy in their Kamui into one massive strike. Ryuko's was called Niban Genkai and Ichigo called his Getsuga Tenshou. You didn't see the attacks completely destroy a Three-Star Goku Uniform in one swing. Not even little Miss Satsuki could do something like that while wearing Junketsu. You remember your fight against Ryuko, right? Now imagine fighting her again but this time your needles have a quarter of their suppressing effect while her strength and speed are twice what they were. Could you beat her?"

"No, I could not," Tsumugu admitted without hesitation. Grabbing the scope off his M-98 Widow, he handed the magnifying device to Aikuro and continued, "Kinue said that I would be unable to stand up to the likes of a Raiment so what chance do I have against Matoi after she's gained experience using her Kamui?"

Aikuro gave his friend a light chuckle out of amusement, "It's not like you to admit your weakness. Kinue's return really must have affected you."

Without looking Tsumugu reached over and grabbed the undercover nudist's shirt in his hand, "If you so much as tell anyone that I'm getting soft I'm going to publically humiliate you in the worst possible way."

"Now hang on a minute!" Aikuro was beginning to sweat at the threatening aura surrounding Tsumugu, "There's no need for violence. No one here said you were getting soft! I sure as heck didn't say anything like that!"

There was a pregnant pause as both Aikuro and Tsumugu looked down at Kon. The mod soul plushie was reading a comic book he pulled out of nowhere and had stopped paying attention to their conversation ages ago. Noticing the stares from the two men, Kon looked up and bluntly asked, "What the hell are you two looking at? Can't you see I'm busy reading my articles?"

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Ryuko sat in a relaxed crouch as she waiting for the clock beneath the battle arena to read 11:00 PM. It was only a few minutes until her fight against Gamagori and she was starting to feel the initially effects of anxiety. The sight of Gamagori transforming into his Shackle Regalia the other night was still ingrained in her memory and it was making her wonder just how powerful the Disciplinary Committee Chair actually was.

**" Ryuko, your heart rate and blood pressure are rising. Are you nervous about the upcoming fight?"** Senketsu's familiar voice asked, cutting through Ryuko's reminiscing.

Giving an exasperated huff of annoyance, Ryuko propped her chin on her fist and sighed dramatically, "It's nothing to worry about, Senketsu. I'm just thinking about how strong Gamagori was the other night. His Shackle Regalia may look downright ridiculous but there's no getting around how powerful it is."

**" Yes,"** Senketsu agreed, turning his eye toward the still sitting large teen. The male Kamui had been concerned about Gamagori's power as an indication of the strength of the rest of the Elite Four but Ryuko's battle against Inumuta hadn't been that troublesome, **"He seems to be the only one to possess a secondary transformation like Mugetsu and myself. You should keep your guard up against him. There's no reason to take unnecessary risks at this point."**

"Who do you think I am? I'm all about safety, Senketsu!" Ryuko boasted proudly. When she heard Senketsu growling at her, Ryuko rolled her eyes, "Ok, fine. I'll be careful against Gamagori, but you know, I thought these Elite Four jerks would be stronger."

**" What do you mean?"**

Ryuko stood up and stretched her legs before she let out a sigh of contentment as her muscles and joints popped back into place, "Inumuta wasn't that tough. If his Probe Regalia didn't have that optical camouflage ability we could have beaten him without using Niban Genkai. Sanageyama has his Shingantsu but we both watched Ichigo wipe the floor with him by moving too fast for Sanageyama to keep up with. I'm starting to get the feeling that we're being played."

" **Nonsense,**" Senketsu shook his body around Ryuko in order to show his displeasure at such a stupid notion, **"Why would Satsuki Kiryuin throw her most powerful followers at us just so they could take a dive? It makes no sense."**

Ryuko grinned at Senketsu's reaction. Turning her eyes towards the battle arena, she noticed the clock read 10:59 AM and let out a confident smirk, "Well, it's almost time Senketsu. Just one more fight and we get to find out from Satsuki why Nui Harime had to kill my dad. I'm kind of hoping she tries to resist just so I can beat the smug look off her face with your power. We never did get to have our rematch against Satsuki, did we?"

" **No, we did not. Ichigo and Mugetsu saved our lives that morning and managed to beat Satsuki Kiryuin before we could do so,**" Senketsu answered as a set of red steps extended down from the pillar Ryuko was standing on. As she calmly walked down the steps, her gaze never leaving Gamagori, Senketsu turned his eye upwards, **"Please don't tell Mugetsu this, but I really do want to fight Satsuki Kiryuin and Junketsu. My Life Fibers are highly dissatisfied with that mockery of a battle you had against her before our proper synchronization."**

"You don't need to tell me that," Ryuko boasted as her hand reached for the pin on the Seki Tekkou, "It would be really annoying to never have a proper battle against Satsuki. It might just drive me crazy. Let's go, Senketsu! Life Fiber Synchronization: Kamui Senketsu!"

Fully clad in Senketsu's transformed state and with her energy replenished after her usage of Niban Genkai, Ryuko stared across the battle arena at the stoic Gamagori. Hefting her red Scissor Blade onto her shoulder, Ryuko smirked at the Disciplinary Committee Chair, "Yo, Gamagori, don't expect me to go easy on you just because you helped us the other night!"

Gamagori gave Ryuko a sly grin of his own before his expression hardened. Smashing his gauntlet-covered fists together before spreading his arms wide, he shouted, "I would not expect any less from the likes of you, Mato! You might as well consider this your final transformation! Your ascent towards Lady Satsuki ends here! Three-Star Goku Uniform: Shackle Regalia!"

Ryuko narrowed her eyes as Gamagori transformed into the familiar bondage uniform she saw the other night. Even though his appearance and inability to move his arms or legs made Gamagori seem like an easy target, Ryuko knew better than to attack him. The memory of the entire AAA Club unloading everything they had against Gamagori's Shackle Regalia only to be completely and utterly destroyed remained at the forefront of her mind. Deciding against doing anything stupid, like attacking him, Ryuko planted her Scissor Blade into the arena and sat down on the handle, all the while giving her opponent the meanest glare she could muster.

"What are you doing?"

The calm and blunt question caused Ryuko to tilt her head to the side in confusion, "Huh?"

"This is a fight," Gamagori's muffled voice was audible to Ryuko despite being all the way across the battle arena, "Is a fight not what you wanted, Mato?"

Ryuko locked her right heel inside the handle of her Scissor Blade and propped her arm on her knee, "That's a dumb question. Of course I wanted to fight you."

"If that is the case then you should be attacking me instead of sitting around doing nothing."

"Do you really think I'm going to fall for something like that?" Ryuko chuckled to herself as she hopped off her Scissor Blade and pulled the Life Fiber weapon out of the ground. Walking back and forth on the arena, her Scissor Blade perched lazily on her shoulder, Ryuko gave Gamagori a knowing stare, "I remember watching your Goku Uniform absorb the power of anything thrown at you. Do you honestly expect me to go charging at you with my Scissor Blade? I'm just going to stand way over here out of range of whatever you may be planning until I can think of something."

"It appears I overestimated your intellect, Matoi. I thought you were surely smarter than this!"

Gamagori's Shackle Regalia began to shift and contort as several strips of the cloth armor composing the outer layers of the Goku Uniform began peeling off and twisted into whips. Ryuko stared in stunned surprise as nearly a dozen whips hovered in the air around Gamagori and gripped her Scissor Blade tightly in preparation for the attack that was sure to come. She was thus shocked when Gamagori, instead of attacking her, turned his whips on himself.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ryuko asked as she watched Gamagori flagellate himself with his own attack.

"Did you not consider I might have anticipated your actions?" Gamagori shouted as his body began to bloat menacingly. As he continued to whip himself, using the power of his Goku Uniform to reach the level of power needed, he stared at Ryuko and said, "I knew after my display the other night that you would no doubt come to understand the power of my Shackle Regalia. That is why if there is no one to discipline me, I am able to discipline myself!"

"What are you talking about?" Ryuko grit her teeth and leapt back as Gamagori expanded to triple his initial size. His secondary transformation was about to appear and she did not want to be

anywhere near him when he brought out his Scourge Regalia, "Using your power to discipline yourself makes no sense! Where does the damn power come from?"

"The power comes from my punishment!" Gamagori declared as his body swelled to near the critical point, "As I use my own technique to punish myself, I quickly bring myself to the climax. That is the power of my Higi Jijo-Jibaku, Matoi! Now witness my true power and realize your weakness! Three-Star Goku Uniform: Scourge Regalia!"

In a burst of power, the cloth armor of Gamagori's Shackle Regalia tore apart to reveal the Scourge Regalia waiting underneath. As a flurry of spiked tentacles and whips crackled around Gamagori, slamming into the arena hard enough to crack the stone tiles, Ryuko spun her Scissor Blade around her wrist and let out a shout as he did her best to deflect as many attacks as possible. While Ryuko was pushing Senketsu and her body to their limits to deflect the multitude of attacks, a different story was going on for the other two remaining contestants. Nonon had a smug grin on her face as she casually dodged and ducked out of the way of Gamagori's errant attacks while Ichigo was using Tournesol to cut and deflect any that strayed too close to him.

"Hey!" Ryuko shouted as one of Gamagori's whips twisted around her guard and smacked her butt. Spinning around and using her Scissor Blade to sever the offending whip, she felt her back arch forward as Gamagori took advantage of her lapse of concentration and proceeded to pummel her over and over again before slammed her body down to the ground right near the edge of the arena.

"You better not fall out of the battle arena, Matoi!" Gamagori shouted boisterously as he continued to smack Ryuko's body with his whips, "If you fall off the edge, you will automatically lose the battle!"

"I know that!" Ryuko shouted as she quickly rolled to the side before flipping to her feet as one of Gamagori's whips came crashing down on to the ground. Deftly leaping and dodging around the spiked tentacles chasing after her, she nevertheless answered, "I kind of

figured that out when Inumuta tried to kick me off the edge. You Elite Four bastards sure do like to not tell all the rules, don't you?"

"It was an unspoken rule!" Gamagori announced as all the whips flailing through the air suddenly retracted back, hiding his Scourge Regalia inside his Shackle Regalia once more.

"Huh?" Ryuko spit on the ground as he cautiously observed her opponent, "Hey, Gamagori bastard, why did you go back to your stupid Shackle Regalia?"

Gamagori seethed at the lack of respect Ryuko was giving him but knew that the perpetrator of such an obnoxious nickname was Ichigo Kurosaki. He had been the one to first come up with it and he was no doubt the one to pass it on to Ryuko, "Did I not explain myself to you already, Matoi? All the power I collect from being punished and disciplined is released in my Scourge Regalia. Do you see the futility of attacking me? You must realize that in a contest of pure endurance and stamina I can outlast you, so I must ask what your next move is. Are you going to give up or would you like to continue being punished?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm not the kind of girl who goes for the kinky stuff you're into. All this discipline and punishment talk is starting to make me feel nauseous. As for your question..." Ryuko gave Gamagori a menacing smirk as she sprinted across the battle arena with her Scissor Blade held to her side, "... I'm going to give you your answer right now! Senketsu Senkou! Your Shackle Regalia is history! Seni-Soshitsu!"

Ryuko felt the Senkou enhanced Seni-Soshitsu slice across Gamagori's Shackle Regalia without hitting any form of defense but she was shocked when Gamagori did not so much as move. As Gamagori turned around to face her, an almost impossible task given his current state, Ryuko saw that all her Senkou-empowered Seni-Soshitsu managed to do was leave a small tear across the width of Gamagori's chest.

***" His Goku Uniform does not have any Life Fibers on its surface," Senketsu explained to a stunned Ryuko, "What concerns me is that even if there was nothing for me to absorb using Seni-Soshitsu, Senkou should have still been enough to cut through it. His Shackle Regalia's defenses are indeed formidable."***

"Impressive. I did not expect you to actually damage my Shackle Regalia," Gamagori admitted as his form began to bloat and expand once more, "My Shackle Regalia is covered in specialized cloth armor, forged and reinforced secretly to increase its power! If you have any chance of defeating me, you'll have to pierce through it and stab your Scissor Blade directly into my proper uniform!"

"That's not a problem," Ryuko motioned with her hand to her transformed state, "I've already proven Senkou can cut through your stupid cloth armor. So all I need to do is cut you a few more times and it's game over for you!"

"Indeed, your Senkou attacks are most formidable," Gamagori's body continued to swell as he resumed hitting himself while Ryuko stood by waiting, "In most cases increased cutting power and range would be a dangerous combination."

Ryuko was blown off her feet as Gamagori's Shackle Regalia exploded outwards once more. As she felt the many spiked whips and tentacles slap every exposed part of her body, Ryuko heard Gamagori shouting, "But in this case it is not true whatsoever! I am Lady Satsuki's ultimate shield. I will withstand the attacks and punishments from anyone daring to stand against her without fail! Even if I have to discipline myself, I will not allow you to stand in Lady Satsuki's presence. My tenacity and determination knows no bounds, Ryuko Matoi! I am going to crush you right here and now!"

"You must be out of your mind if you think I'm going to lose to the likes of you!" Ryuko shouted back as she spun her Scissor Blade around and destroyed any whips that tried to attack her. Rushing towards Gamagori, her Scissor Blade glowing red from the power



she was feeding it, Ryuko leapt into the air as Gamagori reached onto his back and pulled out two spiked chakram.

"What is it you truly fight for, Matoi?"

"What kind of question is that?" Ryuko seethed as Gamagori's chakram stopped her Scissor Blade. Noticing the Disciplinary Committee Chair's weapons cracking under the superior power of her Senkou-enhanced Scissor Blade, Ryuko ducked back and swung her weapon through the air. Growling when Gamagori dodged to the side to avoid the invisible blade, she shouted at him, "Why do you even care what I'm fighting for? Aren't you only fighting because your precious 'Lady Satsuki' ordered you to? I'm surprised you can even dress yourself without Satsuki Kiryuin telling you what to do!"

Instead of taking the bait as she hoped, Gamagori pressed his offense. As she was constantly forced to dodge and avoid his whips while clashing with his seemingly infinite supply of chakram, Ryuko realized that although Senketsu's Senkou configuration gave her greater power and speed it did not help if she was overwhelmed by too many attacks.

"Do you truly believe finding out who murdered your father will get you anywhere in life? If you fight solely for personal vengeance, then you are not worthy of Lady Satsuki's attention!" Gamagori let out a righteous roar as he hit Ryuko with everything he had. Even with her Scissor Blade Ryuko found herself quickly tumbling through the air towards the edge of the arena platform. As she tried desperately to stab her Scissor Blade into the ground to stop her momentum, she felt one last whip smack the bottom of her chin and send her careening over the edge.

"But you will never get that chance, Matoi, because your hopes of defeating me end here!"

" **Ryuko!**"

"Damn that bastard!" Ryuko spun her body around and tried to stab her Scissor Blade into the side of the battle arena. As glowing sparks briefly flashed into existence when the tip of her weapon barely touched the surface of the arena, Ryuko realized she was just a few inches too far away. With blue eyes widening in fear as she continued to fall away from the platform, Ryuko let out a wordless shout as she disappeared into the smoke obscuring the ground below.

"Is this truly all you can muster, Matoi?"

Satsuki watched the perturbed smoke where Ryuko had fallen for several seconds before closing her eyes and scoffing. For a while she had been under the belief Ryuko would use her anger and tenacity to force herself back to her feet time and time again. These matches were not just designed to pick out the flaws of her Elite Four's Goku Uniforms but also grant Ryuko and Ichigo experience with fighting those that expertly wield Life Fiber. Matoi's fall here, while unfortunate, did not have any long or short-term ramifications on her plans. The School Raid Trip would proceed on schedule whether Ryuko got her answers or not.

"Oh? Is this all the Transfer Student can do? This is such a disappointment, wouldn't you agree Strawberry?" Nonon had a haughty smirk on her face as she turned to face Ichigo, but that look quickly fell when she saw Ichigo lightly dozing off with his head leaning on his fist. Growling and grinding her teeth together, Nonon stomped her foot angrily and shouted loudly, "What are you doing, Strawberry? The Transfer Student just lost her fight so why the hell are you taking a nap?"

Ichigo opened one eye and scoffed in annoyance, "I wasn't sleeping, damn it."

Nonon's glare intensified at Ichigo's dismissal of her question, "Why aren't you worried about Gamagori winning? You should be screaming out the Transfer Student's name in fear or something by now!"

"What makes you think I'll do something stupid like that?" Ichigo argued angrily before turning his attention to the battle arena below, "Besides, Ryuko hasn't lost the fight yet."

"Of course she's lost the fight, Strawberry!" Nonon growled and pointed down at the arena with her baton, "The Transfer Student fell all the way down to the ground! There's nothing - "

Nonon's sarcasm was cut off midsentence when a loud boom exploded from within the dust and smoke obscuring the ground. Stepping to the edge of her pillar to see what was making all the noise, Nonon was blow backwards onto her ass as Ryuko rocketed upwards into the sky just a few feet away from her.

"This is great!" Ryuko darted and soared through the air above Honnouji Academy. Senketsu's flight configuration was truly amazing. Unlike Mugetsu's Gufū, Senketsu's Shippu merged her lower body into one solid rocket that gave her more power and speed but at the cost of decreased maneuverability. Turning her head toward the swept-back wing where Senketsu's eye had shifted to, Ryuko gave her Kamui a smirk, "I didn't know you were this reckless, Senketsu."

Senketsu shivered from the praise, ***"Anything Mugetsu can do I can do as well. It is as simple as that. I was not about to let her hold something over me."***

"I knew you could do it, Senketsu!" Ryuko grinned savagely as she hovered a few feet over the arena floor. Holding her Scissor Blade against the back of her neck, she stared confidently down at the waiting Gamagori, "I bet you're wondering what form this is. It's called Senketsu Shippu! Your stupid rule about falling off the arena doesn't matter anymore now that I can fly, Gamagori bastard!"

Gamagori was insulted by what Ryuko was insinuating. How dare she presume that just because she can fly that he cannot defeat her with technicalities! Pulling out several chakram from his back, he threw the spiked weapons at Ryuko while his whips crackled through

the air towards her, "I've put up with your presumptuous attitude long enough, Matoi! You continue to refuse my generosity? Your rebellious attitude ends here!"

"Generosity?"

Ryuko looked at the Disciplinary Committee Chair in confusion with her head cocked to the side. She had no idea what Gamagori was talking about but if it was anything like what he said the other night, she really didn't want to know. Dodging around a thrown chakram, Ryuko grinned as she began flying away, "You can take your generosity and shove it! As if I would even consider losing to someone like you! I have questions for your precious Satsuki Kiryuin about my dad's killer and nothing's going to stop me from getting them!"

"Your petty vengeance is not worth Lady Satsuki's time, Matoi!" Gamagori screamed as he doubled his assault, "Have you refused to even think about what you're doing? You have no chance of defeating me! NO CHANCE AT ALL!"

"That's a load of crap!"

Ryuko boosted beneath the arena, ducking down as a chakram passed dangerously close to her head, before flying back up on the other side behind Gamagori with her Scissor Blade at the ready. Rocketing towards Gamagori with her Scissor Blade held out to the side, she was just about to pierce through his Scourge Regalia when all of his whips suddenly retracted back around his body. As her Scissor Blade ricocheted off the cloth armor surrounding his Shackle Regalia, Ryuko temporarily lost control of her motion and was forced to drag her blade across the arena floor to regain her balance.

"Damn, I was so close," Ryuko wiped the side of her mouth off on the back of her hand and spat on the ground, "I almost had him that time. Just one more second and this fight would have been over."

***" That cloth armor is really tough. Even Senkou was barely enough to cut through it. It seems that unless you can somehow get inside of his Shackle Regalia, Gamagori is going to continue to hide whenever you go on the offensive."***

"How do you suppose I do that? Should I bite one of his whips before he pulls them back in?" Ryuko rolled her eyes and glanced up into the reddening sky, "I have an idea and it requires Shippu. Ready for the most reckless thing you've ever done, Senketsu?"

"I grow tired of your insubordination, Matoi!" Gamagori finally finished whipping himself and burst out of his bindings clad in his Scourge Regalia once more. Reaching onto his back and pulling out half a dozen chakram, three per hand, he shot his whips at Ryuko and shouted, "I thought that if I shackled and whipped myself, my fellow students would see my righteous behavior and correct their own in the process. I hoped they would mend their own ways and not require my direct intervention for that is my goal as the Disciplinary Committee Chair - to lay down the law of Honnouji Academy and impose order and uniformity on the students!"

"You're still going on about that?" Ryuko rolled her eyes as she darted through the air while using her Scissor Blade to cut any whips she could not avoid. Ducking beneath an expertly thrown chakram, she shouted, "I already know all this so why the hell are you explaining it to me again!"

**"YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND, MATOI!"**

Gamagori threw his arms out and Ryuko tensed as every single one of his spiked whips grabbed a chakram, "The Shackle Regalia is the beating heart of my hopes and desires but despite all my hard work students like you remain out there that refuse to learn and mend their rebellious ways! It is with a heavy heart and tear-filled eyes that I use the cleansing whip that is Scourge Regalia! Now face the true horror of the Scourge Regalia, Ryuko Matoi, and despair!"

Ryuko swung her Scissor Blade as the whips shot towards her, "Get ready, Senketsu."

Senketsu stared at Ryuko suspiciously, ***"Ryuko, you never told me your plan."***

Ryuko grinned, "You'll see."

"Have you finally learned your lesson, Matoi?" Gamagori asked as Ryuko was pummeled with his whips. Despite her newfound ability to fly, Ryuko did not know Gamagori was used to fighting an opponent that could maneuver in three dimensions. Jakuzure had required a lot of practice to get used to her Symphony Regalia Mark III and Gamagori had been the one to offer his assistance.

"Like hell I have!" Ryuko roared as she swung her Scissor Blade rapidly in front of her body and destroyed all the whips surrounding her. Glaring at Gamagori, Ryuko spun around before the jets beneath her legs flared to life and she rocketed high into the skies above Honnouji Academy before disappearing into the clouds.

For over a minute everyone, from the audience of students in the stadium to Aikuro watching from high above, stared at the trail of exhaust leading into the sky in anticipation for Ryuko's attack. When nothing happened and there was no sign of Ryuko, angry mutterings could be heard being whispered in the stands. Huffing in annoyance with his eyes locked on the red skies above, Gamagori shouted, "Have you fled like a coward, Matoi?"

Satsuki did not share Gamagori's outburst of anger but she did not say anything to the contrary. It took a clear mind and a sharp intellect to realize that Ryuko Matoi had not, in fact, fled the battle as so many people were beginning to suspect. Such an act of cowardice was against Matoi's nature and Satsuki would be stunned if that was indeed what happened. Casting her gaze on Ichigo, who seemed just as unworried about Ryuko as she was, Satsuki tightened her grip on Bakuzan and muttered, "It is unfortunate that your mind has

become obsessed with resolve, Gamagori, for if you aren't careful it shall turn into arrogance."

"Lady Satsuki!" Satsuki glanced down at the battle arena and saw Gamagori turned to face her. With his loud voice reverberating throughout the stadium, he declared, "Since Ryuko Matoi has fled the field of combat I am requesting that you declare me the winner!"

"You should be cautious with what you say, Gamagori," Satsuki replied evenly, "For the match is not as over as you think."

Gamagori gave Satsuki a questioning look and was about to ask her what she was talking about when a bright flash of red light pierced through the thick clouds covering Honnouji Academy. Peering up into the sky, he was shocked to see Ryuko blasting down towards him at a speed he didn't think possible. Realizing that if Ryuko's Scissor blade hit his Scourge Regalia at that speed the match would be over Gamagori rapidly retracted all his whips and tentacles and formed his Shackle Regalia once more.

"That's not going to work this time!" Ryuko shouted as a loud crackle of thunder echoed through the stadium as she broke through the sound barrier. As her velocity continued to increase, no small thanks to the large thrust from Shippu, Ryuko quickly shifted out of her flight configuration into Senkou and shouted over the roaring wind, "If my Scissor Blade isn't sharp enough to cut through your stupid cloth armor on its own then I'm going need to improvise! Try to withstand this! Seni-Soshitsu!"

Making a turn sharp enough to kill a normal human just as she was about to hit the arena, Ryuko blasted across the stage and sliced through the cloth armor composing Gamagori's Shackle Regalia like it was tissue paper. Before the Disciplinary Committee Chair could even think of moving, Ryuko spun around and slashed him again with enough force to propel him several feet into the air.

"I-Impossible!" Gamagori spat out as he was stripped of his Goku Uniform, "My cloth armor!"

"Humph," Ryuko grinned as the Banshi from Gamagori's Shackle Regalia were absorbed by Senketsu, "Your cloth armor may not have any Life Fibers but my Senkou attacks can still cut through it. All I needed was a running start and your cloth armor was history! This match is over, Ira Gamagori!"

Turning away from Gamagori, who was beginning to get back onto his feet while completely naked, Ryuko gave Senketsu a pleased smile, "You're one hell of a Kamui, Senketsu."

Senketsu's eye closed in happiness at the praise, ***"It was your idea that won the match, Ryuko."***

"But I couldn't have done it without you," Ryuko answered and gave Senketsu's collar a light dusting off. As her Kamui shook around her body, she said, "That's two wins. Now we just need to wait for Ichigo to kick Nonon's ass and I'll finally get Satsuki Kiryuin to tell me what she knows."

"Disgraceful!"

Ryuko's ears picked up the sound of a blade being drawn. Turning around, she saw Gamagori had a dagger in his hands and was about to stab himself in the stomach, "H-Hey! What are you doing?"

Before Gamagori could lower his arms, there was a light laughter as a pink boot lightly tapped him in his massive stomach and sent him bouncing along the battle arena. With her leg still raised in the air, one hand propped against her cheek and the other holding down her pink dress so that humans didn't see anything they should not see, Nui Harime dragged out her words as she spoke, "I'm sure Satsuki wanted to say something like 'wipe away your own tears' or something but it's just so annoying to see naked apes just refuse to lay down, you know. Wouldn't you agree, Ryuko?"

Ryuko stared in stunned surprise at who was standing right in front of her without a care in the world. As her face contorted in anger at



seeing the person who killed her dad acting normally, she shouted, "Nui Harime!"

"Huh?" Nui tilted her head to the side and blinked owlshly as Ryuko shouted her name. She was sure Ryuko didn't know about her since she was very careful when it came to secrets. That meant someone must have been very naughty and told Ryuko and ruined the surprise. Spinning around on her heel and holding her pink parasol on her shoulder, Nui giggled and stared at Ichigo, "Did you have to spoil the big surprise, Ichigo? I wanted Ryuko to be really shocked by my cute and amazing reveal! It's just not the same if she already knows all about me, you know!"

Ichigo locked gazes with the Grand Couturier without flinching. Nui's power may be greater than his own but Ichigo was not about to show any nervousness around her, "Of course I told her all I knew. You not only killed Ryuko's dad but you also attacked Kisuke."

"Attacked?" Nui seemed confused by Ichigo's choice of words before she remembered who Ichigo was referring to, "Are you talking about Mr. Urahara? I'm surprised that you know about that, but then again you are my favorite cousin! Of course I attacked him! He committed the ultimate taboo of creating a Kamui. Humans aren't supposed to go to certain places, you know, but that shopkeeper was really strange. He actually gave me a difficult time before I finally managed to kill him! Although by the end he was bleeding just like any other human."

Ichigo gripped Tournesol and stood up but was stopped when Satsuki appeared before him. Holding Bakuzan toward Nui, Satsuki narrowed her eyes and asked, "Why are you here?"

"That's such a silly question, Lady Satsuki!" Nui huffed and leaned onto her pink parasol. As her body was floating sideways in the air, she giggled and added, "You know that I couldn't stay away from all the fun you were having!"

Satsuki stared coldly at the Grand Couturier, who returned the favor with a pleased expression in her single sapphire eye, before she slowly began unsheathing Bakuzan from its scabbard, "My mother has expressively forbidden you from stepping foot within Honnouji Academy after Parent Student Day. You might not care about what I say but even someone like you will listen to my mother."

Nui's face seemed to show just the tiniest amount of worry before it quickly disappeared and was replaced by a smile, "Nope! I'll have you know Lady Ragyo changed her mind! She said that if I was a good girl and didn't go near Ichigo I could stay for as long as I wanted! While I would love to do nothing more than play with my cousin and bond as a family I made a promise and you're supposed to keep your promises, you know."

Satsuki opened her mouth to respond but stopped when Ichigo stepped in front of her, "Tell me something, Nui Harime. Mugetsu is the Kamui that Kisuke created so why did you kill him and not me?"

"Don't be silly and ask such ridiculous questions Ichigo!" Nui chirped as she felt Ryuko's anger rising by the second. The Grand Couturier loved when a plan came together but any interference would ruin everything. Leaning forward, her chin propped on the top of her pink parasol, Nui puffed her cheeks out and explained, "You're my cousin so I could never do anything to hurt you, Ichigo! Mr. Urahara was nothing but a lowly human who thought he could hide something as high-class as a Kamui from me. Mugetsu is a true Kamui so if it's worn by someone like you then I have no problems with you!"

"Hey!" Ryuko raised her voice to gain Nui Harime's attention, "So you must be Nui Harime. Tell me something. Why did you kill my dad?"

"Why indeed," Nui spun around comically before she suddenly appeared right next to Ryuko, "It's really strange that you want to ask something you already know the answer to!"

Ryuko leapt away from Nui and raised her Scissor Blade, "What are you talking about?"

"You know so much about me and yet I care so little about you!" Nui smiled and reached into her dress before pulling out a familiar purple Scissor Blade. Spinning the blade around her wrist while making cute grunts, Nui pointed her own Scissor Blade at Ryuko and giggled, "See this? I pulled it out of your dad's body! Doesn't that just make you really mad? We should fight and have lots of fun!"

The look on Ryuko's face brought a smile to Nui's face. The look of sheer hate and loathing was perfect for what she had planned for that man's daughter, but when Ryuko bit her lip hard enough to draw blood instead of attacking her, Nui had a look of genuine surprise etched on her face.

"You must think I'm stupid or something," Ryuko spat out a glob of blood as she forced herself to calm down. She could tell Nui was intentionally baiting her but Ryuko was too smart for that. Giving the surprised Grand Couturier a cocky grin, she said, "Did you honestly think I would just attack you because I'm pissed off at you? I sure as hell want to smash your face into the ground and beat you until you're a bloody pulp but Ichigo's told me all about you. You're stronger and faster than Satsuki Kiryuin. If Ichigo can't beat you on his own than anything I do will be pointless!"

Nui leaned sadly on her Scissor Blade, "Gosh, you really know how to ruin someone's fun, don't you? I thought that I would surprise you with this Scissor Blade and then have a fun battle that we could both enjoy, but it seems my big plan has failed. Months of planning against you foiled by your newly acquired self-control. What am I going to do with my life now that my plan's fallen apart?"

Turning to walk away, Nui took three steps before she suddenly turned around, clapped her hands and winked at Ryuko, "Ah! That's why it is always a good idea to have a Plan B!"

"Plan B?" Ryuko glared heatedly at Nui as she raised her Scissor Blade, "What the hell are you talking about now?"

"Not going to tell you!" Nui giggled childishly as she spun around once and clapped her hands excitedly, "Just wait right here! I'll be back in just a second!"

When Nui vanished from sight, Ryuko thought the Grand Couturier's immense speed would be the biggest shock of the day. She had been able to somewhat keep up with Ichigo's speed when he fought Sanageyama up until the very end but she hadn't even seen Nui take a single step. How the hell was she going to fight if Nui actually tried to attack her? As the gears in her mind spun rapidly in order to come up with a plan, Ryuko heard a loud commotion coming from the stands before Nui reappeared in front of her. What Ryuko saw held firmly in her grasp caused her breath to hitch in her throat.

"M-Mako!"

Held above the ground in Nui's left hand was Mako, who was trying fervently to get free of the Grand Couturier's grip, "Ryuko! This strange girl who showed up before is trying to kidnap me! I'm too young for an arranged marriage to an old, rich man!"

"Your voice is really annoying," Nui told Mako as she held her purple Scissor Blade in her right hand, "If you don't be quiet, something really bad might just happen to you!"

"Wait!" Ryuko sprinted towards Nui, pulling the pin out of her Seki Tekkou and transforming wordlessly as she raced towards Nui.

"Nope, it's too late, Ryuko!" Nui giggled as she held her Scissor Blade behind Mako, "Say bye!"

Without a single shred of hesitation Nui plunged the Scissor Blade into Mako's chest and directly through her heart, causing the girl squirming her in hand to spasm in pain before quickly going still without saying another word. Flicking the body off her Scissor Blade,

Nui watched Mako roll to a stop several feet away from Ryuko with a pool of blood beginning to form underneath her body. Lightly giggling, Nui stabbed her blade into the ground and sighed, "Gosh! That was a lot of fun! So do you want to fight me yet, Ryuko? If you don't, I still have Plan C, you know, but it's going to require that I get a few things!"

Ryuko didn't hear a word Nui was saying as she knelt in horror next to Mako's lifeless body. Raising a shaking hand towards her best friend's face, tears streaming down her cheeks as she wished this were nothing but a nightmare, Ryuko turned to Nui with a dead look in her eyes when she felt something snap inside her chest. With red steam wafting off her body, Ryuko staggered back to her feet, heedless of Senketsu's voice screaming at her to calm down, and roared as everything seemed to become covered in a boiling red haze. As she felt her body contort and warp painfully, Ryuko only had a single thought on her mind - kill Nui Harime.

"Golly, now that you're all dressed up, Ryuko, the fun can begin!" Nui cheerfully explained. She could sense both Satsuki and Ichigo rushing towards her back, both of them already clad in their respective Kamui, but Nui didn't really care about them. She was going to have lots of fun and no one was going to stop her. As a berserk roar filled with both fury and lamentation pierced through the air, Nui giggled softly and held up her Scissor Blade. She loved it when a plan came together.

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## **Kamui Tales #17 - It's Just Acting**

Mako was running around in a full-blown panic after watching Nui impale her on the large screen that took up an entire wall of the room, "Eh, I'm dead? I can't be dead! If I'm dead, does that mean everyone else is dead as well? Have I joined a cult? I don't remember drinking any fruit punch!"

Ryuko ignored Mako's rambling in order to focus on memorized the lines for the next episode. Unlike most of her fellow actors, she dedicates a lot of time to her character's emotions and passions. That was the downside of playing a character that was constantly annoyed and angry at everything around her. If Ryuko didn't act perfectly then they would have to redo the whole scene again.

"Let's see here..." Ryuko mumbled as she turned the page in her script and realized she was going to need a lot of cough drops for all the growling and roaring she was going to have to do in the next episode. Banging her head against the table, she muttered, "Damn it, my throat is going to kill me tomorrow. I just know it."

"I don't know why you're so upset, Ryuko," Nui Harime blew a strand of her blonde hair out of her eyes, "You're not the one that has to act all sugary and sweet with one of your eyes covered. Do you know how many times I run into things every day?"

"I know, Nui, I know," Ryuko sighed and turned her head towards Satsuki. Her fellow actress has her face buried nose-deep into the script and was doing her best not to make eye contact with any of them. Ryuko thought it was extremely ironic that Satsuki, who played someone that was pompous and overbearing, was extremely shy off set. Ryuko could count the number of times Satsuki actually talked to them without having her face buried behind a book.

"Please calm down, Mako," Ururu said politely from right next to Nui. The two sisters, who ironically were twins that played twin sisters, looked nothing alike but had nearly identical personalities off set, "I'm trying to memorize my upcoming fight and I don't want to mess it up."

"Oh, sorry Ururu," Mako apologized and sat down, "You know how my imagination gets!"

"Tell me about it," Nui rolled her eyes and leaned on her arm, "Half the fandom already hates me and they haven't even seen this episode yet. I bet that once this episode airs everyone will want to murder me. Do they even realize how hard it is to constantly troll all

you guys while breaking the fourth wall? Even the readers don't notice half the stuff I say. Perhaps the director should just flash a sign whether I troll someone."

"That would be too obvious," Ururu commented.

"Hey, where's Ichigo?" Ryuko looked around for her fellow actor, "He was supposed to be here ten minutes ago."

"Ichigo got called on set at the last minute," Nui answered stoically as she texted on her phone, "Apparently the director wants to try something new in the next episode and wanted Ichigo's opinion on it. I saw Ragyo there so it must be an important scene."

"Ragyo was there?" Ryuko sighed and turned her attention back to her script. Ragyo was a great person to work with but the amount of time the woman needed to get her silver and rainbow hair to look the way it did was simply astonishing. Ryuko's single red bang only needed a twenty minute touch up every day but Ragyo's hair alone required two hours of work. Leaning back in her chair, Ryuko said, "Glad I'm not her. I would hate to have to walk around with glowing hair all day."

"You should turn to page seventy one, Ryuko," Satsuki muttered quietly from behind her own script, "When you put on Junketsu, your hair is supposed to become just like Ragyo's."

"Wait. What?" Ryuko tore through her own script until she saw what Satsuki was saying. Staring down at the offending words in the hopes her glare would delete them, Ryuko said the only word that could come to mind.

"... fuck."

# Heart of Glass

*So here is Chapter 30 but I have a big announcement - I have reached 1,000 reviews for **To My Death I Fight** ! This is a big occasion for me since when I started this story I never thought it would be this damn popular but all of your reviews and author alerts say otherwise... so thank you for all the effort of reviewing after every chapter. It really means a lot to me... but enough expository banter! You came here to read a chapter and damn it, you're going to enjoy it!*

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## Chapter 30 - Heart of Glass

"And... here we go!"

Nui Harime beamed happily at the chaos enveloping Satsuki's little stadium. While the students in the stands around her were fleeing for their very lives Nui was staring in glee at Ryuko in front of her. As blood began to boil and leak out of Senketsu's seams and Ryuko's body began contorting and twisting violently into something it was never meant to be, the Grand Couturier giggled in pure joy. Nui honestly hadn't expected to resort to Plan B to get Ryuko all dressed up in what she needed to wear. Don't get her wrong, though. Nui always planned on killed Ryuko's best friend ever since she heard her annoying voice.

"That just goes to show how dull humans are. You think they'll do one stupid thing and then they go do something else. Gosh, you would have thought something would have killed them all by now!" Nui noted sagely as a piece of debris collided with her head and instantly vaporized into dust. Holding her purple Scissor Blade lazily



behind her back, Nui watched as Ryuko finally emerged from the red steam.

"Wow! You look super awesome, Ryuko!" Nui clapped her hands cheerfully as she psychotically stared at the twisted and misshapen creature that used to be Ryuko. Due to the transformation, Ryuko's skin had turned an unhealthy green while her neck, legs and exposed abdomen were covered in splotches of red blood that appeared to be constantly leaking out from the spikes jutting out of her body. While Ryuko's Scissor Blade had fused to her right arm into a caricature of a weapon, her left arm had enlarged until it was nearly the same size as the rest of her body. As Ryuko's head twitched, blood spurting from the spikes in her neck, Nui sighed in delight at her plan coming together. She was so ecstatic that when she spun around and caught both of Satsuki and Ichigo's wrists in her hands, she still had a joyous look on her face.

"That wasn't very nice, you know. Sneak attacks are so last year, after all," she cheerfully reprimanded as she stared happily at Bakuzan and Tournesol, both of which were hovering just inches from her own skin with the sole intent of killing her. As she easily forced the Life Fiber blades away with her supernatural strength, Nui lazily flicked her wrists and sent both Ichigo and Satsuki flying through the air before then both managed to safely land on the feet. As the battle arena began to shake and crumble from Ryuko's transformation and fight, Ichigo ran and grabbed Mako's body before jumping off the platform and landing safely on the ground below.

"Damn," Ichigo looked sadly at Mako's unmoving form as he gently placed her on the ground before focusing all his attention on Nui. He couldn't afford to get sentimental right now. He needed to deal with the very real danger that was Nui Harime before he thought about Mako. When a roar from the berserk Ryuko tore through the air as she leapt at the Grand Couturier, Ichigo could not help but ask an equally disturbed Satsuki, "What happened to Ryuko?"

"I'm afraid Ryuko Matoi has lost control over her Kamui," Satsuki explained matter-of-factly as she landed next to him and rotated the

shoulder of the arm Nui had grabbed. After clenching her fist several times, she turned her blue eyes to Ichigo, "By being pushed emotionally over the edge, Matoi's lost all control over Senketsu and has merged with her Kamui into an unholy monstrosity. There is nothing that can be done besides putting Matoi out of her misery before she focuses her attention on the students."

There was a large crash followed by a resounding boom as Ryuko swung her left arm at Nui only to miss and strike the ground instead. Wincing as he was buffeted by a burst of heavy wind, Ichigo tightened his grip around Tournesol, "I don't believe that."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed, "Believe what you want, Ichigo, but the fact of the matter is what you see before you. Matoi is no longer in control of her actions and is a threat to anything around her. If we do not put her down it is only a matter of time until she exhausts all the blood in her body and dies of exsanguination. Nui Harime knows that and will most likely drag out the battle as long as possible to make Matoi suffer."

"I still don't care!" Ichigo glared at Satsuki and noticed that her Elite Four, including Gamagori, had appeared behind her at attention. Not sparing them another look, Ichigo began walking back towards the fight, "I'm going to save Ryuko because she is my friend. I don't give a damn if I'm your stupid Vice President or even about what your mother's planning. All I care about right now is saving Ryuko before she dies!"

Satsuki stood aside as Ichigo shifted into his Zangetsu configuration and vanished in burst of speed. While her eyes were capable of following his increasingly fast movements, she noted that Ichigo's speed now outclassed her ability to react and dodge while wearing Junketsu. Crushing the envious feeling in her chest, Satsuki snapped her fingers and immediately all four members of her Elite Four were standing behind her. Closing her eyes and taking a second to focus her thoughts, Satsuki slammed Bakuzan into the ground, "The complete destruction of the battle arena means the

Naturals Election must be put on hold. Gamagori, Inumuta and Sanageyama; you three shall evacuate the students."

"What about me Satsuki?" Nonon asked.

Satsuki gave Nonon a stern look before answering, "Jakuzure, since you are the only one with a Goku Uniform, you shall assist me in helping Ichigo neutralize Matoi."

While Satsuki was planning her next course of action, Nui Harime was having a grand time!

Dodging around the berserk Ryuko's fist, laughing as her opponent missed her once again, Nui brought a hand up to her cheek and sighed, "I thought this was going to be fun but it's just so boring when you can't put up any challenge whatsoever. I mean, your power is really high but you're just so darn slow! Gosh, if I knew this was what you were going to turn into I might have put off murdering your best friend for a little longer!"

Nui's words seemed to trigger something in Ryuko's mind because as soon as she mentioned Mako, Ryuko let out a loud roar before her speed abruptly increased. Spinning around the attack with her arms tucked cutely against her chest, Nui stuck her tongue out at Ryuko, "Nope! That's still not enough to even think of touching me!"

"Then how about this?"

Nui blinked owlishly as a fist impacted against the side of her head. As her body bent comically around the limb, Nui let out a giggle as she spun in the air before landing back on her feet with nary a scratch on her nearly perfect face. Humming quickly to herself, Nui clapped her hands together and laughed, "That was a really good attempt, Ichigo, but you're going to have to try a little harder if you want to hurt me."

With his arm outstretched and clad in his Zangetsu configuration, Ichigo noted with a small amount of satisfaction that he was now

able to land at least a sneak attack against the Grand Couturier. After thinking back on all his past encounters with Nui, Ichigo had begun to realize that she had been letting him hit hurt the entire time. Grimacing as his heart pounded in his chest at the prospect of fighting Nui alone, Ichigo brought Tournesol up into a defensive stance.

"Well then, I suppose I'll just have to try a bit harder to kill you," Ichigo growled as every muscle in his body tensed from the anticipation, "After what you did to Mako, I don't think anything less will be appropriate."

"Why do you care about some dull and boring human, anyway? You and I are far better than them!"

Ichigo blinked and suddenly found Nui standing in front of him with a look of expectation evident in her sapphire iris. With a look of extreme sadness etched on her face, she asked, "Could it be that you think I'm not important, Ichigo? Why do you keep shoving me, you very own cousin, away when all I want to do is love you?"

"Like hell I care about any of that!" Ichigo blitzed around Nui and tried to stab her through the neck but found to his irritation that the Grand Couturier had simply leaned out of the way. Staring over her shoulder into Ichigo's angry eyes, Nui giggled as she gripped Tournesol in her hand.

"That was really amazing!" Nui complicated Ichigo before she absentmindedly brought her other arm up and blocked Ryuko's attack with her purple Scissor Blade. Ryuko let out an unholy moan of anger before Nui spun around and kicked her in the chin, causing a spurt of blood to rain through the air, before following up with a punch that sent Ryuko flying across the stadium into a wall. Pouting in disappointment at how easy that was, Nui turned her attention back to Ichigo and stared at Mugetsu's transformation, "Gosh! Your Kamui is really amazing, Ichigo! Looking at it up close and personal is way better than in the stands like a human!"

Ichigo leapt away from Nui and raised Tournesol, "I'm going to stop you and save Ryuko!"

Nui pursed her lips cutely as she seemed to think about what Ichigo was saying. After a couple of moments of intense internal debating, Nui shook her head and pouted, "Hmm... nope! You can only do one thing or the other and I'm sure not going to let you save Ryuko! I'm still somewhat mad at what her dad did to my eye. It's only fair that she suffer a painful death for what he did to me. Besides, I worked really hard on my big surprise for her and you had to go a ruin it by telling her all about it! Since you are my cousin I love you but that doesn't mean I'm just going to -"

There was a tense moment of silence as everyone stared in shock and amazement at what cut off the Grand Couturier in mid-sentence. Satsuki was staring in bewilderment from on top of Nonon's Symphony Regalia Mark III as she flew down towards the fight. Aikuro and Tsumugu could not believe their eyes even while the former prepared to fire the special adhesive bullet that would stop Ryuko but also potentially kill her.

"Ururu..."

Standing between Ichigo and Nui, with her fist lodged firmly in the latter's stomach, was Ururu Tsumugiyu. As her pigtails were buffeted by the wind she kicked up while moving so quickly, Ururu looked into her twin's eye, "... you killed Mako."

Nui gasped as pain, true pain, radiated out from her stomach. She was a Life Fiber hybrid that was supposed to be able to heal from any wounds, apart from those caused by the complete Sword Scissors, in a matter of seconds. That was why her eye refused to heal no matter how much Lady Ragyo tried. Isshin Matoi had been sure to strike her eye with both blades before dying, taking away one of the most beautiful aspects of her body in his dying breath. Nui couldn't understand why Ururu could continue to hurt her so badly. When Lady Ragyo stabbed and severed her limbs when she was younger, she did so just so Nui could see that she could recover in

only a few seconds. None of those attacks had hurt but the single punch from Ururu was causing her to gag.

"What..." For once Nui had a lack of words as she tried to rationalize what was happening to her. Gripping Ururu's wrist with both of her hands, Nui grit her teeth and asked in a rare moment of complete normalcy, "How can you hurt me? This isn't supposed to be happening!"

If everyone was shocked by the Grand Couturier's alien outburst, Ururu was not showing it. Removing her fist from Nui's stomach, Ururu took a step back as the Grand Couturier managed to stay on her feet. Nui glared heatedly at Ururu even as her body finally began healing itself. As the pain in her stomach rapidly began vanishing, Nui held her Scissor Blade in a death grip and growled, "I don't care if you are my sister! You hurt me! ME! Now die!"

Nui did not like to use her full power in battle. Part of it was because as a Life Fiber hybrid using her full strength on a human, even if they were wearing a Kamui, was the same as saying they were strong enough to stop her. She would never admit that, not to herself or to others, and so Nui willingly held back her power whenever she was allowed to go out and have fun. When she fought against Satsuki and Ichigo's combined efforts at the Power Station, Nui hadn't used more than forty percent of her total strength and even that was more than enough to run circles around the two Kamui wearers. Even Ryuko's berserk form required no more than twenty percent of her power.

But Ururu was different.

Ururu was her twin sister, a fellow Life Fiber hybrid, and leagues above anything a human was capable of doing. That was why Nui was going to stop holding back. As her single sapphire eye darkened and her teeth appeared to file down to jagged daggers, Nui charged towards her twin sister with the sole intent of killing Ururu. She refused to feel pain ever again and even if it cost the twin sister she craved, Nui would never be hurt again.

"DIE! DIE! DIE!"

Nui charged at a speed that would have anyone at Honnouji Academy, even Ichigo, unable to follow. Every time one of her pink boots touched down the ground, Nui seemed to vanish before reappearing several feet away. With a maniacal look on her face and her Scissor Blade sparking against the ground, Nui swung her blade through the air with the singular intent of decapitating her twin sister for the crime of making her feel pain. No one would ever hurt Nui Harime again!

Ururu watched Nui charge to attack her with a stoic expression on her face. Even as her twin sister moved to kill her, Ururu did not allow the hatred she felt for the Grand Couturier to impact her judgment. Nui was just as strong as she was and thus was not an opponent she could afford to attack in a frothing rage. With the benefit of a clear mind aiding her, Ururu swiftly stepped to the side, barely avoiding being sliced by the Scissor Blade, and grabbed Nui's wrist in a gentle embrace.

"W-What?" Nui stared in shock and fear as Ururu calmly avoided her attack and grabbed her wrist. Staring into Ururu's emotionless gaze with a trembling eye, Nui tried to force her Scissor Blade forward and, when that failed, asked in a whisper, "How are you doing this? How can you make me feel pain?"

"Because I have friends," Ururu said bluntly as she slammed her knee into Nui's stomach. The Grand Couturier let out a gasp as she was propelled into the air before slamming hard into the walls of Honnouji Academy. With her foot still in the air, one hand holding down her skirt, Ururu continued emotionlessly, "You killed Mako. I could never lose to someone like you."

"Ururu," Ichigo wasn't as shocked as everyone else at Ururu's display of power. His dad had explained her relationship with Nui and at first Ichigo refused to believe it, but after thinking about it he started to see similarities between the two. Taking a single step towards Ururu, who hadn't moved since kicking Nui Harime, he

raised his hand and promptly stopped when she turned towards him with emotionless eyes.

"She killed Mako, Ichigo." Even without emotions in her voice, Ichigo could sense the sadness permeating every word Ururu said. Mako had been one of the only people in the world that truly understood and got along with her. Even though she wasn't the smartest or the strongest, Mako had been able to make Ururu feel happy and now that Nui killed her, Ururu didn't know how to feel.

"I know, Ururu. Dammit, I know," Ichigo tried to say more but was forced to turn his attention to Ryuko. The berserk Kamui wearer had finally recovered from being knocked away by Nui and was making a beeline directly for him. Letting out a nervous breath as he understood what needed to be done, Ichigo began to walk towards Ryuko when it hit him. Quickly turning back to Ururu before she could take off after Nui, he quickly said, "Ururu, Mako may not be as gone as you thought. Orihime is here, remember?"

The look in Ururu's eyes as she realized what Ichigo meant changed instantly. As much as she would have liked to just grab Orihime and bring her to Mako, Ururu knew that Nui was only a few moments away from coming back. Ururu couldn't risk Nui killing Orihime before Mako could be healed. Pushing off the ground with enough force to leave a small crater in her wake, Ururu flew through the hole Nui's body had made in Honnouji Academy and slammed her feet against the Grand Couturier's Scissor Blade. As identical sapphire eyes stared with equal expressions into each other, both sisters mentally made the same promise to make the other one pay for what they did to them.

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Aikuro Mikisugi cursed as he was forced to dodge to the side, his back roughly hitting the wall, when a piece of debris was flung into the air from far below. Carefully watching the nearly one ton block of



rock and debris slowly fall back to the ground, the undercover nudist quickly pushed himself back to his feet and ran across the fallen glass and metal with the M-98 Widow slung across his shoulder as a resounding crash echoed from the impact behind him. Aikuro had woken up with such high hopes for the day and now it looked like it was going to be a total disaster. Kinue had specifically warned him about the Grand Couturier's plans concerning Ryuko and like a total fool he believed all his preparations were enough to stop whatever it was Nui planned to do.

*"I was a fool," Aikuro mentally berated himself as a loud crash shook the outer wall of Honnouji Academy he was running across. Chancing a look down and noticing Ryuko's twisted, misshapen body, Aikuro grimaced, "How could I not see this coming? I severely underestimated the Grand Couturier's brutality."*

There was one course of action left for Aikuro to take before he would even think about using the special adhesive bullet on Ryuko. As much as he promised he would be the one to take the shot if the worst came to pass, Aikuro was having a hard time rationalizing killing Professor Matoi's only daughter. Tossing the M-98 Widow resting on his shoulder over to Tsumugu Kinagase, who caught the weapon while he placed a clip into his sewing machine gun, Aikuro reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone.

"Is this really the time to be making a call?" Tsumugu asked rhetorically as he slung the M-98 Widow over his shoulder and holstered his sewing machine gun against the small of his back.

"This is the perfect time to make a call," Aikuro answered hastily, "Before we get ourselves mired into a mess that we can't get out of, I think it would be wise to call the one person that may be able to offer help in saving Ryuko."

"I warned you about Matoi's lack of self-control," Tsumugu angrily growled at his colleague. The younger Kinagase sibling was having a difficult time adjusting to the situation at hand and it was only because he knew what would happen if Ryuko escaped that his

mind was focused. As memories of Kinue's own transformation and rampage ten years ago filtered through his mind, Tsumugu glanced down at the berserk Ryuko and cursed, "I damn well told you to take her down before she became too powerful. Even Kinue told you what would happen if she lost control! Mato wore her emotions on her sleeves and now she's been completely swallowed by her clothes."

Aikuro didn't respond to Tsumugu's harsh comments as they finally reached their destination. Skidding to a stop near the edge of the wall closest to the battle far below, Aikuro ducked down and pressed the phone against his ear. After he rang several times, and his heart rate increased at the prospect of no one answering it, a tired voice answered, "Hello?"

"Hello Isshin," Aikuro answered before he and Tsumugu were buffeted by a shockwave, "We have a problem - Code Veronica."

Despite the situation devolving around them into a mixture of chaos and death, Isshin Kurosaki's voice had a distinct lack of urgency. It was almost like he expected something like this to happen and when he spoke, Aikuro noticed a normalcy in the older man's tone.

*" Code Veronica... that's not good. I know it may look bad but if Tsumugu's there then things might not be as bad as they appear. First things first, though. What triggered Ryuko's berserk configuration? I thought for sure Ichigo's presence and my conversation with Ryuko would have dampened her rage and hate towards Nui Harime enough for her not to lose control of Senketsu."*

Aikuro grimaced as he struggled on what to say. Staring down over the side of the wall, the blue haired teacher was stunned when Ururu Tsumugiya appeared out of nowhere and hit the Grand Couturier hard enough to not only knock the air out of her but blast a crater into the far wall of Honnouji Academy. As the entire school shook from the impact, Aikuro regained control of his motor functions and answered, "Your plan did work. Ryuko was able to control herself enough that she did not recklessly charged at the Grand Couturier, but..."

*"... but? What happened, Aikuro?"*

As he was about to answer, Tsumugu tore the phone out of his hand and held it up to his ear. Stepping over to the edge of the wall and watching as the Grand Couturier was thrown into the main building of Honnouji Academy, Tsumugu narrowed his eyes before answering the question, "Isshin, Nui Harime had a backup plan in case her initial attempt at enraging Matoi failed. She killed Mako Mankanshoku right in front of Matoi's eyes. That's what triggered her current berserk state."

On the other end of the line, Isshin was relieved Yuzu and Karin weren't home to see him like this. There were not many times Isshin could recall being visibly enraged or upset enough to get angry. One of them had been when he was fighting that strange hollow the night he met Masaki and another was when he realized that Ragyo had been the one to kidnap Ichigo from right under his nose. As a sense of power stifled the air in the Kurosaki Household, Isshin moved into a room without a window as his black hair flaked away to silver and a bright rainbow light began shining from somewhere within it.

Isshin rubbed his now maroon eyes as his disguise failed due to his anger at the situation. He had anticipated Nui would be depraved enough to hurt one of Ryuko's friends in a misguided attempt at getting back at Souchiro for what he did to her eye. He may have done his best to live life as a normal human being, but he could not fully understand Nui Harime's innate rage at her injury. As a Life Fiber Hybrid, Nui was most likely unaccustomed to actual pain and injuries. To be hurt and not instantly heal probably filled her with fear that she was human, which was something Ragyo undoubtedly raised her to not believe.

"I wonder how you would have turned out if I could have saved you as well." Isshin muttered with his hand over the phone. He didn't need Aikuro or Tsumugu hearing this. There were many things Isshin regretted doing, and not doing, in his life and being unable to take Nui with him when he removed Ururu from Revocs was high on that list. Ururu had turned out fairly normal after being raised by Kisuke

and it pained him to think of how Nui would have been in a similar situation if Ragyo hadn't been the sole person to raise her.

Tsumugu was starting to lose his patience when Isshin did not speak for nearly a minute. Just as he was about to put the phone down and deal with Matoi himself, the older man finally spoke, *"I knew Nui would have a Plan B, she's a lot smarter than most people give her credit for, but I was certain Ururu's presence at Honnouji would be enough of a deterrent to keep Nui from trying anything."*

"Who, or what, is Ururu Tsumugiya?" Tsumugu demanded tensely, "She's not a normal girl, Isshin, and the fact that she just kicked Nui Harime clear across the academy rubs me the wrong way."

*" Ok. I'm going to tell you two everything so put the phone on speaker,"* Isshin waited a moment for Tsumugu to do just that before continuing, *"This is very important. Ryuko can last no longer than fifteen minutes in her berserk state before she runs out of blood. I'm going to tell you two a couple of very important pieces of information. Do not ask any questions until Ryuko is saved, understood?"*

Tsumugu seemed suspicious of where Isshin was going with this but the combined effort of Aikuro's glare and the adhesive bullet he still had hanging around his neck caused him to nevertheless nod in agreement, "Alright. Tell us what we need to know and start with Ururu Tsumugiya."

*" I was going to start there anyway. Ururu is Nui Harime's twin sister."*

Isshin waited a moment for the shock to pass through the two nudists before he continued, *"About seventeen years ago I managed to remove Ururu from Revocs and Ragyo's control. I knew Ragyo would focus all her efforts on tracking me down and getting her daughter back so I did the best thing I could and left her in the hands of an old friend to be raised as a normal girl. He didn't know about Ururu's origins and I didn't make it a point to tell him. Even Ururu did not know of her true family until I told her on Parent Student Day."*

"That explains a lot," Aikuro was still a bit stunned by the fact Ururu Tsumugiya was the twin sister of Nui Harime. Headquarters was going to have his head for not figuring this out on his own. Mentally noting to blame Isshin, which was the truth after all, Aikuro asked, "Now about Ryuko?"

*"If Ryuko truly lost control over Senketsu, then she would be dead,"* Isshin answered bluntly, *"Since she's still alive, some part of her is controlling what she does and going by what Nui did, it's probably the goal of killing Nui. I'm sure Ichigo is doing his best to try and break through to Ryuko but from what I've seen the only one able to do that without fail is Mako. That is why you need to find and bring Orihime Inoue to where Mako is. Tell her I said it's ok and she'll do the rest."*

"I don't know how finding a random girl will help," Tsumugu muttered in annoyance before noticing Kon, who was sitting on his shoulder, appear to perk up considerably upon the mentioning of Orihime's name. Grasping the adhesive bullet in his hand, Tsumugu said, "Unless the girl is able to raise Mankanshoku from the dead, she's completely useless. It's better if I use the adhesive bullet on Mato. It will knock her out of her berserk state with a 45% chance of survival."

*"That brings me to the second piece of information,"* Isshin's voice became cold and even across the phone Aikuro and Tsumugu broke out in a cold sweat as he spoke, *"Do not repeat what I'm telling you to anyone. I've already made sure Satsuki's hacker friend can't hear my voice so do not speak a word of this to anyone at Nudist Beach. Orihime Inoue's survival is vital because she alone possesses the ability to reverse causality."*

"Impossible!" Tsumugu shouted in a rare outburst of emotion and surprise, "That would mean - "

*"She can reverse events to before Mako was killed, effectively bringing her back to a state before dying. Now you see why it is important you do not mention this to anyone. Orihime is the only one*

*able to save Ryuko. If Ragyo were to find out about her powers, it would be bad, but if Nui were to realize her plans depended on a single girl's survival, nothing would be able to stand in her way."*

"I understand," Aikuro grabbed the M-98 Widow from Tsumugu before lying down on his stomach. Staring through the scope at the twitching form of Ryuko, he sighed and said, "I'll do my best to keep Ryuko pinned down from up here while Tsumugu does his best to track down this Orihime Inoue. The problem is going to be time, Isshin, since we only have about ten minutes to find her."

"You can just leave finding Orihime to me!"

Kon jumped off Tsumugu's shoulder and turned off the phone before turning his undivided attention to a perplexed Aikuro. Tapping his stuffed chest proudly, he gloated, "Ichigo's dad made sure to build into my lovely body the ability to track down any of Ichigo's friends in case they got in trouble. I know exactly where my gorgeous princess is, so if you want to find Orihime in time and save Ryuko you will have to bring me along with you!"

"Very well, then."

Tsumugu roughly picked Kon off the ground and held him in front of his face, "I don't have time to tell you two useful pieces of information. Just bring me to Orihime Inoue and you will live to see the sunset, got it?"

Kon snapped off a nervous salute as Tsumugu pressed the muzzle of his sewing machine gun under his chin, "Y-Yes sir!"

Satisfied with Kon's answer, Tsumugu took a step back before running towards the edge of the wall. As he fell downwards towards the stadium, where hundreds of students had yet to flee to safety, he glanced at the mod soul plushie, "Tell me something. How far down the rabbit-hole am I going to have to go before Isshin explains just how this Orihime can do what she can do?"

"Oh trust me, there's a lot that Ichigo's dad hasn't told you," Kon explained mysteriously as Tsumugu landed in a crouch, "It's kind of annoying, isn't it?"

"Yes," Tsumugu answered stoically before grabbing Kon once more, "Now find Orihime Inoue."

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When Ragyo Kiryuin failed to infuse her first two daughters with Life Fibers, even discarding the second one like trash soon after she was born, she realized her once human body would never be able to bear a child capable of bonding with Life Fibers at the same level as herself. Despite being blessed with a portion of its power and turning her into a Life Fiber Hybrid, Ragyo knew the power of ancient creature far eclipsed her own. If anything could grant her the children she needed, it would be the Original Life Fiber. After many weeks of failed experimentations and testing Ragyo was finally able to insert several of her fertilized eggs into artificial wombs built within the Original Life Fiber.

After several months passed with Souchiro growing suspicious of her constant excursions down to the Original Life Fiber, Ragyo finally decided to check on the progress of her experiment. She already knew most of her fertilized eggs would not survive the normally lethal process of being infused with Life Fibers, but Ragyo expected at least one of the nearly three dozen to have survived. It was to her eternal pride and amusement that not only had one actually survived but had split apart in the intervening months into two healthy embryos, each of which glowed with a satisfying purple color.

As she carefully examined the twins that would help herald the world into a new age, one that was ruled by Life Fibers, Ragyo had already come up with names for them. She could not call them Kiryuins, for that would draw too much attention from the public and Souchiro about where the twins had come from. Instead Ragyo decided for

them names that would signal what they truly were and their purpose for existing.

Nui and Amu Harime.

More than seventeen years later Ururu Tsumugiya crashed through several floors of Honnouji Academy, her body leaving a nearly perfect imprint behind as she fell, before she exploded through the ceiling of the grand ballroom that had been the location of the Parent Student Day ceremony. Twisting around as she flew towards the ground, Ururu slammed feet-first into the ground, cracking it for a good fifteen feet around her. Moving to take a step forward, Ururu stumbled as a lance of pain shot up her left leg, courtesy of an injury sustained during her fight against Nui Harime. Biting her lip and pushing past the pain, Ururu took advantage of the momentary lapse in fighting to gather her thoughts.

"She's much tougher than I thought," Ururu muttered as the pain in her leg began to diminish. Perking up when she sensed her opponent rapidly falling towards her, Ururu spun around and punched upwards as Nui swung downwards. Her gauntlet-covered fist met Nui's purple Scissor Blade in a titanic shower of purple light and stars before both girls were thrown away from each other.

As she skidded to a stop, her pink boots destroying the polished marble flooring with ease, Nui's face lacked both the normal cheery and saccharine look she was known to wear as well as the psychotic rage she wore whenever things did not go her way. Instead of either of those, Nui simply possessed a seething anger towards Ururu. Staring at her broken left arm before focusing her sapphire eye upon her equally injured opponent, Nui still could not understand how her twin sister could be hurting her so badly. The Life Fibers in her body should have healed her a long time ago but every injury she's sustained in her battle against Ururu remained on her body. Tasting something weird in her mouth, Nui spat on the ground and noticing there was blood in her saliva.



Gritting her teeth angrily, her single eye narrowing in rage at yet another sign that something was wrong with her body, Nui dashed towards Ururu with her Scissor Blade ready to swing down towards her opponent's neck. Grinning savagely as she saw Ururu bring her arms up to block her attack, Nui took one more step before she vanished and reappeared behind Ururu with her Scissor Blade poised to skewer her.

"Take this!" Nui shouted angrily, her tone lacking any cheerfulness.

Years of training under shinigami like Kisuke Urahara and Yoruichi Shihoin allowed Ururu to sense Nui's incoming attack as soon as the Grand Couturier appeared behind her. Ducking down and spinning to the side as Nui's Scissor Blade attempted to pierce her body, Ururu felt pain radiate from her shoulder. While her quick reflexes had allowed her to avoid a major injury, Nui's speed managed to cut her shoulder, causing her uniform to stain red from her blood.

"You're really quick!" Nui shouted, her tone expressing a mix of anger and satisfaction. She was still incredibly angry that Ururu was not only making her feel pain but also seemed to be keeping up with all her attacks. At the same time she was immensely satisfied that there was someone out there besides Lady Ragyo and Isshin Shiba that could fight her on an even level. As much as Satsuki liked to say how strong and authoritative she was, the firstborn Kiryuin daughter could not hold a candle to Nui's full power even if she used Junketsu. Her sister, on the other hand, was forcing Nui to give it her all. Holding her Scissor Blade in front of her body, purple light reflecting off the blade onto her face, Nui grinned savagely, "But I'm really busy today so do me a big favor and just stand still!"

Nui sprinted at Ururu with her Scissor Blade already arcing through the air, her feet taking off fast enough to crumple the floor behind her. Even as she attacked her twin sister with a flurry of attacks too fast for even Ichigo in Mugetsu Zangetsu to avoid, Nui saw with irritation that Ururu was either dodging out of the way or deflecting her attacks with her Powersoul Mark II gauntlets. Every time her blade clashed against them, Nui could sense hardened Life Fibers

within the gauntlets repel her strikes and could not help but be amazed at the craftsmanship. Lady Ragyo had told her that hardened Life Fibers could only be cast into bladed weapons in order to keep the Life Fibers stable, but whoever made Ururu's gauntlets had seemingly overcome a problem both Lady Ragyo and the Grand Couturier could not find a solution for.

"Those gloves of yours are simply to die for! You must tell me who made them!" Nui shouted as she spun around, her Scissor Blade dragging along the ground accompanied by a shower of sparks. Tensing the muscles in her right arm, she exploded forward at full power and connected her blade against Ururu's guard, causing Ururu to skid several dozen feet along the ground before coming to a stop.

Ururu narrowed her eyes as a cloud of dust was kicked up but she was still able to sense Nui Harime descending through the air towards her. Quickly crossing her arms in front of her body, she caught the Grand Couturier's Scissor Blade between the protected portions of her arms. As Nui floated in the air above her sister, her pink Lolita dress fluttering gently in an unfelt breeze, she leaned forward until her face was only inches away from Ururu's and asked, "Was it the same man that created Ichigo's Kamui and blade? Did Kisuke Urahara make these lovely gloves of yours?"

"Don't you mention Mr. Urahara's name!"

Nui let out a gasp of pain as Ururu managed to push her Scissor Blade away from her body and smashed her fist into her stomach. Using her Scissor Blade as a crutch, Nui pushed herself away from her twin sister until she was a comfortable distance away. Letting go of her weapon in order to hold her hurt stomach, Nui clenched her teeth and shouted, "What's so great about these naked apes that you would fight me? You're my sister. We were supposed to work together to bring Lady Ragyo's dreams to fruition!"

"I don't care if you're my sister," Ururu retorted as she began favoring her right leg, "You killed Mr. Urahara and Mako. I won't forgive you

no matter what you say."

"Do you know how long I've been here watching you?" Nui asked as she reached for her Scissor Blade once more. The anger she was feeling toward Ururu was beginning to die down, only to be replaced by a feeling of betrayal. Amu was her sister, they were supposed to do everything together and make sure nothing could stop Lady Ragyo's plans. This wasn't how it was supposed to turn out. Amu wasn't supposed to be fighting her like this. It had to be the fault of all those humans she hung out with, "I've watched you and Ichigo mingle with Satsuki and the other humans and treat them as your equals. They're nothing but food for Life Fibers, so tell me why you care whether I killed one stupid human or twenty?"

Strafing to the left as Nui attacked her, Ururu reached out and clasped her hands around the Scissor Blade. Hooking her fingers inside the hole near the handle, Ururu held onto the blade firmly as she answered, "Mako was my friend. She didn't care that I was shy and didn't like to talk to other people. She did nothing to you, but you killed her because you were angry at Ryuko's dad for no reason."

"No reason?" Nui smashed her knee into Ururu's stomach, causing her to let go of the Scissor Blade and take a step back. In a move reminiscent of how the fight started, Nui immediately spun around and kicked Ururu squarely in the chest, sending her bouncing along the ground across the ballroom, "NO REASON? He tore out my eye!"

As Ururu flipped onto her feet and recovered from Nui's kick, she looked up and saw the Grand Couturier gripping the edge of the purple eyepatch covering her left eye with her hand. Staring intensely into her twin's eyes, Nui proceeded to tear off the eyepatch had been the sign of her disgraceful loss against Ryuko's dad seven months ago. Blue eyes widening from shock, Ururu asked, "What happened to your eye?"

Under the eyepatch that took up most of the left side of Nui's face was a jagged x-shaped scar stretching across her left eye. Where

her eye should have been there was nothing but the telltale glow of the purple Life Fibers from inside her body. Crushing the eyepatch in her hand before throwing it away, Nui snarled at Ururu and said, "Ryuko's dad did this to my eye! I could live with him tricking me into taking this Scissor Blade instead of Ryuko's Kamui. If that had been all he did, I wouldn't have even bothered to try and kill Ryuko, but he destroyed my eye!"

"... that gives you no right to go after Ryuko," Ururu answered after a moment of hesitation. Sliding her foot back, wincing slightly from the pain, she brought up her purple gauntlets and asked, "You killed him though, so why would you go after Ryuko?"

Instead of answering her question, Nui sprinted towards Ururu and smashed her Scissor Blade against her Powersoul gauntlets. Staring angrily at the twin sapphire eyes that she should still possess, Nui spat, "You and I are both Life Fiber Hybrids! We're better than those lousy humans with their stupid problems and lack of power and intelligence, yet Ryuko's dad had to go and do this to me! I can regenerate my arm if it's cut off but what he did to my eye will never heal! I'm going to be half-blind for the rest of my life! As my sister you should know how that feels!"

"Unfortunately, I do not," Ururu answered with a hint of annoyance before she pushed Nui away from her body. Springing forward before the Grand Couturier could recover, Ururu delivered several quick punches to Nui before ending with an uppercut that sent her flying into the air and slamming into the ceiling.

"And then there's you," Nui continued while ignoring the blood streaming from several new cuts on her face. Flipping onto her feet while hanging upside-down on the ceiling, Nui pointed her Scissor Blade down at Ururu, "Every time you hit me, I feel pain and bleed, but the worst thing is that I can't heal! What have you done to me to make me feel so weak! Tell me!"

Nui crouched on the ceiling before pushing off with enough force to destroy a good chunk of it. Falling down towards Ururu while

screaming angrily, Nui tried to bisect her sister only for Ururu to quickly jump out of the way. As her Scissor Blade cut deeply into the marble floor, Nui shook her blonde hair out from in front of her eyes, "Between you and me, I hope Ichigo is able to bring Ryuko back to her senses. I want to keep killing her friends so she feels the same amount of pain I feel whenever I look into the mirror!"

Forced onto the stage when she avoided Nui's downward slash, Ururu was about to attack when a thought passed through her mind. Several things Nui did over the past few weeks were bothering her and Ururu needed to understand more. Relaxing her body, Ururu asked, "What about Ichigo?"

Nui paused in mid-step, her Scissor Blade trembling from the force of her grip, as Ururu's words reached her. She truly loved Ichigo. He was the son of the man Lady Ragyo loved, was really strong and best of all was exactly like her. Lady Ragyo had taught her that family, especially those that were blessed by the Original Life Fiber, were more important than anything else. They were the only ones that would survive the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet and help spread Life Fibers throughout the universe.

"Ichigo is my cousin," Nui's voice dropped to a low whisper as she tilted her head forward, her long blonde hair hanging in front of her face made it impossible for Ururu to see anything. Lowering her purple Scissor blade into the tip of the weapon barely touched the floor, Nui looked up at Ururu with a vacant expression in her eye, "I hate Ryuko for what her dad did to me so I plan to make her death as long and painful as possible, but don't you ever say I would hurt Ichigo. He's my family and family needs to stick together, but that's not something I expect someone like you to understand."

Ururu noticed Nui's arm tensing up and quickly spun to the side as the Grand Couturier swung her Scissor Blade and released a crescent of pressure that left a large gash in the wall behind her. Skidding to a stop before leaping into the air to dodge Nui's next long-range attack, she said, "Ichigo told me about what you did to him while Ryuko was fighting Mako. He said you nearly killed him."

"He wasn't supposed to still be asleep!" Nui shouted before flicking her wrist and morphing the purple Scissor Blade into a double-bladed scythe. Holding the transfigured weapon by the handle, she bit her lip and stared at her twin, "Ichigo was supposed to already be awake. I saw him heal from my attacks right before eyes. I wasn't trying to kill him, but when he kept playing dumb with me I just couldn't stand it any longer! If I needed to hurt him some more so he finally woke up, I was ok with that! Once he was awake and his eyes were opened to the real world, he would have forgiven me and we would have been a happy family... but then Satsuki had to come and interrupt it. She ruined everything!"

With one of her arms out of commission, Nui's prowess with her transformed purple Scissor Blade was greatly diminished. That did not mean she could not still fight. Spinning the scythe around her wrist, the purple weapon nothing more than a blur in the air, Nui dragged one end of it along the ground before slicing up through the air. There was a split second pause before a trail of purple energy raged across the ground towards Ururu, who only had a moment to defend herself before an explosion that could be seen from Honnou City enveloped her.

"Ha... Ha... Ha..."

Nui panted from exhaustion after having used so much of her energy in that one attack. She was experiencing so many new and ugly feelings this morning that she mentally promised herself to never be taken off guard again. Leaning on her Scissor Blade, Nui smirked and marveled at the destruction her attack caused, "Gosh, I guess I don't know my own strength."

As she waited for Ururu to emerge from the attack, since it was nowhere nearly strong enough to kill someone like her, Nui sensed something approaching from below her feet. Quickly leaping back, Nui barely avoided being blindsided by Ururu, who had forced her way upwards through the floor in an attempt to take the Grand Couturier by surprise. As she stared at the fist passing only inches from her face, Nui stared into her sister's eyes for several seconds

before she brought her leg up and kicked Ururu in the arm. Propelling herself away from her sister, Nui flipped through the air before landing on the ground with nary a sound.

"That was quite scary," Nui beheld her sister's appearance. Ururu was covered in blood, all of which stemmed from the myriad of cuts dotting her face and arms. Intrigued by the prospect that her sister wasn't bothered at all by the pain, Nui pointed her Scissor Blade at her and asked, "But you look all worn out and bruised. Perhaps you would like to give up now?"

"You're wrong," Ururu countered emotionlessly as she brought her arms up into a fighting stance, "My friends are counting on me to defeat you. I cannot lose to someone like you."

"Someone like me...?" Nui tilted her head to the side, her hair falling down to cover up her missing left eye, "... that's not a nice thing to say. In fact, it was very mean of you to suggest we're any different. Mon-Mignon Prêt-à-Porter!"

Ururu watched as dozens of clones, identical in every way to the Grand Couturier, popped into existence around Nui. As she took a step back to assess the situation and think, Ururu sensed that none of Nui's clones possessed more than a fraction of the Grand Couturier's full power. While that would make defeating the clones not as difficult as she originally thought, Mr. Urahara had taught her to never underestimate an opponent despite their power. Just because the clones may not be as strong or fast as her doesn't mean they don't possess other abilities that more than make up for that.

"Don't you just love being around yourself?" Nui grabbed one of her clones, which still wore an eyepatch and had a saccharine smile plastered on its face, and brought it in for a one-armed hug. Smashing her face against her clone, both of them looking straight at Ururu, Nui grinned and said, "There's no better person to have around than yourself I always say! Now before I end this stupid spat between us, why don't you go ahead and use Mon-Mignon Prêt-à-Porter? It will make defeating you much more exciting, you know!"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you but I can't do anything like this," Ururu muttered back quietly.

"Of course you can!" Nui pushed away from her clone and walked towards Ururu with her hand on her chest right where her heart was, "Our hearts beat as one, Amu! We both came from the same bundle of Life Fibers so everything I can do, you can do as well! And I know you're thinking about how stupid it is of me to tell you all this. Just between the two of us, this is the only time in my entire life that I've fought someone at my full power. Lady Ragyo's little bodyguard squad is simply boring once they get their Raiment. You would think a uniform that's half Life Fibers would put up enough of a fight to last more than ten seconds against me. *La vie est drôle.*"

As much as Ururu did not want to hear Nui talk, several things the Grand Couturier mentioned led her to reconsider for the time being. Apparently there existed a group under Ragyo Kiryuin that possessed the equivalent of a Five-Star Goku Uniform. Deciding to stall for time while she came up with a better plan to neutralize Nui long enough for Orihime to help Mako, Ururu asked, "If you are my twin sister then you must know what you're doing is wrong. We are the same and yet we have different ideas and concepts of morality. Why are you doing this?"

Nui was strangely silent as she pondered Ururu's question before she spoke, her voice as stoic and level as Ururu's usually was, "Lady Ragyo is my mother. There is nothing I would not do for her. Now that's enough expository banter! Go ahead and bring out your clones so we can have some real fun!"

"No."

Ururu shook her head in refusal. As Nui's eye widened in surprise as her twin's answer, she continued, "Maybe you're right. Perhaps I can create clones the same way you can, but despite all that I won't stoop to your level. We may be twins that are the same in almost every way, but I'm not you and I will never be you. I'm going to fight



you and make you pay for what you did to Mako, Mr. Urahara and Ryuko's dad."

"Gosh, for some reason you sure are talkative lately. Are you sure you're feeling alright?" Nui's voice lacked any sort of amusement as she tried to understand what was going on inside Ururu's mind. Throughout her entire time watching Ichigo and Ryuko, Nui had never heard her sister utter more than a sentence or two at a time. There was something strange going on and it wasn't just affecting Ururu, but her as well. Nui had felt her normally expressive personality calming down more and more as the fight progressed. She had never been this passive in her life and it was annoying her to feel this way.

"Stooping down to my level? That wasn't a very nice thing to say, you know," Nui clenched her teeth and tightened her grip on her Scissor Blade. Hefting the weapon with ease onto her shoulder, Nui twirled around and exclaimed, "I think you need to learn proper manners! Go get her girls!"

With a resounding cry of 'Oui,' all the clones raced towards Ururu, who watched them approach with a dispassionate stare. She knew Nui wouldn't send her clones at her unless she had something planned so with a burst of power Ururu jumped up into the air. Waiting for the clones to come up after her, Ururu cocked her fists back and silently let loose a flurry of powerful punches that not only destroyed all the clones within range, which reverted to pink scraps of clothes upon being defeated, but also blew away every other airborne clone from the resulting shockwave.

"What the hell is going on?"

Nui seethed as she observed Ururu deal with her clones with practiced ease. Sure she could have done the same thing to her clones with only one arm, they were quite weak after all, but it was the fact she was at a disadvantage in a straight fight against her sister that had Nui's incredible intellect racing to find a solution to her problem. With her arm broken, thus limiting the effectiveness of

her Scissor Blade, the worst scenario Nui could think of was Ururu blowing through all her clones and proceeded straight to her. She may have put up a good effort in their past clashes, but without her normally legendary regeneration it was all bluster. Ururu's left leg may be partially broken, courtesy of a lucky strike by her, but it seemed as if her sister's ability to use her legs hadn't diminished at all. As Ururu slammed into the ground in front of her, destroying most of her remaining clones, a completely foreign thought passed through her mind.

*"I-I can't beat her..."*

Summoning as many clones as she could, the scraps of cloth flying out of her large pigtails before transforming into her exact replicas, Nui's one eye trembled as she watched her sister destroy her clones while constantly moving closer and closer towards her. Holding her purple Scissor Blade in front of her body, ignorant of the sheen of cold sweat coating her skin, Nui began to slowly back away, *"I have to get away from Amu until my arm heals. If I don't escape, she's really going to kill me!"*

"Where are you going?" Ururu's calm voice asked from within the crowd of clones before, in a massive burst of purple energy, destroyed every single replica within twenty feet of her body.

"That's none of your business!" Nui shouted with false bravado before spinning around and sending out another wave of clones. As all her clones rushed towards Ururu at the same time, Nui spun around on her heel and headed in the opposite direction. Turning her head around and blowing a mocking kiss to her twin sister, Nui decided it was time to cut her losses and get away. She had perhaps thirty seconds before Ururu destroyed all her clones, but for Nui that was enough time for her regeneration to finally snap back into shape and start working again. In the meantime, there was something Nui wanted to check.

"Hmmm..." Nui's bubbly personality began to reassert itself, much to her joy, and she smiled widely as an idea came to her. Swinging her

Scissor Blade lazily through the air with her right arm, Nui watched as the wall in front of her exploded into nonexistence, "Gosh, I wonder how Ichigo is doing against Ryuko? I haven't heard anything for a while, so he either killed her or managed to bring her back. I can work with both options but I really should go check up on him! My cousin could do with some cheering up after watching his friend die, after all!"

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Ichigo grunted as his back hit the outer wall of Honnouji Academy hard enough to not only crack the surface around him, but cause a small hole to be blown out the other side of the wall. Pulling his body out of the indentation it made in the wall, Ichigo quickly leapt back to his feet and dodged to the side as Ryuko came crashing through the air. Running horizontally along the wall reminiscent of how Satsuki Kiryuin did in her fight against him, Ichigo began to realize that his plan wasn't working. Nothing he said seemed to be able to pierce the haze of rage and sorry clouding Ryuko's mind. The only person who could have possibly brought Ryuko out of her current state was Mako and she was dead.

" *Damn it, where is Orihime?*" Ichigo's eyes looked across the courtyard for any sign of his friend but with all the smoke and dust clogging the air from his fight against Ryuko it was damn near impossible to see anything.

"Mugetsu, can you try talking to Senketsu?" Ichigo asked as he turned around, his heels slightly digging into the wall as he skidded to a stop. Holding Tournesol out to the side in a one-handed grip, Ichigo's eyes narrowed and his body tensed as he sensed Ryuko beginning to chase him once more.

" ***I've been trying since Ryuko lost control of Senketsu,***" the Kamui answered seriously with a lack of her usually annoyance. Mugetsu might have found Senketsu's general attitude irritating to no

end, but even she would never wish for what happened to her fellow Kamui, ***"Ryuko's raging emotions around Mako's murder by Nui Harime is swallowing up any conscious thoughts Senketsu might have. Ryuko and Senketsu have merged into a monster with the singular drive of taking out her rage on anything that catches her attention."***

At that moment Ryuko leapt towards Ichigo, her enlarged left arm dragging along the wall as she let loose a roar and charged forward even faster. Swallowing his nervousness at fighting his friend, Ichigo raced towards Ryuko with Tournesol already moving through the air as Ryuko swung the red Scissor Blade fused with her right arm. Blue blade met red in a shower of energy and light as both combatants sought to overpower the other for different reasons. When Ryuko moaned in a distorted voice and began pushing back with more force as a spurt of blood arced out of her neck, Ichigo grimaced and pushed back with even more force. For a second there was nothing but silence as the light emanating from the fight intensified before the pressure reached a critical point and was released in an explosion powerful enough to envelop half of Honnouji Academy in a cloud of debris.

"Mugetsu Gufū!"

As his legs morphed into the familiar twin jets and Mugetsu's eyes extended back behind him, Ichigo flew up in the air as the segment of wall exploded into dust around him. Flying high above Honnouji Academy, Tournesol at the ready and his eyes scanning for Ryuko, he was stunned when he saw his body covered by a massive shadow. Descending towards him while emitting a bestial moan, Ryuko twisted her misshapen body around and swung her left arm at Ichigo. With no time to dodge the attack, Ichigo did the best thing he could think of and quickly brought Tournesol in front of his body. As her bloody fist hit Ichigo's blade, he was blasted down to the ground with enough force that he temporarily broke the sound barrier with a resounding crackle before slamming into the ground.

"Damn..."

Ichigo pulled himself out of the rubble a little worse for wear and watched as Ryuko hit the ground some distance away from him. While Mugetsu looked scuffed up with a few tears, he was relatively uninjured apart from a few scrapes and cuts on his face. Standing back on his feet and letting a deep sigh escape his lips, Ichigo began to move towards Ryuko, hoping that another plan to help her would come to mind, when Mugetsu spoke.

***" Ryuko does not have much longer to live, Ichigo. The rate at which Senketsu is absorbing her blood means she has around seven or eight minutes before she dies."***

"What?"

***" It is as I said. Ryuko has lost control of Senketsu and, thus, will die soon,"*** Mugetsu paused, her eyes narrowing as she thought back on something Ichigo said earlier. Looking towards her wearer with a suspicious stare, she asked, ***"You told Ururu that Orihime was here. What did that mean?"***

Mugetsu's question caused Ichigo to pause. He was conflicted about whether he should say anything to his Kamui about Orihime. He knew he would never be able to keep his past a secret forever since trouble always seemed to find a way to come to him, but he hoped he would have more time. Looking around at the death and destruction surrounding him, Ichigo made up his mind, "I mentioned Orihime to Ururu because she has a special ability to reject events. If I can get Mako to her, Orihime can use her ability to reject Nui Harime ever killing her."

***" That's impossible,"*** Mugetsu's multicolored eyes widened in stunned shock as words seemed to temporarily fail her. She looked into Ichigo eyes, hoping he was kidding around, but when she saw nothing but truth in them she asked, ***"How is that possible. No human should possess such ability."***

"Believe me, I know," Ichigo muttered. He was one of the few people that knew just how dangerous Orihime's ability truly was. Her current

level of power was kept in check by her morality and lack of willingness to fight, but Ichigo knew what might happen if someone, such as Sosuke Aizen, were to have it.

When a pained moan followed by a scream of agony echoed through the smoke-filled area, Ichigo stepped back and readied himself for what was to come. Ryuko's attacks were getting faster and more powerful by the second. While he was confident he was stronger than her for the time being, Ichigo didn't want to risk Ryuko getting too out of control. He still wanted to save her, but if she killed him, there would be no stopping her until she died.

"God damn it!" Ichigo seethed in a mixture of anger and sorrow, "Don't make me do it, Ryuko!"

Ryuko appeared to not have heard him as she continued to half-shamble, half-sprint towards him, blood squirting into the air with every step she took. As she let loose a scream and leapt into the air to attack Ichigo, Ryuko was blindsided when Satsuki appeared out of nowhere and slammed her heel into her neck. Roaring in pain as a stream of blood spewed from her neck, Ryuko was sent flying across the courtyard before crashing into the far wall with a loud echo.

"I thought you were better than this, Matoi! Snap out of it!"

Satsuki clicked her heel against the ground as she held Bakuzan's hilt with both hands. Ichigo had done an admirable job holding down Ryuko without killing her, but that was going to change now that she was here. There was no way that a girl who's being worn by her Kamui would be a match for her. As she watched Ryuko getting back onto her feet, blood spraying out with every step she took, Satsuki placed the palm of her left hand on top of Bakuzan's blade and shouted, "Matoi! You are little more than a beast in your current state. I doubt you can understand a single word I'm saying!"

"What are you doing here?" Ichigo asked as he landed next to Satsuki, who gave him a quick glance but kept the majority of her attention on Ryuko. In Matoi's current state, she would be focusing

all her misguided attention on the most recent focus of her ire. Thanks to her earlier kick, Satsuki knew that would be her.

"I'm here to offer assistance in taking out Matoi," Satsuki answered calmly. As twin blasts of steam shot out from Junketsu's shoulder pads, the Kamui silently wishing to fight against Ryuko and Senketsu. Satsuki would never say that she wanted to help Ichigo out of the goodness of her heart. If asked, she would explain that Matoi's rampage was putting the lives of her fellow students in danger, which was completely true. She would never confess that Ichigo's words caused her to rethink her priorities.

"I've already tried to talk Ryuko down," Ichigo said and shook his head as the memory of Mako being impaled from behind by Nui vividly passed before his eyes. He couldn't afford to lose his focus during the fight, "Ryuko doesn't have much longer and the only one that can help her at this point is Mako."

"I am uncertain if you hit your head during your valiant attempt to save Matoi, Ichigo, but Mako Mankanshoku is dead," Satsuki said bluntly. Ignoring Ichigo's angry glare to focus on Ryuko, who was undoubtedly already back on her feet, she added, "You can rest assured that Nui Harime shall not get away with this. The moment our fight against Matoi is concluded I will be informing my mother of the Grand Couturier's actions. Nui Harime has overstepped her boundaries as the Grand Couturier and she shall be punished severely for it."

"That doesn't help Mako," Ichigo bit back sarcastically.

Satsuki did not immediately answer as she slowly rotated Bakuzan through the air until she was holding it vertically in front of her face. Pressing her forehead against the cold black metal-like Life Fibers composing the blade, Satsuki snapped her eyes open, "There is no changing of the fact that Mako Mankanshoku is dead. Dwelling on the past will achieve nothing apart from forcing you to drown in your sorrows! Face the present with open eyes and a clear mind, Ichigo!

Racing forward as Ryuko came barreling towards them, Satsuki let out a defiant shout as she clashed blades with the berserk Kamui wearer. Bakuzan, tinged blue by the glow emanating from Junketsu, was naught but a black blur as Satsuki managed to counter and deflect all of Ryuko's haphazardly thrown attacks. Slamming her blade against Ryuko's deformed left arm, a burst of power causing the ground beneath their feet to crater inwards, Satsuki reversed her grip on Bakuzan and with Junketsu firing out a burst of steam forced Ryuko away, where she proceeded to crash through one of the pillars created for the Sudden Death Runoff before becoming embedded in the outer wall of Honnouji Academy.

"Rest assured, I will not hold you accountable for your reluctance, Ichigo," Satsuki panted, the exertion of using all of Junketsu's power causing the Kamui to test her willpower and determination. Gritting her teeth and pushing the Kamui's mental probes away from the sanctuary that was her mind, Satsuki turned to Ichigo, her blue eyes as cold as ice, and said, "I am aware of your relation with Matoi. It would be extremely dishonorable for me to force you to kill Matoi so step aside and let me finish this."

As Satsuki stepped forth to deal the final blow to Ryuko before she could recover, she felt a hand firmly gripping her wrist. With both his brown eyes and Mugetsu's multicolored ones narrowed, Ichigo warned, "I'm not going to let you kill Ryuko."

"It matters not what you think!" Satsuki declared. Pushing Junketsu's power upwards even more, the Kamui's blue lines beginning to glow, Satsuki pulled her wrist free of Ichigo's grip, "It is my duty as the Student Council President of Honnouji Academy to keep the student population safe from harm. If that means finishing off Matoi, who has already been consumed by the murderous impulses of her Kamui, than that is a burden I am willing to shoulder!"

Ichigo continued to ignore Satsuki's orders and stepped in front of her to bar her path before she could head towards Ryuko. Pointing Tournesol at the eldest Kiryuin daughter, he grimaced and said, "I took the position as your Vice President to keep my friends safe from



Nui Harime, but I see that's amounted to *fucking nothing* ! Despite your promise to keep them safe from her, she's not only been here for days, but she murdered Mako right in front of my eyes! So tell me, Satsuki, why the hell I should listen to anything you have to say?"

Satsuki tried to speak but every time she tried to formulate a response the words just seemed to fail to come together. Ichigo was absolutely right about everything he just said. She had given him her promise as a Kiryuin to keep his friends and family safe from Nui Harime's machinations and now Mako Mankanshoku was dead. She had no right to order him around, whether through persuasion or force, and she couldn't find it in herself to argue with him. It was through either luck or coincidence that as Satsuki was beginning to pull her mind out of the slump from Ichigo's question that a familiar man dressed in guerrilla military gear landed nearby.

"Kurosaki!

With Mako's limp body cradled carefully in his arms, Tsumugu Kinagase barely flinched as an explosion erupted nearby. Gently placing Mako on the ground, Tsumugu gave Satsuki a cold sneer before looking at Ichigo, "Kurosaki, how much do you know about a girl called Orihime Inoue?"

The randomness of the question snapped Satsuki out of her self-induced slump. Turning around and pointing Bakuzan at Tsumugu, she narrowed her eyes, "I remember you. You were the Nudist Beach intruder who had the gall to invade my academy. Tell me one thing before I have you punished for your insolence, why have you -"

Before Satsuki could finish asking her question, Ichigo shoved past Satsuki and stepped forward until he was eye to eye with Tsumugu, "How do you know that name?"

Tsumugu stared back at Ichigo as he pulling out a cigarette and lit it. Taking a deep drag from the cigarette before expelling out a cloud of smoke, he grimaced and answered, "Your dad told me all about her.

He wanted me to keep it quiet but at this point I'm less concerned about a secret and more concerned with keeping the collateral damage to a minimum and saving Ryuko. Now answer my question, Ichigo. Are you familiar with Orihime's unique talents?"

Ichigo nodded, which was all Tsumugu seemed to need. Turning away from Ichigo, Tsumugu frowned and shouted, "Alright, get out here! We don't have much time!"

"R-Right away, sir!"

As Orihime, still dressed in her Karakura High School uniform jogged towards them from around a piece of debris, Ichigo found that he was more confused about how Tsumugu found her rather than the fact she was here.

"I see by your expression that you're confused, so let me break it down for you," Tsumugu bit the end of his cigarette and breathed out through his nose. He really hated have to explain things more than once, but kids these days just needed everything explained to them one step at a time. Picking the cigarette out of his mouth between two fingers, he growled and said, "That little Life Fiber plushie your dad sent was able to track this girl down, but the damn coward ran away as soon as I turned my back on it. Ok girl, do your thing before Ryuko Matoi decides to come over and join us."

"Um..." Orihime twirled her hands around nervously. She really didn't know what to do. Tsumugu had told her Ichigo's dad explained all about her powers, but after showing off her powers led to Aizen kidnapping her and nearly killing Ichigo, she was reluctant to show them around strangers. Looking down at Mako's body, whose chest was stained red from blood, Orihime's dark brown eyes dropped and she bit her lip before asking, "Ichigo, what should I do?"

"You do whatever you think is right, Orihime," Ichigo answered before the ground began shaking. At first he thought it was from Ryuko but the explosion he felt was coming from deep within Honnouji Academy. Twisting towards the building, Ichigo saw a

column of purple-tinged energy explode out of the academy. Whatever was going on in the fight between Ururu and Nui, it was getting more intense. That one attack contained more power than the Getsuga Tenshou he used against Sanageyama.

"What are you talking about, Ichigo Kurosaki?" Satsuki demanded, using Ichigo's full name to emphasize the seriousness of the situation, "What can this girl possibly -"

"Soten Kisshun, I reject."

Everyone apart from Ichigo watched in stunned disbelief as Orihime pressed her fingers against the hairpins in her burnt orange hair before two balls of light shot out and began hovering around her head. Holding her hand out and allowing one of the Shun Shun Rikka to land on her palm, Orihime smiled as the spirit took off again. Twirling around each other in midair, the two spirits flew towards Mako's body before splitting apart and encasing her in an oval-shaped barrier. Holding her hands out and closing her eyes in order to better concentrate, Orihime pushed all of her willpower into bringing Mako back to life.

"This is impossible," Tsumugu muttered in disbelief as he watched the damage to Mako's chest slowly but surely reverse itself. Looking down at the lit cigarette in his fingers, he flicked it away and said, "That's it, I'm quitting smoking."

Satsuki's overall opinion was similar to that of Tsumugu's but at the same time was much more pronounced. She grew up around Life Fibers and thus she knew everything they were capable of doing. She would not have allowed her fellow students to wear Goku Uniforms if she thought otherwise, but what she was observing went above and beyond what normal Life Fibers were able to do. Walking past Ichigo, who was watching Orihime with reserved silence, Satsuki placed her hand on the glowing orange surface and noticed it was quite sturdy. Pushing down with more force, Satsuki realized her strength wasn't going to allow her to pierce the barrier.

**"... *human... ability... let... once... again...*"**

"What did you say?"

"Huh?" Orihime looked up from Mako's healing body when she heard Satsuki speak to her, "I didn't say anything."

"Never mind," Satsuki lowered her hand from Orihime's Soten Kisshun. There was something strangely familiar about the construct of light but she couldn't place just how it felt so familiar to her. Turning towards Ichigo, she sighed deeply as she sheathed Bakuzan, "Are you completely certain this girl can revive Mankanshoku?"

"This is our only shot of saving Ryuko," Ichigo answered passionately as his body tensed up. They didn't have long before Ryuko came back and from the volume of the scream she was really pissed off.

"Let me tell you two important pieces of information, girl. The first is that we don't have a lot of time before Mato crashes the party," Tsumugu growled as he held both of his sewing machine guns up and crouched behind a piece of upturned rock. Making sure his weapons had full clips, he propped his back against the debris and reached into his vest, "The second is that I don't have nearly enough supplies to stall her if she comes. The mines I placed around the area should buy you about a minute."

Ichigo turned towards the Nudist Beach mercenary, "What mines?"

In order to answer Ichigo's question, Tsumugu raised his hand and allowed everyone to see the detonator in his hand. Slamming his thumb down on the red button on the top, Tsumugu's body was highlighted in orange and red as the entire courtyard behind him exploded as fifty well-placed mines detonated nearly simultaneously. Glancing over the rubble as he watched Ryuko scream in agony as she fell into his well-placed trap, Tsumugu stood up and said, "Those

mines, now quit talking to me and heal Mankanshoku. I don't think I did anything more than piss Matoi off."

"Don't worry," Orihime shook her head and lowered her arms. Turning her head and giving Ichigo a relieved smile, she said, "I'm almost done. Just a few more seconds and Mako should be good as new."

As Orihime's Soten Kisshun began dissolving into a myriad of orange-colored fireflies, the last touches to Mako's body were being finished. The wound in her chest where her heart was had already closed up, leaving nary a scar behind, while her No-Star uniform was nearly finished stitching itself back up. When the last traces of blood disappeared from Mako's body, Orihime let out a tired sigh and stood up, "I'm finished."

Despite watching Orihime defy the laws of nature as she knew them, Satsuki was still shocked into silence when she saw Mako's eyes open. The normally carefree girl blinked once, then twice, before quickly sitting up and patting down her chest where she remembered getting stabbed.

"Oh my gosh, what happened? I remember being kidnapped by this funny girl with really long blonde hair before a weird purple thing that looked like Ryuko's weapon skewered me like a shish kabob. Then I was all ghostly and see-through and I was floating around through the sky like a jet! Then I thought I might float away like a balloon so I looked down and saw my body and boy, was there a lot of blood. Oh! There was also this weird chain on my chest, but it's gone now. So anyway, where am I and how did I get here?"

"She's fucking alive?" If Kinue could see him now, she would most likely be sharing Tsumugu's disbelief in what they were seeing. Collapsing backwards against the outcropping of rock, Tsumugu's face was the picture of disbelief as he watched Mako get back to her feet and dust herself off.

***" I can't believe what I'm seeing,"*** Mugetsu muttered in a reserved tone. She was a Kamui, one of the most powerful things on the face of the planet, and yet nothing she did could compare to the miracle she just witnessed. Shaking her Life Fibers to remove the sense of strange familiarity she had surrounding the Soten Kisshun, Mugetsu didn't say anything further as she turned her eyes to Junketsu. While Satsuki was focused on Mako, her Kamui was looking right back at Mugetsu. It seemed that both Kamui, with a lack of words, had come to the same conclusion.

There was something nightmarishly familiar with Orihime Inoue's abilities.

"Huh, why is everyone staring at me?" Mako finished dusting off her uniform and looked around. Now that she thought about it, everything looked rather strange. The entire school looked to be in disarray but the most important thing was that all the snacks Ururu brought were missing! Twisting her body around and noticing Satsuki's intense stare, Mako quickly sputtered about and bowed, "Ah, Lady Satsuki! I'm sorry but I don't know how I got here. Did you come to hear more about my crazy dream where I died and was a ghost? Hey, where's Ryuko and why is Ichigo and the strange man that Ururu nearly beat up here?"

"There's no time to answer your questions!" Tsumugu leapt back and fired his sewing machine guns into the air as Ryuko emerged from the rubble with a loud roar. As soon as his weapons clicked empty, Tsumugu dropped them onto the ground before he reached into his vest and tossed several pin cushion bombs at Ryuko. While the Anti-Life Fiber weaponry detonated in a flash of different colors, Tsumugu was just about to resort to his spool grenades when Ryuko moaned painfully before her misshapen body emerged from the smoke and fire. Her neck spun and twisted painfully as her alien eyes focused intently on Tsumugu, who began to back up when he noticed her gaze squarely on him. With a resounding shout that destroyed everything within a few feet of her body, Ryuko leapt into the air at Tsumugu with the sole intent of killing him.

"Shiten Koushen!"

Right before Ryuko could kill Tsumugu a triangular golden shield appeared in front of him and blocked the entirety of Ryuko's attack. There was a pregnant silence for a split second before Ryuko began to scream in something that could only be described as resulting from the most intense torture one could conceive before she was violently and painfully thrown backwards along the same trajectory she had leapt from.

"I'm sorry, Ryuko," Orihime muttered defiantly, "But I won't let you hurt anyone!"

"Orihime..."

"Huh?" Orihime blinked and turned around when she heard Ichigo's voice. The former substitute shinigami was looking at her with surprise and she quickly realized that Ichigo had never seen her use Shiten Koushen, so blushing in embarrassment, Orihime let out a nervous chuckle, "O-Oh that? Well, you see, while you were here at Honnouji Academy I was really bored and decided to try and make myself stronger. Chad and Uryu helped me out a lot, you know, and eventually I found myself able to use Shiten Koushen!"

"No, it wasn't that," Ichigo's attention was on Ryuko in the distance, who still seemed to be screaming. He was worried about why she would have felt pain after running into Orihime's Shiten Koushen. Her Santen Kesshun and Soten Kisshun didn't actively damage anyone that tried to push through them, "I can be concerned over your new ability later on, right now we need to save Ryuko. She only has a few minutes remaining before she dies of blood loss."

"Why not just allow Matoi to die?" Satsuki asked in her usual pragmatic way. Sitting down on a piece of rubble with Bakuzan laying gently against her shoulder, the Kiryuin heiress was in a state of semi-meditation in order to get her raging emotions under control. She had seen many things in her privileged life but someone able to not only revive the dead but heal every single one of their injuries

went above and beyond that. Even Nui Harime's monstrous regeneration couldn't help her if she was already dead. Sensing a strange feeling of apprehension from her Kamui, which manifested as a non-intrusive rippling of Junketsu's armor, Satsuki added, "If Orihime truly can raise the dead as we've seen, then wouldn't allowing Matoi to perish make saving her easier?"

"Eh?" Mako slapped her cheeks with her hands. Rushing over to Orihime, she grabbed the girl's much larger chest and started shaking her, "Ryuko will die if she's killed by blood loss! You have to use your superpowers like Lady Satsuki said to save her! My dad can't afford paying the insurance company if Ryuko gets anymore hurt!"

"I-I'm sorry, Mako, but Soten Kisshun doesn't work like that," Orihime held her hands in front of her face and looked away sadly so she couldn't see Mako's betrayed expression, "It's true Soten Kisshun can revive people who have died, but I'm not going to let Ryuko die just so I can bring her back to life. My powers are used to help people that did not have someone helping them. To use my powers like you say... that's not the kind of person I am! If... if I do that, then I wouldn't know who I was anymore."

"This is not the time for you to discuss your moralities!" Tsumugu growled as he clicked the last two needle clips into his sewing machine gun and spun around to delay Ryuko's arrival as long as possible, "Matoi is nearly back and she's pissed off to no end! So either you allow Mankanshoku to do what she needs to do or let Matoi die!"

"Do not worry!" Mako stepped forward and clenched her fist dramatically in front of her body. Giving Ichigo a look that possessed nothing but determination for the task she needed to accomplish, she declared, "Mako Mankanshoku will not allow her best friend in the entire world to die of blood loss! My dad's clinic won't survive the internet reviews if she did!"



Rushing past everyone in a blur of motion, Mako threw herself in the oncoming Ryuko's path. Spreading her arms outward and planting her feet firmly on the ground, she took a deep breath and shouted, "Snap out of it, Ryuko!"

For an instant it didn't seem to have any effect and both Satsuki and Ichigo moved to intercept Ryuko before she could kill Mako a second time. All their preparations and worry was for naught, however, as just when Ryuko's Scissor Blade arm was about to behead Mako, it stopped mere inches from her exposed neck.

Opening her eyes, which she had involuntarily shut a few seconds ago, Mako looked up and saw Ryuko's misshapen face hovering inches above her own. Her best friend's fang-filled mouth, in which the telltale red glow of Life Fibers could be seen, appeared to be opening and closing every few seconds while her large yellow eyes glanced over every inch of her body. Twitching once and taking a step back, Ryuko raised her right arm and gently, at least to her, touched Mako's face.

"Yeah, it's me Ryuko!" Mako cried and wrapped her arms around her best friend, heedless of the fact that the boiling blood inside Ryuko was starting to actually burn her. Even if she were to know that was happening, Mako wouldn't care. Saving her best friend was much more important than getting a stupid tan. Wrapping her entire body around Ryuko's green midsection, Mako cried and said, "I'm alright now, Ryuko, so please come back to normal. I know you must feel really bad about what happened but come back to normal so we can talk this over like friends! I'll bring popcorn and soda and we can watch a movie, just don't die on me! I-If you don't, I'm prepared to slap you until you're all better!"

Ryuko stood there with Mako holding her for several seconds before she spoke, her voice sounding like she and Senketsu were talking at the same time, "... **Mako...**"

Immediately after uttering that sole word, Ryuko began to groan as her body seemed to snap back and forth. As the Life Fibers within

Senketsu realigned themselves out of the mess Ryuko's sorrow and rage had forced them in, Ryuko's body began to revert back to her normal appearance. As the last vestiges of her berserk transformation disappeared, her red Scissor Blade clanging against the ground as she lost her grip on it, Ryuko smiled at Mako with tears in her eyes before collapsing from blood loss.

"Ryuko!"

"Don't worry Mako, I'm just really tired," Ryuko muttered from on the ground as her best friend enveloped her in a tight hug that she was too tired to resist. Seeing Mako's burnt skin and looking around at the gathered people, Ryuko managed to gather up enough energy to force her body to sit up, "I didn't hurt you, did I Senketsu?"

**"A little, but I'm alright,"** Senketsu said without hesitation, **"I was also upset about what happened to Mako. It is understandable you would do what you did in that situation. If I were you, I would have done the same thing."**

"I promise you I won't do something that stupid again," Ryuko smiled sadly and looked past Mako at Ichigo, who appeared to be relieved that she was alright. Turning from Orihime, who she still didn't know, to Tsumugu and Satsuki, both of whom were her enemies, she asked Ichigo, "Just what's going on? Why is that Mohawk guy and Satsuki Kiryuin here?"

Satsuki took Ryuko's defiance as her cue to stand up. Slowly sheathing Bakuzan, she said, "Believe what you will, Mato, but my priorities have always been the safety and security of Honnouji Academy. If working together with enemies allowed me to continue doing my duty, then that is what I shall do. Consider yourself lucky that Ichigo was able to convince me to spare your life after you were swallowed by your Kamui."

Ryuko wanted to say something spiteful back to Satsuki, but in light of actually trying to save her, she was willing to let it slide this one time. Turning back to Mako, who was looking at her recently burnt

skin in awe, she asked the question that's been on her mind ever since she came back to her senses, "Hey Mako, how are you alive? I... I saw Nui Harime stab you through the chest."

"That's a super good question, you know. Just how are you still alive?"

Everyone present turned at the familiar saccharine voice and saw Nui Harime sitting on a piece of rubble with her legs kicking playfully in the air. Puffing out her cheeks and tapping her purple Scissor Blade against her shoulder, she looked at Mako and tilted her head, "Wow, I thought for sure you were dead. I did stab you right through the heart, you know, but you look as good and new as the latest fashions. How odd. I wonder how such a miraculous feat could have occurred. Oh wait. I know exactly how this happened!"

"Nui Harime..." Satsuki had already unsheathed Bakuzan once more and was standing between her and Ryuko alongside Ichigo.

"Oh wow, Junketsu looks totally awesome as usual and Mugetsu is simply to die for!" Nui clapped both of her hands together while ignoring Satsuki as a gust of wind blew the hair covering her face to the side. When she saw both of the Kamui wearers' eyes widen in surprise at something on her face, she brought her hand up and traced the x-shaped scar over her left eye, "Gosh, I totally forget my eyepatch was gone. Sometimes these things just get away from me, you know."

"What do you want?" Ichigo demanded and he gripped Tournesol tightly. He was not about to let Nui kill Mako a second time and he was prepared to use all of Mugetsu's willingly given power to make sure that never happened. From the way Mugetsu's emotions were bleeding through to him, Ichigo could tell his Kamui felt the exact same way.

"What I want, huh?" Nui crossed her legs and leaned forward with her chin resting on her arms. Giving Ichigo a happy smile before looking around at everyone else, she took a deep breath and

answered, "What I want is really quite simple. I want to look my best for the entire world to see! As the Grand Couturier it is my duty to be the public face of Revocs, but this nasty little blemish on my face is really making me feel sad. I do wish there was some way I could get it fixed..."

Months of fighting and nearly dying as a shinigami honed Ichigo's battle senses to their maximum. As soon as Nui began talking about a blemish on her face, he was already moving towards Orihime, who could not be more than ten feet away. Just before he could reach her, Ichigo felt a pink boot slam into his chest and push him backwards. Grinding to a halt against the ground, Ichigo quickly flipped back to his feet and paused when he saw Nui had taken Orihime hostage.

"Gee, you really are excited today, Ichigo," Nui said in a happy tone as she held her Scissor Blade against Orihime's throat. Giggling once more before her focus seemed to shift to the side, Nui added, "I'm so happy that everyone's present! I really didn't want to have to repeat myself twice, you know."

"Let Orihime go," Ururu said as she landed in front of Nui. Despite having fought the Grand Couturier to a standstill not two minutes ago, Ururu looked as clean and healthy as her twin. There was not a blemish on her skin and her uniform, which had been torn and cut during her fight, was completely undamaged. Bringing her hands, which were still wearing her Powersoul gauntlets, up into a fighting stance, Ururu stared passively at her twin sister, "Do not make me defeat you again."

"Orihime?" Nui looked into the fearful eyes of her captive before a psychotic grin spread across her face. Orihime was such a really odd name for a human to have. Nui would almost say it was presumptuous for one of them to dare call themselves a princess. Pushing the edge of her Scissor Blade harder against Orihime's neck, Nui giggled and looked squarely into her sister's eyes, "She sure doesn't look like a princess, you know, but even I know if I let

her go there will be nothing to stop you from coming after me. You almost did beat me just a few minutes ago."

"Do not speak another word, Nui Harime!" Satsuki declared as a backdrop of light appeared behind her. Pointing Bakuzan towards the Grand Couturier, Satsuki narrowed her eyes and shouted, "You have broken several of the sacred rules of Honnouji Academy. Do not think my mother will not hear of your casual murder of Mako Mankanshoku. Now let go of Orihime Inoue and leave! You are henceforth banned from Honnouji Academy!"

"Murder?" Nui looked around in wonder before her eye settled on Mako, "Are you sure you're feeling ok Satsuki? I don't see a dead human anywhere. Do you?"

"I don't know about Satsuki Kiryuin, but I'm feeling dandy."

Tsumugu had managed to sneak behind Nui in the commotion and was holding a Carnifex to the back of her head. Holding down the trigger and preparing for the powerful recoil his sister's weapons possessed, Tsumugu narrowed his eyes and could sense the smile on Nui's face disappearing, "This weapon was designed to take someone as persistent as you down. I don't think even you can dodge a point-blank shot to the back of the head so why don't you let go of the girl and put your hands in the air like a good little girl?"

"You stupid human..." Nui giggled menacingly and tilted her head backwards so that her dull sapphire eye was staring straight at Tsumugu, "Did you really think I didn't sense you sneaking up on me like a little rat?"

With barely a second of warning, Tsumugu was thrown through the air courtesy of a kick from Nui's sole remaining clone. As the Grand Couturier and her body double watched Tsumugu skid to a halt and slowly get back to his feet, they both laughed before the clone vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Now that I have your attention, are there any further questions?"

"Let... Orihime... go..." Ryuko managed to demand despite her exhausted state.

"Hmm... I guess I can do that, but only if she does one small favor for me," Nui pointed with her hand at her missing left eye. Exposing the ugly x-shaped scar that was the result of Ryuko's dad final strike once more to everyone, Nui pursed her lips before she stuck out her tongue childishly, "I saw everything Orihime did and I want in on the action! If she heals my eye back to the way it was, I promise on my job as the Grand Couturier that I will let her go safe and unharmed. In fact, I'll do one better! If she fixes my eye I'll turn around and leave Honnouji Academy without harming the hair on any more humans, including Ryuko!"

"I don't believe you," Ururu countered.

"I may be a lot of things, but I'm not a liar," Nui was insulted by her sister's accusations. Sure there were a lot of reasons why humans would not trust her, but if there was one thing Nui took pride in, it was the fact that she never ever lied to anyone. Lady Ragyo always said her truthfulness was an endearing trait that should be cultivated and grown into something spectacular, so when someone called her a liar, Nui never took it lightly. Staring emotionlessly at Ururu, she pushed Orihime away before seemingly teleporting over to Mako. With her Scissor Blade around Mako's throat, she said, "If you call me a liar once more, I'm going to kill Mako and I don't think Ryuko could survive watching her die a second time."

"Damn you, Nui Harime! Leave Mako alone!" Ryuko seethed and tried to stand up but found her legs unresponsive. Collapsing back down onto her hands and knees, Ryuko propped her body against her Scissor Blade and desperately tried to get up, much to Nui's amusement.

"Gosh, you just don't know when to quit, do you?" Nui puffed her cheeks out and smiled as she pressed the Scissor Blade closer to Mako's throat, "I'm going to guess that you must really want to see this girl die again."

"W-Wait!"

Before Nui could carry through on her threat, Orihime rushed forward, "I'll heal your eye, but I want you to promise that you'll let Mako go first."

"A promise is a promise, and I always keep my promises," Nui cheerfully ranted as she shoved Mako to the side with enough force to cause the girl to go tumbling across the ground until she hit Ryuko.

Giggling as she watched Ryuko groan in pain, Nui clapped her hands together and sighed, "Gosh, it sure is swell that you're cooperating with me. I thought for sure I would have to rough some of Ichigo's friends up to get you to heal me, but I'm glad I don't have to since that would make Ichigo sad and I sure do not want to make my cousin upset. Oh! I can see you trying to sneak up on me Amu, so I should warn that although you can certainly beat me in a fight, I'm pretty sure I will be able to kill Orihime before you can stop me! And if this girl dies, who will you have left to save Ryuko and Mako when I eventually come back to finish the job I started?"

Ururu stopped moving towards Nui once her sister called her out and looked at Orihime. She knew Nui would carry through on her threats given half a chance but Ururu didn't want to cause any of Ichigo's friends to get hurt because she couldn't control her actions.

Orihime turned away from Nui and looked at Ururu. The stoic girl had a miserable look on her face, almost as if to say that she was taking the blame for failing to stop Nui from taking Orihime and then Mako hostage and Orihime could not blame her. Nui Harime was a complete monster that put most of the arrancar she encountered while she was Aizen's prisoner to shame. It was amazing, but mostly terrifying, how Nui's strength and power would be more than enough to not only fight evenly against some of the espada but also kill them without trying. Steadying her nerves and preparing herself for what needed to be done, Orihime touched her fingers against her hairpins before throwing her arms forward, "Soten Kisshun, I reject."

As the golden oval-shaped barrier surrounded Nui Harime, Tsumugu limped towards Ichigo. Giving the Grand Couturier a look of hatred, he placed his hand on Ichigo's shoulder and said, "This is going to be bad."

With his eyes still firmly looked on the shadowed form of Nui from inside the barrier, Ichigo forced himself to turn towards the Nudist Beach operative and ask, "What are you talking about?"

Tsumugu gave Ichigo a scathing glare, "That wound over the Grand Couturier's eye was the only thing holding her back. Once she's healed, there is no doubt in my mind she will come after us with renewed interest."

"No, I don't think so. I think she was actually telling the truth when she promised not to attack us," Ichigo answered with a shake of his head. He didn't trust Nui Harime as far as he could throw her, but he had the strangest sense that she was telling the truth about promising to not attack them if Orihime was healed. He didn't know why he trusted her about that, but there was no chance he could fight Nui off if she was lying.

"Ichigo is correct. Perhaps the only admirable quality about the Grand Couturier is that she never lies. She will speak in half-truths and hide information, but she will never utter a single falsehood no matter the situation," Satsuki added stoically. Turning her blue eyes towards Tsumugu, who returned her gaze, Satsuki smirked haughtily and added, "I am willing to allow you some leeway for your assistance in dealing with Matoi. For the next ten seconds I will close my eyes and turn away, if you are no longer here I will assume you had escaped in the destruction and mayhem Matoi's rampage caused. One..."

Tsumugu took that as his cue to leave. Giving Ichigo a knowing glance, he ran off into the distance and jumped over a piece of rubble before vanishing into the chaos below. Staring at the spot where Tsumugu had disappeared, Ichigo frowned and said, "That wasn't like you at all."



"I do not know what you are talking about," Satsuki walked next to Ichigo and placed a hand on his shoulder, "But it would be dishonorable for a Kiryuin to not repay someone who risked life and limb to help their enemy. That man may be the enemy of my mother, but his services today have warranted a reprieve on his punishment."

"I-I can see again..."

Nui did not move as the last traces of Orihime's Soten Kisshun dissolved into particles and motes of orange light. Letting her Scissor Blade stab deeply into the ground at her side, Nui raised a trembling hand to her face in search of the x-shaped scar that had defined her behavior and purpose for the last seven months. When she ran her fingers over where it should have been and felt nothing but flawless skin, she smiled happily and would have jumped in joy if she had been alone at the time. Looking around with two sapphire blue eyes once again, Nui focused on Orihime and desperately wished to ask her how she healed her.

After Ryuko's dad tore out her eye with the Scissor Blades, Nui had immediately gone back to Revocs with the intent to discover why it hadn't healed already. She had been stabbed and cut many times in her life, mostly when Ragyo trained her, but all those wounds had healed up quickly. Ragyo had taken one look at her poor daughter and declared that Nui's beautiful blue eye would never regenerate. The Sword Scissors her former husband created had cut her regenerating Life Fibers both ways, severing them and preventing Nui from ever regenerating her precious eye. It was from that day forth that Nui covered up her shame with a purple eyepatch and vowed to kill Ryuko for what her dad did to her.

"I'm all back to normal now!" Nui exclaimed cheerfully and stuck her tongue out in a cute pose. Pulling her purple Scissor Blade out of the ground she stalked past Orihime, who wisely moved out of the way, and waved to Ururu, "Look! Now we're even more alike!"

"Your eye is now healed so do not forget your promise, Nui Harime!" Satsuki declared passionately.

Nui closed her eyes, a strange motion to the Grand Couturier after so many months of only have one eye, and scoffed, "Boy, you are really a wet blanket, Satsuki, but that's what I like about you! I'm just trying to show off my brand new eye and you have to go and ruin the fun for me, but I'm not going to complain! I thought today was going to be a real letdown when Ryuko didn't die but it's actually almost like my birthday again! There's just one thing I want to do before I go... and don't worry, I'm not going to harm a single hair on any of your precious humans..."

When the Grand Couturier vanished in a burst of speed, Ururu immediately began searching for her twin sister. With her eyes darting back and forth across the area and her innate ability to detect her twin's location quickly narrowing down where she was, Ururu turned and lightly gasped when she heard a squelching sound as a delicate hand tore through Ichigo's chest.

"F-Fuck..." Ichigo gasped as he stared at the thin arm stabbed into his chest. Coughing harshly as blood began leaking from the corners of his mouth, Ichigo felt his knees give out and was only held up by Nui's hand in his chest.

"... but there's no way you're a human, Ichigo, and this is the proof!" Nui cheerfully exclaimed as she pulled her hand out of his chest with one simple motion, exposing his still beating heart for the world to see. While that would have normally caused anyone to gaze at the Grand Couturier in a mixture of terror and horror, everyone, especially Ryuko, were transfixed on the blue glow emanating from the Life Fiber infused heart beating in Nui's hand.

"So you see, Ichigo, we're family!" Nui explained as a psychotic smile lit up her face.

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## Kamui Tales #18 - Life Fibers Can Do What?!

As soon as his eyes opened and he saw the sun streaming in through the window, Ichigo knew it was going to be one of those days. Yawning and sitting up, he looked at the alarm clock next to his bed and nearly panicked when he saw it was almost noon before remembering it was Winter Break.

"Damn," he yawned once more as he got dressed. Now that he was back home in Karakura Town for the next two weeks, he planned on doing as much as possible without any weird nonsense involving Life Fibers, Nui Harime or anyone trying to kill him. Before being sent to Honnouji Academy, he was depressed about losing his shinigami powers but after everything that happened over the past few months, being powerless and ignorant was looking pretty damn good again.

"Hey Mugetsu, you wanted me to show you around Karakura right?" Ichigo stretched out a kink in his shoulder and turned towards his Kamui only to find her sleeping sounding on her hanger.

***"No Senketsu, that much starch isn't good for my fibers. I'll get all wrinkly,"*** Mugetsu mumbling incoherently in her sleep.

"Right, I'm just going to get dressed and deal with the fallout later on," Ichigo shrugged and finished getting dressed before he headed downstairs. His dad was supposed to be out volunteering at Uryu's dad's hospital, so it was just going to be him, Karin and Yuzu for the entire day. As he walked downstairs with the intent to have some breakfast before seeing if Chad or anyone else was busy, the doorbell rang.

"Can one of you get it?" Karin's voice shouted from upstairs.

"But I'm busy making Ichigo breakfast!" Yuzu's voice shouted in return from the kitchen, "He slept in today so he's going to be really hungry!"

"I got it," Ichigo said just loud enough for his sisters to hear and not worry about it. Sighing as he turned away from the kitchen to head back towards the front door, he wondered who would be ringing the front bell. The only people who visit his house were patients and they usually used the side door since it was right next to the patient rooms. Opening the front door, Ichigo was about to ask who was there when he was immediately floored by the person standing with her arms folded across her ample chest.

"Hey Ichigo. Gosh, I haven't seen you in forever," the blonde haired woman waved happily with one hand in a voice that Ichigo had the vaguest sense he's heard before. Whoever the woman was, Ichigo didn't know how she knew him but that was the least of his concerns at the moment.

Ichigo had seen quite a few more than attractive women in his life ranging from Yoruichi and Rangiku to Ragyo Kiryuin. Sure, most of those encounters had involved the woman being overly friendly to him, but he could not deny that he had met a long of attractive women. This blond woman, however, put Rangiku's beauty to shame in the sense that she wasn't trying to be overly sexual about it.

The woman in front of him had twin pigtails that reached just below the nape of her neck and wore a pair of faded red jeans and a white shirt with a pink jacket over it. Smiling as she noticed Ichigo's eyes looking over her body, she sighed dramatically and pouted her cheeks, "Gee, it's almost like you've never seen a woman's body before."

Mentally slapping himself for acting like his dad for a moment, Ichigo shook his head and looked away as a red blush spread across his face, "Sorry about that. I'm not sure how you know me but I'm pretty sure I've never met you before."

"Never met me?" The woman pouted childishly and placed her fists on her hips as she leaned forward, "Gosh, that's quite rude of you to suggest you've never seen me before, Ichigo. I thought I told you our

hearts beat as one, you know. So how could you pretend to not know me?"

As Ichigo's mind processed the woman's strange speech pattern, every thought that passed through it ground to a halt as he realized just who the woman actually was. Faster than he ever moved before, Ichigo tried to slam the front door closed on Nui Harime. Hopefully it would buy him just enough time to run upstairs and grab Mugetsu. Unfortunately for Ichigo, Nui had quickly realized what he was trying to do and placed a single finger against the door.

"So you do remember me?" Nui said in her same pattern of speech, which sounded a little odd coming from the woman in front of him. Pushing the door back open with ease, Nui hooked her hand around Ichigo's shirt and pulled him outside, "I bet you're wondering why I'm here."

"Yeah," Ichigo admitted as Nui let go of him. Quickly recovering, he took a step back and said, "But I'm more concerned about why you look like a supermodel!"

Nui looked down at her much more developed body, "The funny thing about Life Fibers is that they can do almost anything you want. After our unfortunate fight during Satsuki's little election, I realized I could never been your loving cousin if I remained how I was, so I forced the Life Fibers in my body to change my body until I actually looked seventeen. I really liked my original body but it was just so small compared to Lady Ragyo's beautiful body. I was so jealous that I just had to have one myself!"

"Ok," Ichigo conceded, "So why are you here?"

"To pay you back for all the help you gave me!" Nui cheerfully clapped as she grabbed Ichigo's hand and began pulling him down the street, "I never properly thanked you for having your friend heal my eye. Think of this as family bonding, Ichigo!"

"Family bonding?" Ichigo tried to free himself from Nui's monstrous grip, "The last time we met you tore out my heart and held it in your hand!"

"Gosh, you're still focusing on the past? Ichigo, that's so unlike you!" Nui stuck her tongue out, "You should know that when a woman changes her underwear, she puts the past behind her. Now come on, I wonder what interesting things we can find around town!"

# Paranoid

*Here's chapter 31. That review glitch last week really annoyed me. I woke up the next morning and saw I had around thirty reviews for the last chapter but I couldn't see nearly half of them. Luckily I didn't look any or I would be really upset. Anyway, here is the next chapter. There is one thing I should tell you and that is the omake **IS CANON!** Yes, that means what happens in the canon actually happened in the story. It's really helpful to read for the upcoming Karakura Occupation Arc. Also, this chapter is more than 20,000 words long.*

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## Chapter 31 - Paranoid

"So you see, Ichigo, we're family!" Nui Harime exclaimed excited as she held Ichigo's beating heart in the palm of her hand. With her eyesight recently restored back to normal, she was able to see the look of terror and realization sweep across Ichigo's face.

"Isn't it amazing, Ichigo?" Nui continued off without a single care in the world. Sure she was upset that Ichigo was terrified she was holding his heart, but she knew that feeling would pass once he understood what she was talking about. Even Nui understood that destroying seventeen years' worth of memories and knowledge wasn't a simple thing to do without Mental Refitting and that just wouldn't work on Ichigo for a couple of reasons. Since Ichigo was a Life Fiber Hybrid like herself, trying to weave Life Fibers into his brain would automatically fail as the Life Fibers in his body would reject them. That is not to mention that Nui would never do something so heinous to her favorite cousin. He wasn't a human who didn't matter in the long run. Ichigo was a Life Fiber Hybrid like herself and so Nui would never do anything that insulting to him!

Ryuko Matoi stared at what was held in Nui's hand with a mixture of horror and mute shock. As she desperately managed to push her failing body back onto its feet, which was still immensely weakened from her earlier berserk rampage across Honnouji Academy, Ryuko leaned on her red Scissor Blade as a makeshift crutch. She was confused beyond belief why Ichigo had Life Fibers in his body but that was something she could ask him about later. Right now Nui Harime was literally holding Ichigo's life in the palm of her hand and as long as she could draw breathe, Ryuko was not about to let the Grand Couturier take anymore of her friends from her.

"Hey Mako," Ryuko whispered softly but just loud enough that her overactive best friend snapped to attention. Once she was certain Mako was paying close attention to her every word, Ryuko muttered, "You should get somewhere safe. Nui Harime is extremely dangerous and I have a feeling things are going to get bad again. I... I don't want to see you get hurt again."

Mako Mankanshoku puffed her cheeks out in a caricature of a pout and stepped closer to Ryuko until she was invading her friend's personal space, "The safest place is next to you, Ryuko! I don't remember much from what happened before my crazy dream of death, but I do remember seeing that girl over there appearing out of nowhere in a flash of super speed! Therefore, the safest place would be right next to you!"

Ryuko seemed ready to argue with Mako's insane leap of logic but instead she simply gave a tired smile. It felt strange to realize Mako had a valid point but Ryuko wasn't about to argue. If Mako staying close meant she would be kept safe, than Ryuko was willing to put up with it. With that particular conversation dealt with for the time being, Ryuko focused her ire on Satsuki Kiryuin, but her anger bled away when she saw the look of fear in her adversary's eyes. For as long as Ryuko could remember Satsuki's emotions, when she wasn't staring at everyone with her usual passive expression, consisted of either anger or smug superiority. To see the normally implacable Student Council President looking at Nui Harime with noticeable



apprehension began to force Ryuko to question just how dangerous the Grand Couturier truly was.

"Huh? What's wrong, Ichigo?" Nui tilted her head to the side, her blonde pigtails bouncing softly while her eyes seemed to tear up, "You look sad. Is there something bothering you?"

Ichigo gasped heavily, his every ragged breath shortened to the point of hyperventilation, as he stared at his own beating heart held in the hand of a psychotic teenage girl. Damn it, he thought as beads of sweat poured down his face, he should have been used to this sort of crap already. During his short time as a substitute shinigami, he had his body nearly severed in two, a hand shoved through his chest and a hole shot clear through his body from front to back. That is not to mention the countless number of grievous wounds he'd accumulated fighting all his opponents. All of that paled in comparison, however, to watching someone holding his beating heart in their hand like it was nothing special.

"Don't tell me this actually hurts you. Oh! I know what I can do cheer you up!" Nui seemed to find Ichigo's panic-stricken expression disheartening and decided to show Ichigo that there shouldn't be any reason to worry. Stabbing her purple Scissor Blade into the ground, Nui raised her left arm into the air, wiggled her fingers mysteriously in the air and proceeded to thrust her hand into her chest right where her heart was.

"What the fuck..." Ryuko gasped as she watched the Grand Couturier appear to commit suicide with a smile on her face.

Ururu Tsumugiya watched worriedly as her twin dug into her own chest with a cheerful expression on her face. Nui didn't even seem to be the least bit perturbed by what she was doing. In fact, not a drop of blood was spilling out of the Grand Couturier's body from around her hand. As much as she wanted to help Ichigo, Ururu didn't want to risk trying only to end up harming Ichigo in the process of saving him. So with a feeling of powerlessness that was so strange to the

normally quiet girl, Ururu lowered her arms with her hands clenched tightly into fists. As she watched Nui dig around in her chest, Ururu vowed to make her move the second she had an opening. This time there would be fight. Ururu was going to kill her sister if only to protect her friends from Nui's psychotic machinations.

"Here we go!"

Nui removed her hand from her chest with a wet squelching noise and brought out with it her own Life Fiber infused heart. As she held the organ glowing purple from the Life Fibers composing it up for all to see, Nui's line of thought revolved completely around showing Ichigo that they were actually family. After all, there was no one else here besides her sister that she could do this to without killing them. Humans were so fragile that it almost brought a tear of pity to the Grand Couturier's eyes when she thought about what was going to happen to them.

"See!" Nui laughed happily as she held her own beating heart next to Ichigo's. As the blue glow from Ichigo's heart mixed and swirled with the purple light her own heart was giving off, Nui stuck her tongue out childishly and gloated, "I wasn't lying when I said we're family, you know. The way our hearts beat in unison is proof that we're family! I really do care about you Ichigo! Family is family, after all, and one should always make sure to love their family."

"Like hell I believe that!"

Managing to pierce through the veil of helplessness that had permeated his nerves after watching his heart get pulled from his chest, Ichigo clasped a hand around Nui's wrist before tightening his grip hard enough that a crackling sound was heard as he temporarily shattered her forearm. Staring straight into the Grand Couturier's blue eyes even as he felt the bones in her arm shift around and regenerate, Ichigo swung Tournesol with the intent of hitting Nui's heart only to be frustrated when the Grand Couturier spun around his attack.

"Gosh, you are just full of energy!" Nui clapped her hands as she let her heart get pulled back into her chest with a faint sucking sound. As she stared enraptured while the veins and arteries connected to Ichigo's heart did the same, Nui clasped her hands behind her back and leaned forward, "So tell me how you feel Ichigo! Since you aren't human, there shouldn't be any reason for you to hang out with them anymore! Let's leave this dull place and go have lots of fun elsewhere!"

Ichigo watched his heart get pulled back into his body before his wound healed up without nary a scar or mark. Even Mugetsu's armor was repairing itself and within seconds was as good as new but was concerned Ichigo the most was how Life Fibers got into his body. It couldn't have been recent or he would have remembered it. The only conclusion that made any sense to him was that he was born with them, which just went and raised a lot more questions.

"Mugetsu..." Ichigo muttered as he stared at Nui Harime, "Are you alright?"

**" Yes. My Life Fibers were able to regenerate the damage Nui Harime did to my body,"** Mugetsu answered with a concerned look in her eyes. It was odd that Ichigo was less concerned with why he had Life Fibers in his body than she was, **"Ichigo, why aren't you -"**

"There's no time for that now," Ichigo cut off his Kamui with a wave of his hand.

Pointing Tournesol at Nui, who was smiling as she observed Ichigo speak with Mugetsu, he shouted passionately, "I don't give a fuck what my body is made of! I could be made of nothing but Life Fibers but I will always consider myself a human because that is what I am! What my body is made of doesn't change a damn thing, so you can take your offer and go to hell!"

Nui didn't say anything to Ichigo, which caused him to worry more than anything else. She just continued to stare at him with her blue eyes framed in shadow with an expressionless face masking

whatever it was she was truly thinking. After a couple of seconds, Nui reached for her purple Scissor Blade and turned around to leave.

"Oh well..." Nui shrugged childishly as she skipped away from the group. She hadn't really expected Ichigo to come to her side right away. If he did, it would really have lowered the respect she had for her cousin. Life Fiber Hybrids were supposed to have strong wills and minds. If Ichigo had caved in the first time she explained everything, Nui would have been really disappointed in her cousin. Turning her head around and blowing a kiss to Ichigo and then Ururu, Nui leapt up onto a piece of pillar and said, "I'll see you around Ichigo, so don't go being a stranger! Oh, and don't worry about me Satsuki, I won't be coming back to Honnouji Academy any time soon! I have much more important things to do now like figuring out what to do with my time. Since I don't want to kill Ryuko anymore, my schedule for the next few days just super opened up, you know."

"What..." Ryuko staggered forward and stared angrily at the Grand Couturier, "... the fuck are you blabbering about now?"

"Humph. Gosh, you really are a rude girl!" Nui pouted before she stuck her tongue out, "But since you asked so nicely, I was planning on donning a disguise to get you to let your guard down so I could destroy your Kamui and kill you all in one afternoon. But you don't have to worry about that anymore! I have no more interest in making you suffer. I have two eyes now and it's all thanks to Orihime, which is such a peculiar name..."

"Nui Harime!"

"Gee, you're really pushy today, Satsuki. Fine, I'll get going," Nui rolled her eyes at Satsuki's demanding tone before she mockingly spat at Ragyo's firstborn daughter and disappeared in a flash of speed.

Once he was certain Nui Harime was no longer in Honnouji Academy, Ichigo allowed Mugetsu to shift back into her normal

uniform and immediately felt a wave of exhaustion hit him. He hadn't noticed it while wearing Mugetsu, but his battle against Ryuko had taken a toll on his body. Turning to walk away, his every muscle screaming in defiance at the motion, Ichigo barely took three steps before a familiar voice asked, "Where do you think you are going, Ichigo?"

Satsuki Kiryuin did not like what Nui Harime did to her school at all and she needed to consult with her Elite Four as well as Ichigo concerning what their countermove should be. Nui Harime's behavior was chaotic at best and Satsuki did not doubt that if the Grand Couturier truly wished to return, she would find some sort of loophole to exploit. She had underestimated Nui's cunning too much already and for future encounters, Satsuki planned view Nui as threat she truly was. When Ichigo continued to walk away from her, despite hearing her question, Satsuki decided to ask once more, "Where do you think you are going, Ichigo? Nui Harime may be gone but there are still things left to do."

"I don't need to tell you anything," Ichigo answered coldly, but despite his tone he wasn't angry at Satsuki. He was still reeling from what Nui had shown about his body and Ichigo needed to have some peace and quiet to think more about it. He also needed to call his dad up and demand answers but Ichigo preferred to do that in person. That way if his dad was being annoying he could hit him.

"W-Wait up, Ichigo!" Orihime stuttered as she rushed after Ichigo. After watching everything that happened she could not stand on the sides anymore. The callousness and brutality of Nui Harime's every action terrified her but Ichigo needed her more than ever and Orihime wasn't about to watch her friend just walk away without any help. Easily catching up to Ichigo, she wrapped one of his arms around her neck and suppressed the luminescent blush of embarrassment that threatened to highlight her face red.

"Orihime?"

"You shouldn't keep pushing yourself like this!" Orihime scolded childishly as she made sure not to look at Ichigo's face, "I know I can't say I understand what you feel. Watching someone hold your beating heart in front of your face is like something out of an old movie, but you're hurt Ichigo! Please let me look at your injuries once we get back to your room."

"Thanks Orihime," Ichigo admitted, "I could really use your help."

Satsuki watched Orihime and Ichigo leave before she turned her gaze away toward Ryuko. She knew she should have been disappointed with Matoi's lack of control over Kamui, but after everything that happened in the last twenty minutes, Satsuki couldn't help but let such matters slide in order to focus on more important matters. Watching Matoi lose control and turn into a berserk monster only to regain her mind was one thing, but seeing a girl bring Mako Mankanshoku back from the dead with the ease of breathing was something else entirely.

"You are free to go, Matoi," Satsuki mentioned offhandedly as she forced Junketsu to shift back to its normal military-style uniform. Noticing Jakuzure flying in to pick her up, Satsuki slowly sheathed Bakuzan and stared into Ryuko's defiant gaze, "Due to recent events I have canceled the Naturals Selection. Any infractions you have accumulated over the past week are hereby expunged. I recommend that you use what free time you have to understand just why you are so weak. If you couldn't handle Nui Harime's mind games, then there is no chance you will ever defeat her in battle."

Ryuko grit her teeth and tried to approach Satsuki only for her legs to give out under her. Staring heatedly at Satsuki's back while Mako blubbered about calling her dad, she growled, "Why you..."

Satsuki tuned out the rest of Ryuko's threat as she jumped up into the air and landed on top of Nonon's Symphony Regalia Mark III. Holding onto one of the clarinet thrusters as a wave of exhaustion washed over her body, Satsuki focused her thoughts inwards, *"Orihime Inoue seems to be an old friend of Ichigo's going by his*

*familiarity with her frightening powers. Both of them do come from Karakura Town, which is the only city in Japan to not be controlled by either my mother's company or the Takarada Conglomerate. Leaving such a location unclaimed might seriously affect my plans if Ichigo has more allies with other unique abilities. Perhaps I will need to consider revising the Tri-City Schools Raid Trip to account for this new variable..."*

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In one of the spacious boardrooms near the top of Revocs Headquarters, a young woman with long magenta hair growled angrily to anyone in hearing range as she sat down in one of the plush leather chairs. Tucking her knees up and spinning the chair around out of sheer boredom until she was dizzy, Riruka Dokugamine huffed as she slammed her feet onto the large table in the center of the room.

"God, where is everyone? You would think they would be on time," Riruka growled more from boredom than any true anger. She had no idea why Lady Ragyo had pulled her away from Tokyo back to headquarters and the fact that she only needed to take a one hour helicopter flight instead of an all-day one didn't matter one bit to her. As much as she was loyal to the Kiryuin matriarch, Riruka Dokugamine did not appreciate being recalled without at least a little information. When the only other person in the boardroom did not respond, Riruka's left eye started to twitch before she rounded on him and shouted, "Hey! I'm talking to you, you know, so pay attention!"

Giriko Kutsuzawa reluctantly pulled his attention away from the antique pocket-watch he was polishing, an heirloom from his grandfather, towards Riruka. Unlike the much younger member of Xcution yelling at him, Giriko was perhaps the oldest member of the group. Most people would assume Life Fiber Resistance was higher when one was young but Giriko was the perfect counter example to

such a notion. With the hair near his temples already beginning to gray from age, Giriko stared out the full-length windows overlooking the rest of Revocs Headquarters and the early afternoon before calmly speaking, "I wish you would mind your manners, Miss Dokugamine. Lady Ragyo always has a reason for doing what she does and complaining about it would do nothing besides earn her ire. Also, I recommend you remove your feet from the table. Lady Ragyo would be most displeased if she sees you scuffing her property again."

"Yeah... well... who asked you anyone?" Riruka sputtered out indignantly as she quickly moved her feet off the table.

"I believe you just did," Giriko answered bluntly before his expression seemed to perk up. Momentarily looking at his pocket-watch before placing the device into his pocket, Giriko slowly walked over to his seat and sat down before saying, "Ah, it appears that Yukio has just arrived at headquarters. He shall be here in no more than forty-five seconds."

"Your Époque Raiment is as annoying as ever!" Riruka snapped, "How the hell does anything surprise you if you can predict the future? Hey, wait a minute, you already knew I was going to ask that, didn't you? Admit it!"

"It was nothing of the sort," Giriko explained calmly, much to Riruka's growing irritation. Folding his hands under his chin and giving her a sly smile, he continued, "I suppose you wish for me to say that I can read your thoughts or determine what someone is going to do before they do it. Is that correct? The truth is that I have exceptionally good eyesight and noticed Yukio walking into the lobby."

"What? That's impossible!" Riruko jumped out of her chair and ran towards the window. Pressing her face against the glass, smudging it slightly as she narrowed her eyes in order to see better, she eventually turned back around and pointed an accusatory finger at Giriko, "You're lying! There's no way anyone can see anything from all the way up here unless they had the eyes of a hawk!"



"Is she still putting off going to the optometrist?" Yukio Hans Vorarlberna asked as he walked into the boardroom and looked around before shrugging. It was a well-known fact that Rirukia had bad eyes, myopia if Yukio bothered to remember correctly. Every member of Xcution has the best health care in the world and yet Riruka refused to go have her eyes checked. Lady Ragyo had suggested once for Riruka to go and while the magenta haired girl had gone, once she left the eye doctor, she immediately tore up the prescription they gave her. The only reason the rest of them knew how bad her eyes actually were was because Ginjo somehow managed to gather all the discarded pieces of the prescription after Riruka stormed away.

"Hey, how's it going Riruka! Long time no see!"

Riruka froze up with her face pressed against the window. With her nails beginning to leave jagged crevasses on the clear surface, Riruka narrowed her magenta eyes and growled, "I'm going to count to four and when I turn around you better not be there, Shishigawara, or you're dead!"

Moe Shishigawara felt his survival instincts kicking in and he immediately backtracked away from Riruka before sitting down and making sure he wasn't looking at the enraged girl. He might have a crush on Riruka but he wasn't stupid enough to risk dying over something like that. Once he heard Riruka sit down, he glanced over at Giriko and asked, "Yo Giriko, where is Ginjo and Tsukishima? Usually those two are always the first to these meetings."

"I do not know," Giriko admitted pensively, "But Miss Hououmaru will undoubtedly inform us about the situation once she arrives."

After nearly ten awkward minutes of silence, only punctuated by Riruka's valiant attempt to destroy the game console Yukio was playing and failing due to the shorter member of Xcution seeing it coming long before she tried, the doors to the boardrooms opened and Rei Hououmaru walked in. Rei was not just the secretary to Ragyo Kiryuin but also the head of Xcution, the security division

created to defend the head of Revocs from any and all threats to her person.

As her white high heels clicked across the marble flooring, Rei headed towards the large screen taking up the entire wall at the far end of the conference table and entered in a very specific set of numbers known only to her before pressing her thumb against the finger scanner. Instantly a large amount of data and charts began to flash across the screen and as Rei walked over to her seat, all the members of Xcution put on their sunglasses as Ragyo Kiryuin walked through the door with the usual intense rainbow light filtering in behind her.

"Good afternoon, Lady Ragyo," the present members of Xcution shouted respectfully while they stood up and bowed in unison at the Kiryuin matriarch.

Ragyo did not speak until she was seating firmly at the far side of the table. Crossing her hands in front of her face and gazing at her assistant with maroon eyes, Ragyo asked, "Hououmaru, have you informed the rest of Xcution about the purpose of this meeting?"

"I did not, Ma'am," Rei apologized, "I was under the impression that you wished to inform them yourself."

"Indeed," Ragyo paused momentarily as her eyes glanced around the table at the five members of Xcution present. Standing up once more and placing her hands gently on the table, Ragyo took a second to think before she began to speak, "As you may have noticed, three of your fellow Xcution members have failed to heed the order to return to Revocs. Hououmaru?"

"Right away, Ma'am," Rei stood up and faced the rest of Xcution. Folding her hands in front of her body, she began explaining, "Earlier this week Jackie Tristan was defeated by an unknown Kamui wearer while working in Paris. She was defeated after an intense battle against this Kamui wearer before her Sanguinaire Raiment was destroyed. Both the remains of the Raiment and Jackie Tristan were

taken prisoner by this woman, who we know works for Nudist Beach."

With a flick of her wrist, Rei pressed a button and the screen changed to a full body picture of Kinue Kinagase wearing Danketsu. The reactions of Xcution upon seeing the previously unknown Kamui were common. They all had grown used to the power and respect their raiment gave them but to hear of how a Kamui could so easily best one of them gave them reason to be nervous. Jackie Tristan's Sanguinaire Raiment's overall power was on the higher end and she could defeat most of them in a straight up fight if it lasted long enough. For her to be defeated after being bloodied spoke wonders for Kinue's power.

"Yo, I don't mean to be rude, Lady Ragyo, but shouldn't we wait for Ginjo and Tsukishima to show up?" Shishigawara asked nervously. He may be a member of Xcution but even that wouldn't protect him from Ragyo's wrath if he said the wrong thing.

"Ginjo will not be showing up," Ragyo said coolly, not betraying the anger festering in her heart. As the rainbow light behind her head intensified alongside her emotions, her eyes narrowed angrily, "He has betrayed Revocs."

"My word..." Giriko's eyes were wide in shock while the rest of Xcution apart from Hououmaru were equally stunned. Ginjo had always been the most loyal of them all, second only to Hououmaru in terms of respect and power. For him to betray Lady Ragyo was an unexpected slap to the face.

"I-Impossible!" Riruka shouted passionately, "Ginjo may have been a stuck up prick, but he's not a traitor!"

"For once I agree with Riruka. Ginjo was always one hundred percent loyal to you, Lady Ragyo. What could cause him to commit such a traitorous act?" Yukio felt a weight sink in his stomach and for the first time in memory he found that he lacked the urge to play video games whatsoever. Ginjo had been the one to help train his

Fantaisie Raiment to its current state. Yukio would never have been able to join Xcution if Ginjo hadn't helped him push through the Grand Couturier's intense and deadly training.

"Kugo Ginjo was caught by the Grand Couturier attempting to steal Revocs secrets from our Moscow base two days ago," Rei Hououmaru snapped her fingers and the screen changed to show Ginjo in the server room downloading information from the central computer. Snapping her fingers a second time, the screen changed to show him getting into a helicopter on a snowy roof, "While the Grand Couturier was able to severely wound Kugo Ginjo, he still managed to escape with the data. The latest projections for his flight path show him heading in the vicinity of Osaka."

"Karakura Town..."

Rei turned when Ragyo mentioned the name of the Isshin's city, "Both Karakura Town and Osaka lay along the same flight path. If anyone could get Ginjo to betray me, it would be Isshin Shiba. That wondrous man is so intelligent sometimes that I can't help but think why I don't just kill him."

"So we have to hunt down Ginjo now?" Riruka growled before looking around, "Hey, where's Tsukishima when you need him. If anyone could figure out where Ginjo could be hiding it would be his little protégé!"

"Tsukishima is currently considered deceased," Rei flicked her wrist once more and the screen changed to show the city of San Francisco, where several columns of smoke and fire could be seen rising from the streets. As the destruction continued to play out on the screen, Rei folded her arms behind her back and explained, "The woman wearing the Kamui that we now know is called Danketsu was seen entering the city of San Francisco nearly ten hours before this video was taken. Once she managed to track down Shukurou Tsukishima, he used his Mémoire Raiment on the San Francisco Police Department as well as the personnel at Moffett Federal Airfield. The woman simply cut her way through the humans before

she engaged him in combat and stabbed her weapon through his heart. His body has yet to be recovered."

"Damn..." Shishigawara leaned back in his chair in a state of mute shock, "... Tsukishima's dead? When are we going to make those nudist bastards pay for this?"

"Soon," Ragyo smirked psychotically as plans within plans were born within her mind. She had many things to do in order to get the world set for COVERS and the setback in Europe was not something she was going to take lightly, "There are many things to do before we are to proceed. Finding this woman will be your top priority. Use whatever means you have to, but once you see her, please do give me a call. I would like to meet her personally and discuss where she obtained her marvelous Kamui..."

"All of you apart from Dokugamine are to go back to your respective sectors and await further instructions," Rei ordered without haste. Noticing the confused, and annoyed, look on the magenta haired girl, Rei handed her a folder, "You are currently being reassigned to Lady Ragyo's daughter."

"I have to babysit her?" Riruka spat as she looked over the information concerning her mission. It seemed that Satsuki was planning a School Raid Trip in the upcoming days and would require some assistance. After a moment of thinking it over, Riruka snapped the folder shut and threw her hands up into the air, "Fine, I'll do it Lady Ragyo, but why do I even have to go? By the looks of things, Satsuki seems to have all the power she needs. Her Kamui is much more powerful than my Duveteux Raiment."

"The answer is very simple Riruka," Ragyo grinned menacingly as she leaned forward and stared at Riruka, "Satsuki is not one to let someone like Ichigo fall through the cracks. She will be forced by her own rules to go after Karakura Town, which is a place she will never be able to take. You are to watch her and make sure she lives. I do not need her perishing before her final role in this grand play is fulfilled."

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Deep within the central control room of Honnouji Academy where the Student Council could monitor and gather data on every student and civilian, Satsuki Kiryuin gratefully accepted the cup of bitter tea Soroi had prepared for her. It had been nearly a day since the end of Ryuko Matoi's rampage through the courtyard and Satsuki needed to move things along. As she stared at the dozens of monitors lining the massive wall in front of her, her face lit up with a pale white glow from the screens, Satsuki watched as her fellow students prepared for the School Raid Trip.

In the aftermath of Nui Harime's appearance at Honnouji Academy and her subsequent murder of Mako Mankanshoku, Satsuki felt it was best to push up the School Raid Trip from the week after next. She did not believe for an instant that the Grand Couturier had simply let go of her grudge against Ryuko Matoi simply because Orihime Inoue restored her eye. For all the years that she had known Nui Harime, Satsuki had not once seen the Grand Couturier let someone who had slighted her escape with their life. While Satsuki knew she should have Inumuta monitor the security cameras dotting Honnou City for any sign of the Grand Couturier, she kept finding her thoughts drifting back to the revelation concerning Ichigo Kurosaki.

He was a Life Fiber Hybrid.

Satsuki knew only of two such beings in existence - Nui Harime and her other. She had suspected the Grand Couturier was not human for many years but after watching Nui tear her own heart out of her chest, Satsuki's suspicions were all but confirmed. As for her mother, Satsuki had no definite proof but it was just too contrived of a coincidence that she could not be human. All the signs that her mother was a Life Fiber Hybrid were in front of her eyes, from the rainbow colored hair to the fact that she hadn't appeared to age in twenty years. When she eventually betrayed her mother, Satsuki would need to account for the insane regeneration she knew her

mother most likely possessed. If she were to manage to behead her mother, Satsuki would not let her guard down and immediately proceed to dismembering the rest of her body before burning it to ashes.

*"I did not anticipate such a thing," Satsuki conceded mentally as she finished her tea and narrowed her eyes, "In retrospect, Ichigo's power was always supernatural. His control over Mugetsu from the start was always suspicious. Both Matoi and I had issues with Senketsu and Junketsu respectfully before we were able to force our Kamui to grant us their full power. Ichigo, however, never seemed to have that issue. Could his status as a Life Fiber Hybrid have granted him some unforeseen resistance to his Kamui's mental assaults?"*

She would have gone and asked Ichigo himself about his newly revealed status but for the past twenty-four hours he had confined himself to his room with the only person allowed inside being Orihime Inoue. Ryuko Matoi was also in a similar state after her rampage, which irritated Satsuki. She had counted on Matoi and Ichigo to try and run interference with the School Raid Trip and gain power and control over their Kamui but that seemed less and less likely, but with the change in venue for the trip it might be best that they not interfere.

"Status Report."

Uzu Sanageyama, wearing a green jersey and holding a wooden shinai in his left hand, was the first to speak. Leaning back on the couch and tapping his shinai against his shoulder, he turned his head to Satsuki and spoke, "All Athletic Committee Squads are prepared and ready to hit Karakura Town from the west. We will move swiftly and take control of the Old Karakura Train Station as well as Karakura General Hospital."

Houka Inumuta frowned but the high collar on his blue jersey hid it from the rest of the Elite Four. Adjusting his glasses with the tip of his index finger, Inumuta scoffed and said, "You should be cautious, Sanageyama. Your part of Lady Satsuki's plan involves you passing

close to Ichigo Kurosaki's home. If the data I've managed to gather about his family is to be considered accurate, his father is an exceptionally dangerous man capable of standing up to Lady Ragyo. It would be wise if you refrain from attempting anything against Ichigo's family."

"Who do you think I am? I would never go after Ichigo's family just because I have a grudge against the guy," Sanageyama spat at the insult Inumuta was giving him. He had too much honor and pride to attack Ichigo's family just because he lost to the kid.

"There is something else you should know," Inumuta began rapidly typing on his laptop before with a single stroke pressed a key and brought up a map of Karakura Town on the screen behind Satsuki. Standing up and walking up to the screen, Inumuta pressed his finger against the map and highlighted a building, "Karakura General Hospital is controlled by Ryuken Ishida. He is the father of Uryu Ishida and head of the Ishida Medical Conglomerate, which rivals the Kiryuin Conglomerate in terms of both power and influence. Lady Satsuki, I recommend on the basis of these facts that you change Sanageyama's orders. Instead of taking Karakura General Hospital he should continue pushing eastward past it until he reaches Karakura Community Park. Doing so will potentially diffuse a situation that could cost us dearly."

"Agreed," Satsuki leaned back and folded her hands under her chin. Antagonizing the Ishida Conglomerate would be a serious lack of judgment on her part. Satsuki had heard of her mother's failed attempt to assassinate Ryuken Ishida a few weeks ago, which meant the man was a potentially serious threat to her mother's plans. She would rather have someone like him on her side than against her, "But it seems like you have forgotten one thing, Inumuta. There is another dangerous factor to account for - Tatsuki Arisawa."

"Tatsuki Arisawa?" Inumuta wracked his brain for why that name seemed so familiar and it wasn't just because it sounded nearly the same as Satsuki, "Wait a second, isn't she -"



"The second strongest girl in Japan after me," Satsuki finished stoically. She remembered that tournament quite well since it was the only time since she first started putting together her grand plan that she nearly lost in a fight. She had initially entered the tournament with the goal of searching for new recruits to join Honnouji Academy but when she fought Tatsuki in the final match, her goal had shifted to winning. The match had dragged on for several minutes and after she managed to shatter Tatsuki's arm using nothing but her own hand-to-hand skills, Satsuki had fully expected her opponent to give up. She was thus surprised when Tatsuki continued to fight her with a broken arm, earning Satsuki's respect. The fight had continued on for another few minutes and Satsuki only won when the judges had declared Tatsuki to be in too much pain to continue fighting.

"She very nearly bested me two summers ago in a tournament," Satsuki explained to her Elite Four, "Tatsuki Arisawa is not someone to be underestimated. She can most likely take out a Two-Star student with ease if her strength has increased as much as mine has. Now then, Gamagori, are your brigades prepared?"

Ira Gamagori sat at attention once he realized Satsuki was waiting for him to give his report, "The Disciplinary Committee is ready to move out upon your word, Lady Satsuki! We shall move upon Karakura Town from the south through Tsubakidai Park until we reach Mashiba Middle School. My forces are more than sufficient to accomplish the task you gave us!"

"I've done some further calculations on your route," Inumuta pointed to the screen, where a large arrow began snaking up from the south towards Mashiba Middle School, "The most expedient route will take you through the Sakurabashi Sector, but that will put you within a block of the homes of two of Ichigo Kurosaki's friends - Yasutora Sado and Orihime Inoue. If we extrapolate out Orihime Inoue's powers on the basis that she is not unique, it is likely Yasutora Sado possesses some sort of ability as well. Use every precaution needed if you find yourself facing him."

"Understood," Gamagori nodded.

"I guess it's my turn now," Nonon Jakuzure cheerfully announced as she waved her baton around in the air all while a large smirk was evident on her face. Clad in her dark blue Symphony Regalia Mark III, the only remaining Three-Star Goku Uniform, she pointed the baton at Satsuki and said, "I'm supposed to lead the Non-Athletic Squads south through the Yumisawa Sector straight toward Karakura High School."

When there was silence after she finished, Nonon turned to Inumuta and sarcastically growled, "Hey, aren't you going to give me any stupid advice?"

Inumuta looked at Nonon in mock surprise, "Are you actually asking for my advice? Well, if you insist and are desperate enough, I suppose I can offer you some advice."

"Bite me, Doggy."

"Your route through the Yumisawa Sector takes you past the Ishida family home," Inumuta continued off while ignoring Jakuzure's scathing remark, "Much like my advice to Sanageyama, it would wise to put as much distance between you and the Ishida home as possible. There is no need to antagonize a potentially dangerous enemy."

"Your precautions are welcome, Inumuta, but we shall move too fast for Ichigo Kurosaki's friends to put up any resistance," Gamagori boasted proudly. Leaping onto his feet, he patted his hand against his massive chest and shouted, "Do not forget that the students of Honnouji Academy possess Goku Uniforms imbued with the power of Life Fibers while Karakura High School does not have any such thing. There is nothing that can stand in our way!"

"That's not what I heard," Sanageyama spoke up cryptically, causing Gamagori to look at him with a perplexed expression. Sensing the Disciplinary Committee Chair's focus, Sanageyama sighed and

thought back on the rumors he heard from other schools, "It's just rumors, but apparently Karakura Town is the only place in Japan that is not ruled by either Lady Ragyo's company or the Takarada Conglomerate. While the Ishida Conglomerate is based in Karakura Town, the only sway they have is the millions of dollars donated to Karakura High School every year."

"That's not a cause for concern," Gamagori answered after a moment, "Surely -"

"You should have let Sanageyama finish, Gamagori," Inumuta interrupted rudely, "There is one thing you do not know. Starting about nineteen years ago, Karakura Town has had a permanent ban on any products made by Revocs. Anything containing Life Fibers is always stopped at the outskirts of the city and confiscated before being destroyed. The city is completely and thoroughly Life Fiber free."

"Impossible!" Gamagori shouted in disbelief. He found it extremely hard to believe that the citizens of Karakura Town did not wear Revocs clothing. If that was the case, then surely they would not be able to put up much of a fight against Satsuki's forces. Knowing that the Student Council President undoubtedly had a plan for all this, Gamagori frowned before voicing his complaints, "I mean no disrespect, Lady Satsuki, but if Karakura High School does not possess weaponry able to go against our Goku Uniforms, surely it would be better to divide our forces and assault the Kansai Region as well."

"It would be wise to heed Inumuta and Sanageyama's advice, Gamagori, lest you find yourself defeated in battle," Satsuki calmly said while Soroi poured her another cup of his bitter tea.

Sipping the tea gently, the bitter liquid soothing after years of drinking it, Satsuki waited several seconds before continuing, "Many years ago when I was first beginning to plan the conquest of the Japanese school system, my mother came to me and forbade me from conquering Karakura Town. I was confused and perplexed by

her rather hands-on advice to what she had previously felt was none of her concern. When I asked her why I should not take over Karakura Town, she coldly informed me that the city possessed a power strong enough to not only repel my forces but also keep her out as well. At the time I had no idea what she meant, but after the last few weeks I realize she was referring to Isshin Kurosaki. If that man is able to scare Nui Harime into submission then he is not to be underestimated."

"You need not worry about us, Lady Satsuki. We will succeed in our goal of conquering Karakura Town!" Gamagori boasted with much more control. If Satsuki was apprehensive about Ichigo's father, it would be in his best interest to not do anything to antagonize the man. Once he was dismissed, Gamagori was going to give the Disciplinary Squads orders that if they came across Ichigo's sisters that they are to be returned home alive, uninjured and happy.

Inumuta rolled his eyes at Gamagori's enthusiasm before focusing back on the data streaming across his laptop. There was so much to do with so little time left that he was spending every moment possible updating brigade orders, GPS trackers, topology reports of the land surrounding Karakura Town and everything else imaginable, "As you are aware, two weeks ago you gave me orders to keep an eye on Karakura Town as a precautionary measure. Five days ago the Information Strategy Team working with the Information Systems managed to listen in on a call originating from the Kurosaki Clinic and forwarded me the conversation, which I then gave to Iori. If what was heard is to be taken at face value, Isshin Kurosaki has built an Anti-Life Fiber shield that envelops the entirety of Karakura Town. The shield is of such strength that Goku Uniforms will not be able to work without the creator keying them into the shield's IFF program."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed in irritation, "What about Junketsu?"

Inumuta adjusted his glasses before answering, "Iori's calculations of the shield's composition and strength indicate that Junketsu will be able to activate, but that its power will be limited to just below a tenth of its current strength."

"I see..." It was extremely wise of Inumuta to inform Iori and while Satsuki was disappointed she hadn't been informed, the more she thought about it the more she realized Inumuta had no reason to tell her. It wasn't until yesterday that the Tri-School Raids Trip was changed from the cities of Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto to simply Karakura Town. Pressing a button on her chair, Satsuki turned around as one of the monitors flared to life before Iori appeared, "Iori, have you thought of a solution to pierce the shield surrounding Karakura Town?"

There was a ruffling of paper before the Sewing Club President answered, "I've looked over the data surrounding the shield and quickly determined that whoever created it is a complete master of Life Fiber manipulation. The shield is on a level of complexity nearly identical to that of Junketsu and will not allow anyone wearing Life Fibers to pass through without being keyed into the shield's IFF program. We can certainly enter Karakura Town but our Goku Uniforms will be completely useless once we're inside."

"So you have nothing?"

"I did not say that, Lady Satsuki," Iori coughed nervously before the camera panned away to show a vial about the size of his head with several Life Fibers floating around inside of it. Focusing the camera closer, Iori's voice reappeared, "After countless hours of failing to devise a method to get through the Anti-Life Fiber shield, I had an epiphany after witnessing yesterday's footage of Ichigo Kurosaki. As I saw Nui Harime expose Ichigo's true nature, I began to realize that whoever created the shield must have keyed in Ichigo. He is from Karakura Town, after all, and it would make sense that he could come and go without any issues. After the Grand Couturier retreated, I sent a small team to the scene of the fight to collect as many of Ichigo Kurosaki's Life Fibers, which was very little I'm afraid, but by sewing his Life Fibers into the Special Anti-Karakura Combat-Spec Goku Uniforms we should be recognized by the IFF system and allowed through. However, there is still a small problem."

Satsuki frowned and looked at Iori with piercing blue eyes, "However?"

Iori looked away nervously, "There was an unforeseen complication with Ichigo's Life Fibers. They began breaking down and destroying themselves almost as soon as we began collecting them. It's a fascinating defense mechanism and will result in the complete decomposition of all gathered Life Fibers within forty eight hours."

"Great work, Iori," Satsuki complimented the Sewing Club President before gently pushing herself out of her chair. There was much to do with very little time to do it, "If the Life Fibers you gathered are unstable, then the Raid Trip to Karakura Town will be moved up to tomorrow at 5:00 AM. We cannot afford to let this golden opportunity pass us by. Have you managed to weave Ichigo's Life Fibers into the Elite Four's new uniforms?"

Iori nodded, "Jakuzure's Symphony Regalia should be simple enough to patch but the rest of the new Three-Star Goku Uniforms will not be finished until 10:00 AM at the earliest. The final adjustments are taking longer than I thought but I will have them delivered as quickly as possible."

While the prospect that the Raid Trip would be going on as scheduled relieved Satsuki, there was something about the situation that put her on edge. Ichigo did not seem to know he was a Life Fiber Hybrid until Nui Harime ripped his heart out and showed him. If Ichigo did not know then how did the creator of the Anti-Life Fiber shield manage to imprint his Life Fibers into the IFF system? The creator of the shield was most likely Isshin Kurosaki but that just raised the question of whether or not Ichigo's father knew Ichigo was a hybrid all along. With that and many other questions plaguing her mind, Satsuki turned back to her Elite Four and slammed Bakuzan on the ground.

"Your new Goku Uniforms have been improved and upgraded based on the results of your fights against Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi!" A bright yellow and white light appeared behind Satsuki as

she spoke, "Do not be ashamed of your defeat at the hands of the Kamui Mugetsu and Senketsu, for they were pure Life Fiber outfits and thus extremely powerful! Look forward to the future and your maturation as commanders of your Raid Trip Brigades! You are all dismissed! I shall see you all at 4:30 AM tomorrow morning!"

As the Elite Four left to prepare for the Raid Trip, Satsuki sat back down and closed her eyes in contemplation. After about a minute or two, she heard the elevator doors hiss open and saw Iori walking towards her. With a sly smile on her face, she looked at the couturier and said, "I suppose I should allow you to have Junketsu so you can upgrade it with Ichigo's Life Fibers."

"Yes," Iori stopped at the foot of the stairs leading up to Satsuki and bowed, "But there might be a problem."

"A problem, you say?"

"Do you recall the small sample of Junketsu's sleeve you allowed the Sewing Club to have?"

Satsuki looked down at the spot where she had callously torn off part of Junketsu's sleeve. She had done the act without a moment of hesitation so that Iori could make sure her Kamui wasn't having any adverse effects on her body. Junketsu had easily regenerated itself within twenty-four hours but Satsuki could not forget the way her Kamui refused to work for her for several hours afterward.

"I had Ichigo's Life Fibers tested on the sample you gave us, in case the two pure samples would have a violent reaction," Iori pulled off his thin glasses and sighed, "The results were completely unexpected. Junketsu's sample completely absorbed Ichigo's Life Fibers into itself."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed, "What are you suggesting, Iori?"

"What I'm suggesting is that using Ichigo's Life Fibers on Junketsu could have unforeseen consequences. From what I could gather, if I

were to put them into your Kamui you would be able to remain within Karakura Town's shield indefinitely, but any other effects are unknown at the moment. It is much too risky to allow the procedure to commence without at least another day of tests."

"I do not have time to think about things that might not occur," Satsuki exclaimed passionately after a moment of deep contemplation. Walking down the stairs toward Iori, the Student Council President stopped in front of him and declared, "If I allowed even the smallest of problems to stand before me, then nothing would get done! Let us go to the Sewing Club and commence with the procedure. I will not have my goals and dreams crushed by maybes and possibilities!"

As she walked towards the elevator to leave, Satsuki stopped and paused momentarily before speaking, "Soroi, please inform my mother that I shall have to postpone my meeting with her until 8:00 PM tonight."

The old butler bowed respectfully, "Yes, Milady. Shall I get the helicopter ready?"

"Yes," Satsuki answered as she walked into the elevator, "The procedure should not take more than an hour. Tell the pilot to get prepared for we leave as soon as I am done!"

Soroi watched Satsuki until the elevator doors closed with a hiss and he was left all alone. After spending the next few minutes cleaning up the room, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the phone that an old friend had given him many years ago. He still remembered to this day his friend's words about the phone being completely and totally untraceable and spy-proof. Slowly dialing in the number he knew by heart, Soroi put the phone to his ear and waited patiently for the person to pick up.

"Hello, old friend," Soroi greeted, "There's been a slight change in Miss Satsuki's plans. I think you should know that..."

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As a clock ticked monotonously in the background of the classroom, Ichigo folded his arms across his chest and sat back in his chair. Looking outside into the early afternoon sky, he frowned in annoyance at how hard it had been for him to find a place to sit and think, especially since Satsuki kept trying to find him. Eventually he had given up staying in his room and snuck down to one of the unused classrooms. Hopefully it would allow him enough time to come to terms with everything that happened to him.

"Damn..." he quietly muttered as he clenched and flexed his hand. He may have Life Fibers in his body, if his heart was any indication, but he felt no different than before. Turning his hand over and staring at his palm, Ichigo quickly slammed it against the desk in front of him and winced as a lance of pain shot up his arm. Ok, so he still felt pain like a normal person, so why did it not hurt when Nui tore his heart out? Nothing made sense and the more he thought about it, the more convoluted things got, and it wasn't like he was the only one smarting after Nui's so-called 'surprise' from yesterday.

While Ichigo may be mildly depressed due to the revelations about his body, Ryuko had come out of everything much worse. After being brought back from her berserk state, Mako had informed him that she refused to not only leave her room but also but Senketsu back out. Apparently she was afraid of hurting him again, which Ichigo could understand. From what he was able to gather from Mugetsu's explanation, when Ryuko went berserk she caused Senketsu to feel an intense amount of pain. It didn't take a genius to figure out that she was afraid of hurting Senketsu if she lost control again.

***" Are you upset with me, Ichigo?"***

Ichigo looked over at Mugetsu, who had somehow managed to sit in the chair next to him. Ever since he returned from his fight against Ryuko, Ichigo had chosen not to wear his Kamui, but unlike Ryuko it was not out of fear or disgust. Rather, he wanted to get his head on

straight as to what he truly was before doing anything stupid. The more he thought about everything Nui Harime had done and will mostly likely do in the future, the more Ichigo's anger increased. He needed a cool head if he wanted to confront the Grand Couturier about her actions, but going off half-cocked at someone like Nui was just begging for him to fall into a trap.

"No, I'm not mad at you," Ichigo answered, "I've just got a lot on my mind after yesterday and I needed some time to think."

" ***Then why do you refuse to wear me?***" Mugetsu waved her sleeves sadly at Ichigo while her collar appeared to droop.

"I just found out that I'm not exactly human. I need to come to terms with the fact that I'm half clothing or something like that," Ichigo said with a frown on his face. If he truly was a Life Fiber Hybrid, or whatever it was Nui had called him, then he needed to find out answers. He was going to need to have a really long and thorough chat with his dad the first chance he got.

Mugetsu deflated in sadness before her collar perked up as she remembered something from just after her birth. She had been drifting in and out of consciousness as soon as the ability to exist was given to her, but she remembered quite clearly something her creator told her, ***"There's something I think you should know, Ichigo. It's something my creator said right after I was born."***

"Kisuke gave you a message?"

" ***Well... not exactly,***" Mugetsu looked away in embarrassment, ***"He didn't know that I was already sentient at the time, so it really was just my creator talking to himself. At the time I thought it was just rambling to himself, but after yesterday his words are starting to make a lot of sense."***

Ichigo blinked in surprise before he asked, "What did he say?"

***" Let me think... it's been so long,"*** Mugetsu scratched where her chin would be before she answered, ***"I remember now! He was just finishing up by stitching when I heard him mutter to someone that your blood was quite strange and matched the spectrum of Life Fibers. Right before I fell back asleep until you awakened me once more, I heard Kisuke Urahara chuckle and tell somebody that the Life Fibers in your body was the least strange thing about you."***

Just thinking about Kisuke smirking beneath that stupid bucket hat of his and talking about Life Fibers made Ichigo feel somewhat better. Standing back up, the weight on his mind lightened, he raised his hand to Mugetsu, whose eyes were beginning to water, and said, "Of course Kisuke would figure everything out before anybody else. I'm sorry for ignoring you all day, Mugetsu."

***" It's fine Ichigo!"*** Mugetsu didn't care that she was acting like Senketsu and if Ichigo were to comment on her behavior in the future, she would deny it without fail. All that mattered at the moment was that her wearer was going to put her back on! Wrapping her sleeve around Ichigo's arm, she excitedly said, ***"Come on, put me on!"***

"What the hell?" Ichigo struggled to remove Mugetsu as she desperately clawed at one of his only other outfits. Her jealousy of other clothes was legendary and Ichigo had woken up in the morning several times to find pairs of pants or shirts torn to shreds and Mugetsu with a guilty look in her eyes. As his Kamui growled and jumped on him, Ichigo's reflexes were fast enough for him to grab her in midair and hold her at arm's length.

***" What are you waiting for?"***

"I can't change here!" Ichigo argued, "Satsuki has cameras everywhere, remember? I sure as hell don't want her to see me naked!"

Mugetsu gave a soft growl as she became limp in his hands before huffing and saying, ***"Fine. Go to the bathroom so you can put me on... now!"***

Ichigo rolled his eyes at the possessive nature of his Kamui and let go of her. As he turned to leave the classroom, Ichigo felt Mugetsu jump on his back and wrap her sleeves around his neck. Sometimes he was too much of a pushover for his own good. Just as he was thinking of the damage Mugetsu who undoubtedly do to his current attire, Ichigo opened the classroom's door and found himself face to face with a visibly bloodied Shinjiro Nagita.

"H-Hey, Ichigo," Shinjiro coughed out some blood and wheezed for breath as he gave a shaky smile, "I... I finally managed to get away from her..."

Ichigo didn't hesitate to catch his friend as the spectacted teen fell forward. Ignoring the blood flowing from Shinjiro's wounds, Ichigo helped him lean against the wall and asked, "I thought you were dead. Ryuko said Gamagori found your body weeks ago."

Shinjiro panted heavily before he managed to spit out the words, "T-That's what she wanted everyone to think. I... I wasn't the only one she kidnapped. There... There was another student that she killed and disguised as me. S-She needed to divert all suspicion because I... I think Lady Satsuki was starting to catch on to her plans."

"Who are you talking about?" Ichigo asked even though he already knew the answer, "Is it Nui Harime?"

Shinjiro nodded before tensing up as the pain in his left shoulder intensified. Clenching the jagged wound where his arm had once been, Shinjiro managed to regain some energy and said, "I-I saw you on Student Evaluation Day and watched you reject Lady Satsuki's authority. I wanted to speak... speak to you about an interview but before I could she... she appeared in my room. N-Nui Harime said she needed to pretend to be me for a while so -"

Ichigo grabbed Shinjiro's shoulders as the member of the Newspaper Club was wracked by a spasm of pain. It was increasingly clear that his friend wouldn't last much longer without help. How he managed to come this far with a missing arm boggled Ichigo but as he was about to run and get help, Shinjiro's right hand grasped Ichigo's leg in a weak grip.

"I-I know what you're doing and it's not worth it. Nothing can save me," Shinjiro coughed up blood and stared at Ichigo with his one remaining eye, the other having long been gouged out leaving nothing but a jagged scar along the left side of his face, "You... You have to find and warn Ryuko that N-Nui Harime isn't finished with her! S-She tried to finish me off last night, she said my job was done and I wasn't needed anymore, but I managed to escape by jumping through the third story window after she cut off my arm."

"Why would Nui keep going after Ryuko?" Ichigo muttered quietly as he knelt down next to the dying Shinjiro, "Orihime already healed her eye. Nui even said she didn't hold a grudge against Ryuko anymore because of that."

"I d-don't know how that monster thinks," Shinjiro's voice was getting less and less steady by the second but he was pushing himself to tell Ichigo everything he could, As his arm fell limp at his side, Shinjiro sputtered and said, "Before she... she tried to kill me, Nui Harime laughed and said today would be her coup de grace against Ryuko. She has something big planned for Ryuko and you... you need to stop it, Ichigo! You... need... to... stop..."

As Shinjiro's words trailed off and his head fell forward, Ichigo somberly checked his neck for a pulse before shaking his head. Shinjiro had pushed his body to the limit in order to warn Ichigo about Nui's grand finale against Ryuko. Standing up and staring at the body of the former member of the Newspaper Club, Ichigo grit his teeth and slammed his hand against the wall with a resounding crack, "Fuck!"

" *Ichigo...* "

"Not now, Mugetsu," Ichigo turned to leave. As much as he knew Shinjiro would be at peace in the afterlife once a shinigami sent his soul to the Soul Society, he couldn't bear to look at his friend's mangled and tortured body. Nui hadn't been lying that evening when he tried to rescue Shinjiro. She had him the entire time but failed to say where she was keeping him. He should have asked where Shinjiro was. If he had, perhaps he could have helped his friend.

***" There was something in the pocket of Shinjiro's uniform. It looked like a folded piece of paper."***

Steeling his nerves, Ichigo turned back to Shinjiro's body and looked at the spot Mugetsu mentioned. Sure enough, in the side pocket of Shinjiro's school uniform there was a bloody piece of paper. Gingerly removing and unfolding it, Ichigo took one long look at it before throwing it to the ground and bolting to the door. Throwing off his shirt as he quickly and uncomfortably put Mugetsu on, Ichigo looked into his Kamui's eyes and began apologizing, "Sorry for the rough treatment, Mugetsu, but we don't have any time. We need to go to Mako's house as quickly as possible. Ryuko is in danger."

***" What did the note say?"*** Mugetsu asked as Ichigo finished putting her on.

"Shinjiro just wrote down one word - Ururu," Ichigo explained as he raced through the halls of Honnouji Academy and activated her released state. As he was clad in her full transformation, Ichigo sprinted across the academy courtyard, dodging and weaving around One-Star students getting ready for the Raid Trip in the morning. Leaping into the air and through the entrance to the academy, Ichigo activated his Gufū configuration and began flying as fast as he could.

There was only one reason Shinjiro, who had personally never met Ururu before Nui took over his identity, would know her name. After the events of yesterday and Orihime had gone back home to Karakura Town, Ichigo had pulled Ururu aside and asked her to keep close to Ryuko and Mako at all times. She was the only one that

could sense when Nui was close by and could fight her off if the Grand Couturier tried to pull anything. If Nui mentioned Ururu's name, it could only mean she either had a plan to get rid of the only person he knew that beat her in a fight or to distract Ururu long enough to leave Ryuko vulnerable.

Screaming through the sky above Honnou City towards Mako's house, Ichigo just prayed he wasn't too late to stop Nui's final move against Ryuko.

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"I cannot say that I approve of your choice of modifying the wondrous garment that is Junketsu..." Ragyo's fingers trailed up Satsuki's body as she sensually touched every inch of her daughter. Resting her chin on her daughter's shoulder, Ragyo breathing into Satsuki's ear and asked, "... but you used Ichigo's Life Fibers to do it. I suppose I can find such an addition to Junketsu tolerable."

"Thank you mother," Satsuki replied stoically. She should have already known that her mother was aware of Ichigo's condition. When she arrived at Revocs and informed her mother that Ichigo was a Life Fiber Hybrid, Ragyo had simply chuckled in amusement before declaring that she's known that fact for nearly all of Ichigo's life. She would have been more shocked if Satsuki had said she was a Life Fiber Hybrid herself, "I added Ichigo's Life Fibers not only to Junketsu but also to all of my Goku Uniforms in order to bypass the Anti-Life Fiber shield surrounding Karakura Town."

"Before we talk about business, tell me one thing..." Ragyo cupped her daughter's cheek and asked, "How goes your attempt to court Ichigo?"

Satsuki did not want to mention that all of her attempts to gain Ichigo's trust had backfired over and over again. Schooling her features as her mother's hands trailed across her face, she

answered neutrally, "About as well as can be expected. Ichigo is surprisingly resilient to my usual methods of gaining trust."

"He is Isshin's son. I would expect nothing else from that man's progeny," Ragyo let her finger wrap around a lock of Satsuki's hair before turning to her assistant, "Hououmaru, if you will."

Rei Hououmaru bowed her head and pressed a button on the remote in her hand, "Of course, Ma'am."

In a crackle of static the screen behind Ragyo lit up and began showing clips of Ichigo's battle against the berserk Ryuko. The CEO of Revocs watched Isshin's son effortlessly fight off a rampaging Kamui with maniacal glee. To think that Ichigo's Life Fibers were strong enough to synchronize with Mugetsu to such an extent sent shivers down Ragyo's spine. Ichigo was getting stronger with each obstacle he encountered and soon he would reach the plateau of power Isshin, Nui and herself stood upon. Once his Life Fibers finished awakening, Ichigo would finally be the son with Isshin that she never was able to have.

"So that must be Kamui Senketsu. La vie est drôle," Ragyo walked over and sat down. Leaning to the side and resting her cheek upon her fist, she smirked and glanced over at her daughter, "Is this the reason that you've come to me? I've looked over your report on the incident. I have found no issues with the way you handled the situation, although watching Isshin's son hold back against Ryuko Matoi and still overpower Kamui Senketsu is a truly unique experience."

"Kamui Mugetsu is indeed powerful, but Junketsu is equally strong," Satsuki answered with just a hint of passion to her voice. She had gone over her fight against Ichigo several dozen times from different angles all in order to memorize his fighting style and weaknesses. If they were to fight a second time, Satsuki was certain she would be able to best Ichigo as long as she was able to stop him from shifting to more advanced Kamui configurations, "But that is not what I have



come. I wish to know why you have allowed the Grand Couturier free reign to do what she wished at Honnouji Academy."

"The Grand Couturier..." Ragyo leaned her head back and thought about Nui's reasoning for continuing to go to Honnou City. Smirking coldly as she recalled Nui's wish to bring Ichigo into the family, Ragyo turned her gaze onto her daughter and said, "I had no choice in the matter. You know how hard it is to control the interests of an artiste. Although you might not be aware of it, I was not pleased with the way she played with Isshin's son prior to Parent Student Day. Before I allowed her to head back to Honnou City, I gave her a firm warning about potentially harming Ichigo, because if she somehow hurt him, it would not be me that punished her..."

The way that Ragyo trailed off at the end gave Satsuki all she needed to know to understand her mother was talking about Isshin Kurosaki. Looking around her mother's spacious office, bare apart from several pieces of artwork and her desk, Satsuki softly frowned and asked, "Have you spoken with the Grand Couturier since yesterday?"

"I cannot say I have," Ragyo steeped her fingers and adopted a stoic expression, "Why do you show such interest in speaking with Nui? If you're understandably upset about her interference yesterday, I can assure you that she will not have my protection if she does it once more. Matters concerning youth should always be settled amongst themselves. If Nui does something in the future that conflicts with your control of Honnouji Academy, I grant you full authority to use everything, including lethal force, to punish her. Is that all?"

"No," Satsuki handed Hououmaru a small flash drive containing the footage of Nui's fight against Ururu. She had Inumuta work quickly to isolate the cameras in the grand ballroom so that nobody other than herself could see it. As soon as the secretary and leader of Xcution downloaded the file and the video of Ururu fighting Nui appeared on the screen, Satsuki continued, "I wish to know how it was possible for Ururu Tsumugiya to wound the Grand Couturier with her bare

hands. During the battle against Ichigo and myself, the Grand Couturier was able to heal from her wounds nearly instantaneously."

Ragyo stared enraptured as she watched her precious Nui fight against her twin sister. While in every other instance she would be furious at seeing her daughter hurt, the phenomenon she was witnessing doused the anger before it could boil over. Seventeen years ago, when she first bore witness to the births of Nui and Amu from the Original Life Fiber, Ragyo had recognized that the Life Fibers coursing through each of her daughters were identical. While Life Fibers would regenerate from damage within seconds in most cases, the unique origin of her twin daughters gave rise to what Ragyo had coined Twin Life Fiber Entanglement.

Twin Life Fiber Entanglement dealt with the fact that since both Amu and Nui share identical Life Fibers, if they were to somehow end up fighting each other, those same Life Fibers would entire a state of constant entanglement. If Nui were to injure Amu, or vice versa, the Life Fibers would recognize the incoming attack as originating from itself and temporarily lose the ability to regenerate. Of course this small flaw in her twin daughters vanishes after they stop fighting for roughly a minute, but to think that Nui almost lost against Amu caused Ragyo to wonder just how her long lost daughter was able to learn to fight as well as she did.

"Life is indeed amusing," Ragyo finally mentioned as she gave a light and airy chuckle. Isshin had done well in raising her lost daughter and the irony of the situation was not lost on the Revocs CEO, "Everybody has weaknesses for an opponent to exploit. Nui and Amu are my precious twins. If anyone could deduce the Grand Couturier's weaknesses, it would be herself, would it not?"

Satsuki nodded respectfully, "I suppose so, but if the Grand Couturier attempts to interfere with my plans once more, I will not hesitate to use all possible avenues to deal with her. That includes forcing her to fight Ururu Tsumugiya in a location that she cannot so easily escape from."

If Ragyo was upset by the veiled threat against the Grand Couturier she did not show it. Rather, she smiled and said, "Do what you wish, but note that attempting to trick Nui is not going to be easy. I'm sure that as long as you continue to play the part of a child of COVERS, she will hold herself back from bothering you too much. Now then, what's this I hear about your changing the Tri-City Schools Raid Trip?"

"It has come to my attention that Karakura Town is an unknown and dangerous factor in spreading Honnouji Academy's rule over all schools and academies in the country," Satsuki could not see her mother's face at the moment but she could sense the smug expression on her face. Calming her emotions, lest Junketsu attempt to usurp her iron will, Satsuki steeled her expression and continued, "Do you recall my near loss against Tatsuki Arisawa from the National Martial Arts Championship last year? Tatsuki Arisawa is a close friend of Ichigo Kurosaki. If one city is able to give rise to two such exceptionally strong people, it stands to reason there might be more. If I had attempted to conquer the Kansai Region and Karakura Town chose to attack, I would be leaving the gates of Honnouji Academy open to an occupying force."

Ragyo found no flaws in Satsuki's logic, but there was so much her daughter was missing that she would have laughed if she were any less of a woman. If Satsuki thought the only problem with attempting to conquer Karakura Town were Ichigo's human friends, she was in for a surprise. Still, she had to say something or Satsuki would find her silence suspicious enough to change her plans. Slowly spinning her chair around and crossing her legs, Ragyo grinned haughtily and asked, "Do you recall my words about conquering Karakura Town? If you are set on your current path, nothing I say will dissuade you but just be careful that you aren't wading in water over your head. This cold, dark world has many surprises in store for us all, but if you truly wish to continue on your path, I do have a present for you..."

Ragyo snapped her fingers and the doors to her office were harshly swung open as Riruka Dokugamine walked up. With a pout on her

face and her arms tucked over her chest, Riruka took one look at Satsuki and Junketsu before huffing and turning her attention to Ragyo, "Are you sure she needs my help, Lady Ragyo? Satsuki looks strong enough to survive on her own."

"Riruka Dokugamine," Satsuki's tone was forcefully polite. She knew all about her mother's private security force or Xcution and how each member wears the equivalent of a Five-Star Goku Uniform without losing themselves in the process to the power of the Life Fibers woven into their raiment. That was the reason she had Iori constantly testing out a Five-Star uniform in the hopes that she could create enough loyal students to counter Xcution when the time came for her plan to reach its second stage.

"Yeah, it's good to see you too," Riruka sarcastically said as she sat down in the chair next to Satsuki with her legs dangling over the edge.

Ragyo chuckled in amusement before speaking, "I had a feeling you would not change your mind about Karakura Town so I recalled Dokugamine from her duties in Tokyo. She will be escorting you throughout the Raid Trip and making sure you aren't hurt."

Satsuki's brow creased in anger, "With all due respect mother, I do not need a bodyguard. Mere raiment is no match for a true Kamui."

"That's what I said!" Riruka exclaimed before the full weight of Satsuki's words hit her, "Hey!"

"Do not fret," Ragyo smiled knowingly, "Dokugamine will stay out of the way unless you require assistance. Just make sure Iori weaves the Life Fibers you collected from Ichigo into her raiment. I don't want Dokugamine heading into Isshin's territory only to find her raiment nonfunctional."

"You need not worry mother," Satsuki gave her mother a curt nod before turning around and walking away, "I shall make sure that the battle for Karakura Town is one that will bring honor and glory to the

Kiryuin name. When the day is done and Karakura High School is under my rule, not even the naked apes hiding in the Kansai Region will be able to stand against us."

"Alright, what's this I hear about doing something to my raiment?"  
Riruka stalked after Satsuki while pulling on the sleeve of her dark dress, "I just had this thing cleaned, you know!"

As Satsuki and Riruka's voices faded into the distance, Ragyo stood up and walked over to the window. She would never admit it, least of all to her daughter, but Satsuki's plan to use Ichigo's Life Fibers to pierce Isshin's shield was something she wouldn't have thought of doing. It was too bad that after Satsuki's attempt to take the city Isshin will most likely adjust his shield to prevent a repeat of this.

"Hello, Lady Ragyo!" A cheerful voice exclaimed from behind Ragyo, "Sorry it took so long for me to come back, but there was just so much to do with all my new free time!"

Ragyo was content with addressing Nui without taking her gaze off the helicopter retreating into the distance, but when she heard Hououmaru gasp in shock Ragyo turned around and very nearly gasped herself. Sitting on her desk with her legs kicking playfully back and forth in the air was the Grand Couturier with both of her eyes intact.

"My precious Nui..." Ragyo walked over and gently wrapped her hands around Nui's face. Gazing deeply into her daughter's blue eyes, Ragyo asked, "How is this possible? Your eye was damaged by my former husband's Sword Scissors. It should have been impossible for your eye to regenerate."

"That is true, but I had outside help!" Nui stuck her tongue out and jumped off the desk. Skipping happily around the room before she stopped and spun around on her heel, Nui sighed happily, "I really wanted to show you a picture of the girl who healed my eye. It's too bad that Satsuki wouldn't give me a copy of the home footage. I

would have really liked to see that orange haired girl heal my eye from a third person perspective."

Something within Ragyo's mind connected and memories of experiments from decades ago filtered into the front of her mind, "What was this girl's name?"

"Hmm..." Nui thought back on what Ichigo called her. She would have played around a bit more but Lady Ragyo's tone was serious and even the Grand Couturier knew when it was time to get serious, "Ichigo called her a princess or something, but what was it? Oh! That's right! Her name was Orihime!"

Both Nui Harime and Rei Hououmaru were confused when Ragyo, upon hearing that name, began giggling uncontrollably before she eventually erupted into full blown laughter that echoed not only in her office but across much of the surrounding city.

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When Ichigo slid into the Mankanshoku home through the back door, he very nearly ran into Sukuyo Mankanshoku. Even as he apologized for almost hitting her, Sukuyo gave Ichigo a smile and asked, "Why hello Ichigo. You haven't been around here for so long that I wondered if you forgot about us. How are you today?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Mankanshoku," Ichigo answered quickly despite the oddest feeling he was forgetting something. Looking around the kitchen and noticing they were alone, he asked, "Where is everyone?"

"My husband took Matarou and Guts out to pick up some extra food, Mako is in her room taking a nap at the moment and Ryuko and Ururu are both in Ryuko's room. Is something the matter, Ichigo?"

"What? No," Ichigo shook his head and walked past Mako's mom. Accidentally brushing against her shoulder in the process, Ichigo froze as a strange feeling washed over him. Stopping in the hallway before Ryuko's room, he glanced back at Sukuyo only to find her humming a song while folding laundry. Shaking his head and thinking he was just tired, he slid open Ryuko's door and walked into the darkness inside.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness permeating Ryuko's room, Ichigo looked around and saw Ururu sitting in the corner farthest from the window. In the twenty-four hours since Ryuko's berserk rampage, Ururu had not left Ryuko's side due to the high probability that Nui Harime was lying about giving up her grudge against Ryuko. Already she had sensed several false positives surrounding her twin sister and while she was capable of staying awake for days without suffering from exhaustion, the constant vigilance over her friend was starting to impact her.

"Ururu," Ichigo's voice brought Ururu's full attention squarely onto him. After giving the depressed Ryuko another glance, he asked, "Why don't you go get something to eat from Mrs. Mankanshoku? I can watch over Ryuko for a few minutes."

"Alright," Ururu answered in a whisper as she stood up and walked past Ichigo towards the door. Before leaving the room, Ururu paused and looked off to the side before muttering, "You shouldn't let your guard down. It's not safe."

"I know," Ichigo answered back. It was never safe when Nui Harime decided to involve herself. It was only by sheer luck that he managed to get to Ryuko and Ururu before Nui arrived. Pulling up a chair and sitting down next to the quiet Ryuko, Ichigo sat in silence for almost a minute before asking, "How are you feeling, Ryuko?"

With her knees tucked up to her chest and her eyes looking at Senketsu's hanging form every few seconds, Ryuko did not look anything like the determined and strong willed girl that Ichigo knew. Going berserk and watching Mako die must have taken a larger toll

on her body and mind than he thought. Letting a sigh and rubbing the back of his neck, Ichigo decided to bite the bullet, "You didn't do anything wrong yesterday. No one could have thought Nui would kill Mako like that just to make you angry. Hell, if Nui did that to me I would have lost control of Mugetsu. What happened to you is not your fault."

Ryuko sadly looked at Ichigo before looking away, "I let my anger and hatred at Nui for killing Mako get the best of me. I hurt Senketsu all in order to get my vengeance on her. It's not safe for me to wear Senketsu anymore."

Ichigo frowned at Ryuko's self-loathing. He really wasn't good at these sorts of things. Whenever he got depressed or something terrible happened to him, he would simply force himself to move forward until the problem solved itself, but then again he had his friends and family depending on him to succeed and win. Ryuko not only lost her only family to Nui Harime, but she watched that same person kill her first and best friend. Looking over at Senketsu, who was in a state of half-consciousness with his eye only opening partially, Ichigo knew what he had to do but he had to make sure his dad never found out about it. If he did, Ichigo would murder him and would proudly go to jail with a smile on his face. Raising his arm, he waited a second before smacking Ryuko hard on the back of her head.

"H-Hey!" Ryuko rubbed her head and glared angrily up at Ichigo, "What the hell was that for?"

"What you're doing is really stupid," Ichigo answered passionately. Standing up and patting Mugetsu over his heart, he continued, "I found out that I'm not human yesterday but didn't change who I am. So what if I'm a Life Fiber Hybrid like Nui Harime. I'm still me and nothing will ever change that! If you're scared about losing control over Senketsu, talk about it with someone. Don't just let your anger fester inside. Everyone has problems but that's why we have friends to support us and cover our backs. Mako may have died, but she's



fine now thanks to Orihime and you know she doesn't blame you for anything."

Ryuko looked into Ichigo's eyes as she gave a sad smile, "Mako doesn't know she died. I want to tell her what happened, but I don't know how she will react. What should I do?"

"That's something you need to decide on your own. Mako's your best friend, so you should already know how she'll take the news," Ichigo answered as he sat back down.

For a few minutes after Ichigo gave his answer, Ryuko did not say anything. As time passed and Ichigo began to think she was going to lapse back into depression, she asked in a tone with much more life to it, "I never got the chance to ask, but what's it like being a Life Fiber Hybrid?"

Ichigo shrugged, "It's really not that different from being human, but since I've been a hybrid my entire life I wouldn't know what being human actually is. The regeneration is nice since it will allow me to kick Nui's ass the next time I see her, but then again, you don't need to worry about someone ripping your beating heart out of your chest and showing it to you like it's a goddamn Christmas present."

"You're..." Ryuko seemed conflicted about her next words, "... not worried about being an inhuman monster?"

"It doesn't matter what my body is made of," Ichigo brought his hand over his heart again, "As long as I know I'm human, I could be made entirely of Life Fibers. It wouldn't change a thing about who I am. Nui Harime and I may both be hybrids, but the choices she's made are her own. I'm not going to let it change who I am."

Ryuko sat in silence once more as Ichigo's words sunk in. While she was still physically and emotionally shaken by her berserk rampage across Honnouji Academy, she consoled herself with the fact that Ichigo had a point. He was a Life Fiber Hybrid, however the hell that came to be, and yet he was handling the situation much better than

she was. Ryuko knew that if their situations had been reversed, and she discovered she was a Life Fiber Hybrid, her reaction would not have been pretty. She probably would have snapped in disgust at herself while thinking she was a monster.

"You're right, Ichigo," Ryuko sat up and threw the blanket off her body. Standing up and walking over to her Kamui, Ryuko ran her hand down Senketsu's fabric before asking, "Hey Senketsu, are you awake?"

***"I've been awake since Ichigo and Mugetsu arrived,"*** Senketsu responded, ***"And I heard every word. I do not blame you for what happened, Ryuko. Your anger at Nui Harime for killing Mako was to be expected. There is nothing either of us could have done to prepare for what transpired."***

"Thanks, Senketsu," Ryuko stood up and pulled her Kamui off his hanger before giving it a hug, "I'm sorry for the way I've been treating you. I promise that I won't let anything bad happen to Mako again."

***"And I'll be with you the entire time,"*** Senketsu's muffled voice answered as a small blush adorned his navy blue fabric.

***"Ok, enough with the heartwarming moment,"*** Mugetsu butted in angrily. Ichigo had come here for a reason and he seemed to forget all about it. Luckily she was here to remind him, ***"Ichigo! Did you actually forget what Shinjiro wrote?"***

"Shinjiro? He's dead, Ichigo," Ryuko looked at Ichigo with a perplexed expression. She had completely forgotten about the member of the Newspaper Club given everything that has happened at Honnouji Academy since his murder, but Mugetsu was speaking as if Shinjiro was still alive. That didn't make any sense to Ryuko. She remembered watching Gamagori's Disciplinary Committee carry Shinjiro's body out from the building it was found in.

"I thought so too, but he showed up at Honnouji Academy today nearly dead. Apparently the body that Gamagori found was actually

another student Nui Harime had killed to keep Satsuki off her trail," Ichigo explained with a cold edge in his voice. The sheer depravity of the Grand Couturier's actions made Aizen seem like a boy scout in comparison. At least that smug bastard didn't torture people for days because he enjoyed the sounds of people screaming. With a grimace plastered on his face as he forced his mind to focus on the matter at hand, Ichigo continued by saying, "Nui kidnapped Shinjiro at the start of the school year so that she could impersonate him to get close to us."

"Wait a fucking second. Are you telling me that the Shinjiro we knew, the same guy that I talked to alone several times, was actually Nui Harime?" Ryuko's eyes were wavering back and forth and her hands were clenched tightly at her sides as the revelation of the depths of Nui Harime's plans hit her. How many of their secrets and conversations had Nui not only overheard but also taken part in? She remembered Shinjiro, or rather Nui, given them suggestions about how to go against Satsuki Kiryuin. Were all those suggestions just part of Nui's plan to kill her?

"Yes, but there's something you should know. I don't think Nui is done trying to kill you yet," Ichigo walked over to the window in Ryuko's room, yellow light from the late afternoon sun streaming into the room and highlighting the dust hovering in the air. After quickly looking around and mentally sighing in relief when he saw the alley was clear, he turned his attention back to Ryuko, "Shinjiro managed to escape from Nui's torture last night but he died only a few minutes after reaching me. Before he died, he said that Nui was coming after you to finish the job and in his pocket he had a blood-stained note with Ururu's name on it."

"Hold on a second. Nui might be insane but why would she want me dead?" Ryuko grimaced as she was lost for words. That blonde psychopath seemed pretty truthful when she said she would have no reason to hold a grudge against her if Orihime healed her eye. Ryuko would have called Nui a liar, but the Grand Couturier appeared to get angry whenever someone accused her of lying.

"I've learned not put anything past Nui Harime. It's just easier to assume what she won't do," Ichigo said sarcastically as he walked away from the window towards the door to Ryuko's room. Before sliding it open and heading to the kitchen, he turned and added, "You should put Senketsu on before meeting me in Mako's kitchen. We need to think of a way to stop Nui from doing whatever she plans to do."

Ryuko didn't wait for Ichigo to close the door before she began stripping Mako's spare set of pajamas, which were still too small for her. She really should ask Ichigo if he could steal a set of Satsuki's pajamas for her since she seemed to be about the same size as her. As Senketsu's suspenders snapped into place and she slid the Seki Tekkou onto her hand, Ryuko seemingly flew out of her room and into the kitchen, where she saw everyone waiting for her.

"Ah! You're looking much better Ryuko!" Sukuyo cheerfully stated from across the kitchen.

"Thanks mom but can you go away for a few minutes?" Mako asked her mother politely, "I need to talk about super-secret stuff with my friends!"

"All right, but just holler if you need me," Sukuyo chuckled before heading outside to do laundry.

"So what's the plan?" Ryuko asked while roughly sitting down. When Ichigo seemed to continue watching Mako's mom as she closed the back door, Ryuko growled and slammed her hand on the table, "Ichigo!"

Ichigo shook his head as he forced his attention away from what was bothering him. Muttering a quick apology, he sat down next to Ryuko and looked at her, Ururu and Mako before speaking, "I think we all agree that Nui Harime is an inhuman monster that will do whatever the hell she wants, when she wants, until someone is able to stop her. Ururu, if you were to fight Nui again, do you think you could take her down?"

"That's a tough one," Ururu wringed her hands together and looked away from her friends, "The last time we fought, she was really angry about her eye and why I could hurt her. I only managed to win because she was angry. If we fought again, I don't know what she might do."

Ryuko narrowed one blue eye as she stared intently at Ururu. She couldn't believe that Ururu was Nui's twin sister. It wasn't enough that they didn't look anything alike, but they didn't even act the same way. While Ururu was always polite and friendly, if a little shy, her sister was anything but. Ryuko may have only seen Nui Harime for a few moments before she killed Mako but that was long enough for her to understand that every single word that spewed from the Grand Couturier's mouth made her want to just bash her face into the ground, "I still can't believe you're Nui's twin. How is that even possible? You two are nothing alike!"

"I'm not sure what happened, but Mr. Kurosaki was the one to tell me. He seems to know an awful lot about everything going on," Ururu muttered in a whisper.

"Ichigo's dad is super nice and all!" Mako happily added, "The last time we spoke, he gave me lots of snacks and said I reminded him of his daughter!"

Ichigo admitted that Mako acted like Yuzu sometimes, especially when she's dressing up Kon. Speaking of which, "Hey, has anybody seen Kon?"

"I saw Orihime take him back to Karakura Town," Ururu explained.

"All right then, we need to think about how to deal with Nui Harime," Ichigo leaned back and looked at the ceiling. Thinking briefly about the various options available, he sighed and said, "We already know that Ururu is able to fight her off while hurting her. So our first option is to keep Ururu around Ryuko until Nui gives up. The second option involves my dad. When he spoke with Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui on Parent Student Day, I saw brief flash of fear pass through Nui's eye.

However goofy and idiotic that man is, Nui is afraid of him. If all of our other plans fail, heading to Karakura Town would probably work. I'm sure Nui Harime won't dare set a foot there if my dad's looking for her."

"Are you asking me to run away?" Ryuko demanded angrily as she gripped part of Mugetsu and pulled Ichigo closer, "Satsuki Kiryuin knows why Nui killed my dad. I can't leave until I find out why."

Ichigo bit his lip and looked away from Ryuko, "I don't like running away any more than you do, but Nui's already made it clear that none of us can stop her. Ururu here is the only person in Honnou City that could stop her, but I'm not sure Nui would willingly fight her again. I want to kick Nui's ass as much as you do, but we should regroup and figure out a plan on how to finally bring her down first. Once we do, I promise you can have first shot at kicking that annoying smile off her face."

Ryuko opened her mouth to say something when Ichigo's cellphone began loudly ringing in his pocket. Fumbling around for a moment to pull it out, he flipped it open once he saw the caller ID and asked, "Uryu? Why the hell are you calling me?"

*" There is no time for your stupidity, Ichigo," Uryu Ishida's voice filtered through the phone, "I need to know if you're with Ryuko Matoi. If you are, put the phone on speaker. There's something you both should know."*

Putting his phone on the table and pressing the button, Ichigo said, "Ok, Uryu. What's so important?"

*" You need to head back to Karakura Town as quickly as possible. I've just received word that Satsuki Kiryuin has changed her Tri-City Schools Raid Trip. Instead of hitting Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto all at once, she's focusing the entirety of her forces on Karakura Town."*

"What?" Ichigo nearly shouted in surprise.

*" That's what I thought as well but I would have said it with much more dignity,"* Even on the phone, Uryu always knew how to piss Ichigo off, *"At first I wasn't concerned since your dad informed me that he constructed an Anti-Life Fiber shield around Karakura Town that should negate Satsuki's Goku Uniforms, but the Satsuki Kiryuin I know would not throw her troops into a battle they cannot possibly win. She must have something that will enable her forces to pass through the barrier unimpeded."*

"Wait a second. I knew Satsuki was planning to go after the Kansai Region for some stupid reason or another, but why would she go after Ichigo's hometown?" Ryuko pouted as she tried and failed to think of a reason Satsuki would change her plans like this. It wasn't like the Student Council President to just change things up at the last second.

*" You must be Ryuko Matoi. As for your question, Satsuki Kiryuin has a very analytical mind that nearly rivals my own. She most likely views Karakura Town as a threat that she could not ignore any longer if she wanted to conquer all of the Japanese academies. There is not much time, Ichigo. Satsuki plans to head out tomorrow at five in the morning."*

"Then we don't have much time," Ichigo snapped his phone shut and stood up, "We need to find a way to get back to Karakura Town before Satsuki arrives. Any suggestions on -"

Ichigo cut himself off as he became aware of a dull thumping sound growing louder and louder by the minute. Walking towards the window, he stuck his head outside and saw a helicopter hovering over Mako's house. At first he assumed it was Satsuki since she was the only person he knew that consistently used helicopters to travel but as the aircraft turned to land in the street in front of the house, Ichigo smirked when he saw the blue Quincy pentacle emblazoned on the side with Ishida Pharmaceuticals printed around the symbol. Heading outside, Ichigo watched as the pilot got out and opened the side door, allowing Uryu Ishida to hop outside.

"Hello Ichigo," Uryu greeted calmly as he waved for the pilot to go back to the cockpit. Glancing around the area before snorting in disgust, Uryu added, "Next time, make sure the person on the other end of the phone is finished speaking before hanging up."

Uryu's behavior reminded Ryuko so much of Satsuki Kiryuin that she just about to yell at him when Ichigo rolled his eyes and said, "Go to hell, Uryu. Don't make me come over there and kick your sorry ass. Why are you here, anyway?"

"This is my father's private helicopter," Uryu looked over his shoulder at the aircraft behind him, "He uses it travel on business across the country and has granted me the use of it as long as I do no scratch it. If it looks familiar, it is because it is the same model as the one Satsuki Kiryuin is known for using. That is probably why her anti-aircraft batteries did not shoot me down, although I loathe thinking about how long such a deception will last. Satsuki is probably already aware of my presence in Honnou City."

Ichigo crossed his arms before asking, "Did Orihime make it back to Karakura Town safely?"

Uryu nodded, "Yeah. She arrived early this morning and the stories she told us were quite fascinating. She especially went into great detail about Nui Harime. I've only met that girl once but I can say with complete certainty that she is a psychotic woman with no regards for human moralities or feelings."

"Hey, are you sure we can trust this guy, Ichigo?" Ryuko asked Ichigo, "He looks and acts a lot like Satsuki Kiryuin."

"Uryu's an ass sometimes, but he's trustworthy," Ichigo commented, causing Uryu's shoulders to tense upon hearing the insult. Uncaring as to his friend's current state, Ichigo added, "You never answered the question. Why are you here?"

Uryu took a moment to compose his emotions before answering. He couldn't allow Ichigo to see that his petty insult got the better of him.



There was too much at stake for their usual fights, "I'm here to bring you back to Karakura Town. As I told you on the phone, Satsuki Kiryuin will be invading the city tomorrow morning and we need every bit of power possible to repel her forces. The Kamui you are wearing is probably one of the few things capable of combatting her Junketsu in battle with any appreciable events. If Ryuko Matoi and Ururu want to come as well, I will not stop them. Karakura Town could use all the help it can get."

Ichigo's eyes widened upon hearing Uryu talk so casually about Mugetsu, "How do you know about my Kamui?"

As a siren began blaring and the sounds of people yelling and shouting in the distance grew louder, Uryu stepped back onto the helicopter and said, "I already explained my familiarity with Life Fibers and Kamui a few months ago, Ichigo, but there is no time for me to repeat myself! Everyone get on board before Satsuki sends her forces. I will explain everything during the trip back to Karakura Town!"

Without fear or hesitation, Mako jumped onto the helicopter and sat down in one of the comfortable leather seats next to a window. She had dreamed about riding in Lady Satsuki's helicopter ever since she first saw it and now it was like a dream come true. As she bounced in her seat and looked around, her eyes caught sight of the snack bar and refrigerator in the back and began to sparkle, "Oh wow. Ryuko, they have snacks in here and everything!"

Ururu was the next one to get on board, but before going to her seat she gave Uryu a long sad look, much to the Quincy's confusion. Uryu hadn't really interacted much with the girl throughout his adventures so the reasoning behind her stare escaped him. As Ryuko looked around conflicted about what to do, she eventually jumped on board, but gave Uryu a scathing look, "I don't trust you one bit, even if Ichigo's says I should."

"I don't expect you to," Uryu answered back as something nearby caught his attention. With his voice trailing off as something more

important came to mind, he quickly finished by saying, "Just know that I'm on your side. Satsuki Kiryuin's invasion of Karakura Town has repercussions that I can only explain to you on the way there."

"Fine," Ryuko conceded angrily as she sat down next to Mako. Ignoring her friend's attempts to fill her mouth with food she found at the snack bar, Ryuko folded her arms across her chest and looked out the window.

Ichigo, unlike the other three already on the helicopter, did not move. There was something out there watching them and he had the strangest feeling in the pit of his stomach that he knew exactly what, or rather who, it was. Hearing the sound of someone jump on the ground, he looked to the side as Uryu walked next to him, "You feel that?"

"Yeah," the Quincy answered as his analytical gaze pierced through the shadows in the afternoon sunlight for any sign of the spy. Whoever they were, they had to be really good to escape his sight, "I've sensed this presence before. It's extremely faint to the point where I would normally ignore it, but it's so close that it's acting like a beacon. When my father refused to accept Ragyo Kiryuin's merger proposal, she did not let us go unscathed. As we left her office and took the elevator down to the lobby, it became apparent that she left us a going away surprise. A blonde haired surprise, Ichigo..."

Ichigo slowly reached for Tournesol on his back, "Nui Harime. She just doesn't know when to quit."

When he saw Ichigo drawing his blade, Uryu couldn't help but ask, "What do you intend to do against her? I have been briefed on the power your Kamui possesses, but the Grand Couturier of Revocs is on an entirely different level. Even my father, who is far stronger than me, could not do much more than slow her down enough for us to escape. Her regeneration and speed makes her truly nightmarish to fight. We have to get out of Honnou City."

"Then you go," Ichigo stepped forward and looked over his shoulder at Uryu before scoffing, "I know Nui better than you. If she really wanted to stop us from leaving, we would be dead already. You take Ryuko and the others back to Karakura Town while I stay behind to distract her. For some weird and creepy reason she thinks I'm her cousin or something, so she probably won't kill me. I'll catch up later."

Uryu opened his mouth to argue but remembered just how stubborn Ichigo was. Turning around and climbing back into the helicopter as it began to lift off, he shouted down at Ichigo, "Do you even have a plan to get back to Karakura Town?"

"Like hell I have a plan!" Ichigo yelled back, "I'm making this all up as I go!"

Ichigo watched the helicopter carrying all his friends to safety vanish over the horizon for several minutes before turning around and pointing Tournesol at a shadow, "I know you're there so come on out, Nui."

"Oh dear," Sukuyo Mankanshoku stepped out of the shadows and brought a hand up to her cheek. Tilting her head to the side and opening her eyes, which were bright blue, she asked, "Gosh, just how did you know it was me, Ichigo?"

"Your disguise was pretty good, but when I brushed against your shoulder earlier I could sense Life Fibers inside you," Ichigo clasped both his hands on Tournesol's hilt and hardened his stance. Keeping his attention firmly on Nui, he added, "Your impersonation of Mako's mom had a few mistakes as well. What did you do with her? Tell me!"

"Oh, relax!" Nui exclaimed before her disguise burst apart like a balloon, allowing her true appearance to once more shine through. Giggling softly as her blonde pig tails bounced around, Nui brought a finger up to her lips and smiled, "You should learn that not everything is what it appears to be! That girl's family is fine. I just slipped them a

piece of mail with a some money and a note for them to go do whatever the heck they want. They're all fine and dandy, Ichigo, so you can relax and lower your weapon. Someone is bound to poke their eye out on it, you know."

Ichigo knew Nui didn't, or couldn't, lie so he let his guard relax just a tad at that piece of news, "You're too late to do anything to Ryuko."

Nui laughed at Ichigo's words and stuck her tongue out childishly, "That's really funny, Ichigo. Did you really think I would care about Ryuko after I got my eye back? You fell for my plan just like I knew you would!"

"What?"

"Did you really think a stupid human like Shinjiro could just escape me?" Nui asked a stunned Ichigo as she walked towards him with a pout on her face. Hugging his right arm, Nui looked up into his eyes and smiled, "Of course I let him go, but I had to make it really convincing or you wouldn't buy it. That's why I cut off his arm. A loss of a limb automatically makes any situation serious! I also made sure to rant and rave about a 'coup de grace' against Ryuko just loud enough that Shinjiro could hear it. I knew that if he escaped, he would go to you for help! Once that happened, I knew you would come save Ryuko like the hero you are, and ahead of time to boot! Well done, Ichigo! The only thing I didn't anticipate happening was Uryu Ishida showing up, but that's ok since the goal of my grand finale was to get to you."

Ichigo pulled his arm out of Nui's grasp and hopped back, "What do you want with me?"

"Absolutely nothing!" Nui exclaimed as she clapped her hands together.

Leaning forward with a maniacal look in her eyes, she stared at her cousin and explained, "I want absolutely nothing from you! This whole plan has been created just to make you think I was out to get

Ryuko, but I have to say you sure are paranoid Ichigo! I thought you would know me by now, but there is one thing I want you to do before you go rushing off to Karakura Town to stop Satsuki's childish plan. You need to go check out Junketsu and see what she did to that poor Kamui with the Life Fibers from your body! Goodbye, Ichigo, I'll see you during the Great Culture and Sport Festival. It's going to be a world-changing experience for us all!"

Twirling around on her heels, Nui leapt into the air before abruptly vanishing from Ichigo's sight. Biting his lip in anger at being played by Nui, Ichigo turned and began running back up to Honnouji Academy. He didn't care what Satsuki did to Junketsu with his Life Fibers, although he couldn't help but be concerned why she would do such a thing. He needed to get back to Karakura Town as quickly as possible and the only way to do that this late in the day was to steal one of the trucks Satsuki was going to use.

***" Couldn't we just fly?"***

"No, unless you wish to fly for several hours," Ichigo answered Mugetsu, "Besides, even if you could make it to Karakura Town by flying, you'll probably be too exhausted to fight. I have an idea on how to get there, but it's going to be risky. I'll probably get kicked off the Student Council as well, so here's what we're going to do..."

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## **Kamui Tales #19 - Trap and Impromptu Explosive Placement 101**

Keigo Asano was excited to be where he currently was. He couldn't remember the last time he was excited about learning but this wasn't boring like math, English or thermonuclear fission, all of which had no practical applications. This five hour seminar was all about creating impromptu traps and explosives. Keigo paused in his bouncing as he briefly considered if this was what loving to learn felt like.

"Man, if only school was this exciting I would gladly go every day with a smile on my face," Keigo sighed happily as he leaned forward in his desk. The seminar was taking place at Karakura High School on a Saturday, two phrases that would normally have Keigo breaking out in hives. It was only the survival mantra in his head that this would be awesome that kept him from leaping through the nearby window even though he was on the third floor.

"Is that you, Keigo? Today is just full of interesting surprises. I suppose having my date cancel on me could be a good thing if you're here," Mizuiro Kojima gave his friend a small wave as he sat down in the open seat next to Keigo. Today was just full of surprises if Keigo was actually in school on the weekend. Usually Mizuiro or anyone else couldn't get Keigo to do anything mentally stimulating on the weekend without threatening to involve his sister.

Keigo leaned over with his finger extended to offer a rebuttal but was stopped in midair as the door to the classroom was kicked open and gruff voice asked, "Is this everyone?"

Tsumugu Kinagase stalked into the classroom dressed in his usually military fatigues and vest. Casting his dark blue eyes around the room at the gathered students, of which there could not be more than fifteen, he fixed his gaze firmly on Keigo and asked, "Is there a problem?"

"N-No sir!" Keigo snapped off an involuntary salute before planting his ass in his seat and refusing to budge. If this man was his teacher, then all the fun out of coming to the seminar had vanished. Keigo would have attempted to flee but he was certain Tsumugu would kill him before he took a single step.

"I see there are fifteen of you for this special seminar on trap making," Tsumugu paced back and forth in the front of the classroom before stopping in front of the desk and shouting, "My name is Tsumugu Kinagase and for the next five hours I will teach you everything about bombs, mines, grenades and where to place them to do the most damage to the target! When I am done with you, you

will allow know how to plant mines to cause five buildings to simultaneously collapse onto a moving target!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Kinagase," Mizuiro raised his hand, "But isn't creating improvised explosive devices illegal?"

"Yes, it is," Tsumugu kicked the desk behind him, causing the wooden structure to break apart and reveal the crate of mines he had snuck in earlier. They were all diffused with zero chance of detonating, of course, but if Isshin's intelligence was correct Satsuki would be hitting Karakura Town in two days. That meant he needed to whip the students into an appreciable defense force now that the Nudist Beach headquarters in Osaka wasn't in any danger of being attacked.

"That is why you will be working with fake mines," Tsumugu reached down and picked up one of the Anti-Life Fiber mines created by Nudist Beach, each of which lacked the Nudist Beach symbol to preserve the anonymity of the group. Tossing the diffused device to Keigo, who caught it after almost dropping it, Tsumugu clasped his hands behind his back and explained, "The first lesson of trap making is to think ahead. Know the route you wish to place the mines upon and even while running for your life you can plant mines as you go. I've walked up and down the hallway outside this classroom twice before coming here. If I so wished it, I could lay a dozen mines and grenades throughout it while sprinting at full speed."

Picking the crate off the ground and placing in front of Keigo's desk, Tsumugu pointed to the door and said, "Everyone get outside to the soccer field. I've been warned that practicing mine placement inside the school would cause unwanted attention. Mr. Asano, due to your interruption at the start of the seminar you will carry the crate of mines. Move!"

As the students, including Mizuiro, rushed out the door, Tsumugu turned as he heard Keigo grunting. After watching the helpless teen try to carry the box of mines, he rolled his eyes and walked over.

Picking up the crate easily before thrusting it into Keigo's arms, Tsumugu spun around and walked away while saying, "Lift with your legs, not your back. I expect to see you outside in five minutes. Do not make me come back to look for you."

"Yes... sir..." Keigo grunted as he slowly shambled out of the classroom with the crate in his tiring arms. He had a feeling this day was going to suck.



# Inner City Blues

*Here's Chapter 32 and you might notice that I wrote things a bit differently than normal. You might notice that each section has a location and a time. That is because all the events that take place in this chapter occur between the end of Chapter 31 (when Uryu left with Mako, Ryuko and Ururu) and the start of the Raid Trip at 5:00 AM the following day. There are a lot of viewpoints and characters of importance in this chapter and every one of you will like who I introduce. There are also a couple of pop culture references and shout outs to other fandoms as well. Enjoy and don't forget to read and review!*

*Don't forget that there is a tvtropes page for this story! Contribute to it what you can!*

*I'm looking for fanart of this story if anything is interesting. The Karakura Occupation Arc is going to require some visual aid.*

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## Chapter 32 - Inner City Blues

*Karakura General Hospital (Lobby) - 11:37 PM*

Ryuko watched as dozens of people dressed in hospital scrubs scurried around while words and phrases she did not understand were passed back and forth like trading cards. She was still pissed off that Uryu had lied to her about explaining what was going on. The flight from Honnou City to Karakura Town had been completely silent and every time she would try to speak Uryu would inform her that she would get her answers in due time. Clamping down on her anger as she remembered what happened the last time her fury overwhelmed her, Ryuko spent the entire ride stewing in an annoyed

silence. When they finally landed on the roof of the hospital early in the evening she thought her questions would be answered but as soon as everyone was off, the helicopter hovered back into the air with Uryu in it before flying southward.

"Wow, this is a real hospital! Dad is always talking about these things but I never thought I would actually see one," Mako was bouncing around in her seat while absentmindedly eating chocolate that she took from Uryu's snack bar. As she gleefully watched doctors, nurses and volunteers scurry around in preparation for the upcoming battle; Mako brought her hands up to her chin and squealed, "This is amazing! Do you think we can take a tour after the field trip is over, Ryuko?"

Leave it to Mako to always find a way to bring her out of a funk but even as a small smile spread across her face, Ryuko could not help but remember seeing the light leave Mako's eyes as Nui Harime stabbed her through the heart. If Orihime hadn't been there to bring Mako back Ryuko didn't think she would have the strength to go on. Nui had taken her father from her and almost took her best friend as well. Clenching a fist as her eyes drooped sadly, Ryuko vowed to never let something like that happen again. She was never going to let Nui Harime take someone she cared about away again. Biting her lip and suppressed the anger boiling just beneath the surface, Ryuko huffed and turned to Mako, "Sure, but I don't think this hospital is going to be standing after Satsuki is done with Karakura Town."

"I highly doubt Satsuki Kiryuin will attempt such a measure," an older and slightly conceited voice answered Ryuko's unseen question. Leaning her head backwards on her chair, Ryuko saw a man walking towards them, "If she even tries to bring her little squabble onto my property I will bury her with so many lawsuits that Ragyo herself will notice the drop in her personal fortune."

Ryuko stared as the man continued to approach them. While the high quality grey suit he was wearing meant he had to be rich, she couldn't help but find her eyes drawn to the weird patterns on the

guy's tie. They looked so familiar but she was sure she hadn't seen them before today, "Huh? Who are you?"

Instead of answering Ryuko's question, Ryuken checked his watch before adjusting his tie. So this was the girl Isshin talked so much about when he came back from his little trip to Honnouji Academy. Quite frankly she reminded him of Isshin's son to the point that Ryuken would have wondered if Isshin had cheated on Masaki if not for two things. The first was that Isshin, despite his childish demeanor, had always been in love with Masaki since that day so long and would never do anything that might bring shame upon him. The second and far more important was that if Ryuko Matoi was indeed Isshin's daughter, Ryuken was going to hunt that man down to the corners of the earth and torture him for all eternity.

"I am Ryuken Ishida, CEO of Ishida Pharmaceuticals and head of the Ishida Conglomerate. You must be Ryuko Matoi and Mako Mankanshoku. Isshin's told me much about you, but that is enough introductions," Ryuken ignored or didn't see the look of surprise grace Ryuko's face at the mention of her father's name. Turning his back to the two teenage girls, Ryuken began walking away down the hall, "There is not much time to prepare for tomorrow's events and every minute wasted talking is another minute that Satsuki Kiryuin has to prepare. Come."

"Wait!" Ryuko leapt to her feet and since she was holding Mako's hand, accidentally took her friend with her. As Mako spun around dizzily as her brain tried to reestablish balance, Ryuko stared at Ryuken and asked, "Did... did you know my dad?"

Ryuken saw the crestfallen expression on Ryuko's face and decided his usual hands off approach would most likely do more harm than good, "I'm sorry that you misinterpreted what I said. The Isshin that I was referring to was not your father but Isshin Kurosaki. While I have never met your father, I have heard many things surrounding Professor Matoi's accomplishment. He was a good man that did not deserve to die at the hands of a psychopath like Nui Harime."

The casual mentioning of the Grand Couturier's name caused a lance of worry to shoot through Ryuko's mind, "How do -"

"Like I said, there is no time for talking," Ryuken interrupted Ryuko's question as he continued to walk away. As Ruko was forced to follow him while dragging Mako, who kept trying to stop and ask all the doctors they passed various questions, Ryuken raised his hand at two armed guards blocking a doorway. Ryuko watched as Ryuken pressed his thumb against a pad on the wall before the door opened with a pressurized hiss. As he escorted Ryuko and Mako through the hallway that only a dozen people in the world had access to, Ryuken coughed and continued his explanation, "My son is waiting for you further ahead. He wanted to come retrieve you himself but due to his guests he asked me to instead. Usually I would not even condone such a request but the situation we're all involved in does not leave room for stubbornness. The upcoming conflict will leave dozens, if not hundreds, injured or worse and as a doctor I cannot allow my personal feelings to get in the way of helping people. This is as far as I go. Continue walking straight ahead and you will reach my son."

"Thanks," Ryuko muttered before asking, "Hey, how do you know about Nui Harime?"

Ryuken didn't pause as he answered, "She tried to kill me. It did not work and she most likely finds a blemish on her perfect record abysmal."

Before Ryuko could ask why Nui had tried to kill him Ryuken pressed his thumb on the pad once more, causing the door to slid shut and lock with a hiss behind them. As Mako gasped in amazement at the stuff around them and began pulling her along for the ride, Ryuko realized that perhaps it was for the best she not know the answer to her question. Nui had hurt a lot of people in her life and it was beginning to dawn on her that her dad might not have been the first one she killed. The way Nui bragged about the deed to her during the Sudden Death Runoffs suggested Nui had been murdering people for a very long time and the fact Nui was only seventeen years old caused Ryuko's heart to clench in her chest.

**" Your heart rate and pulse have jumped, Ryuko. Are you thinking about yesterday?"** Senketsu's familiar and calming voice helped to relieve some of the fear Ryuko was feeling. She was pissed off the hell over what Nui did but at the same time the level of power and strength the Grand Couturier possessed scared the crap out of her. If Ichigo and Satsuki working together could not bring that bitch down, what chance did she have? She needed to find a way to get stronger as quickly as possible to not only avenge her dad but all the people Nui killed.

"Yeah," Ryuko conceded before noticing a light shining out from under the door of the room ahead of them, "Hey Senketsu, we need to get stronger. I won't let Nui Harime hurt anyone that I care about anymore."

**" Yes. I will not let that monster lay another finger on Mako or anyone else! If that means we have to team up with Satsuki and Junketsu to do the deed, then that's what we'll do!"**

"Hold on a second, that's taking things a bit too far," Ryuko scoffed at the hurt look in her Kamui's eye, "Getting stronger is one thing but teaming up with Satsuki is just crazy. Next you're going to tell me she's my sister."

"... if we don't fortify the Mitsumiya Sector we risk Satsuki's forces entrenching themselves in the old Matsukura Hospital. It would take power we do not have to dislodge them if that happens."

The voice drifting through the air down the hallway caused Ryuko to frown. She quite easily recognized the angry voice as belonging to the Mohawk bastard that kicked her ass a couple of days after she managed to fully synchronize with Senketsu. She wanted to pay him back for the humiliating defeat but the question of what he was doing here forced Ryuko to think things over. Ryuken said Uryu was back here and if Tsumugu was with him, did that mean the two of them were working together?

"That is a brilliant point, but Satsuki Kiryuin is anything but conventional! If she intends to capture Karakura Town and enslave the population under the thrall of Life Fibers, the most expedient way would be through the Karakura Honchou Sector. Capturing the train station would be an advantage that will all but turn the tides of the battle!" A second and much more boisterous voice answered and for some reason Ryuko could not help but think about Gamagori going off into another of his tirades about breaking the rules, not wearing a proper uniform or blowing up the science lab due to a concoction of chemicals she mixed together. How the hell could she know she accidentally created a mixture one thousand times more explosive than nitroglycerin?

"You are thinking too simple," A voice that belonged to none other than Uryu Ishida appeared, "Satsuki Kiryuin may be eighteen years old but she is a master strategist. She has four commanders as her Elite Four and will most likely split them up into three or four fronts. Such a maneuver will stress the defenses we have if we do not plan according. The best course of action would be to split our forces and send them here... here... and here. If Satsuki tries to pull anything, we should be able to warn those in reserve of her intentions."

"That is a marvelous idea! Such an ingenious plan is worthy of coming from an Ishida!" the second and unknown voice nearly shouted and Ryuko could have sworn she heard Uryu groan.

While Ryuko wanted to stand outside the room and listen for a few more minutes, it seemed that Mako had other plans. Pulling open the door and slamming it into Ryuko's face, Mako's eyes drifted up while she pointed at the man facing them and said, "Oh wow, he's huge like Gamagori!"

Ryuko rubbed her nose from where the door hit it and was about to chastise Mako when she saw a bald man leaning over a large table with a detailed map of Karakura Town and the surrounding mountains. The man wore what was obviously a military uniform but had the symbol of a red X crossed over a pair of underwear stitched onto his breast. What drew her attention the most was his massive

size. He easily had to be the same size, if not bigger than, Gamagori and she could tell all of that was muscles. Upon noticing their arrival the man stood up to his full height and walked past Tsumugu, nearly knocking him over in the process, before giving Ryuko a very, very firm handshake.

"I must say that it is a pleasure to finally meet the daughter of the great Professor Matoi!" Ryuko was floored when the man seemed about ready to burst into tears even as he continued to accidentally break her hand, "I confess that due to my duties I was not able to watch as you grew into a fine young woman but it fills my heart with unbridled joy to see that you are alive and well. I truly am sorry for the loss of your father. He was a marvelous man and while I can never reach the level of charisma and respect Professor Matoi possessed, I will do my best to fill that gap in the world!"

"Er... thanks?" Ryuko didn't know how to respond to the man's speech so she fell back on the age old, "Who are you?"

The giant man's body stiffened as he realized he forgot to introduce himself to Ryuko. Letting go of her hand, much to Ryuko's immense relief, he stepped back and instantly threw off the top half of his uniform, exposing his muscular and well-sculpted body for all to see. As he moved in various poses with creepily familiar purple sparkles and stars surrounding his body, the man boisterously shouted, "I humbly request that you forgive my rudeness! In my haste to greet you I have forgotten one of the most important tenets of manners. Gaze upon my sculpted body, carved through years of service and dedication, and accept my most sincere apologies. My name is Alex Louis Armstrong, Major General of Nudist Beach!"

The reactions of the two girls couldn't have been any more different. While Mako was ecstatic at seeing Armstrong for reasons she would never fully understand, Ryuko was staring at the man with a terrified look on her face. When she first met Aikuro Mikisugi and his tendency to strip while giving her valuable information, Ryuko thought that was the worst thing she would ever encounter in her hopefully long life. That thought was blown out of the water when

she saw the man in front of her strip off his shirt and began posing in ways that Aikuro could only hope to emulate. With her survival instincts kicking in, Ryuko leapt back and brought out her red Scissor Blade before pointing it at Armstrong.

"Stay back!" Ryuko shouted at Armstrong, "You try to take off your pants and I'll castrate you!"

Armstrong blinked in confusion as he witnessed Ryuko's reaction. He hadn't expected her to get angry upon hearing his most sincere apology but Armstrong did not get to where he was in life by being dense and stupid. It had taken his analytical brain only seconds to tie Ryuko's reaction to the removal of his jacket and shirt to Aikuro Mikisugi.

"Do not worry, Miss Matoi, I have no intention of doing such a thing in front of you," Armstrong stood up to his massive height and sighed wistfully. Pressing his knuckles against his forehead and turning his head away, the purple sparkles appeared around his head as he spoke, "While we of Nudist Beach prefer to operate with minimal clothing so that we may better fight against the tyranny of the Kiryuins and the Life Fibers they possess, we are not arrogant enough to assume everyone feels the same way. One of the key tenants of my organization is that a Nudist must never strip in front of impressionable minors whose minds have yet to fully develop! Such behavior can traumatize their developing minds for the rest of their lives! So take heed in my words that unlike my student I will never do such a disrespectful thing in front of you or your friends!"

To Ryuko's eternal gratitude Uryu decided Armstrong was wasting too much time. As much as he would have preferred to assume Satsuki would stick to the leaked plans and leave at 5:00 AM, Uryu knew her well enough to know Satsuki was one to know take any chances. If she was aware of her plans being compromised, she might order Honnouji Academy to depart earlier than expected in the hopes of arriving before Karakura's defenses are ready. Placing himself between Armstrong and Ryuko, Uryu adjusted his glasses and looked at Armstrong, "Major General Armstrong, please excuse



my tone but we do not have the time for this. We still need to finalize our defenses against Honnouji Academy's assault!"

"Yes, of course." Armstrong turned away from Ryuko toward Tsumugu, who snapped to attention upon receiving his commander's attention. There would always be time to speak with Ryuko later. For the moment he needed to focus every last screed of his intellect on the task at hand, "The attention of a Kamui and its wearer will change everything. Most of our plans revolved around limiting Satsuki Kiryuin's impact on the battle. Ryuko's presence changes everything. Forces that were previously dedicated to slowing down Satsuki can now be redirected to more vulnerable locations."

Tsumugu looked like he had just swallowed a particularly sour lemon as he answered, "As much as I would not like to depend on a Kamui, you have a point. There is no chance of my men taking on a Kamui without suffering massive and extensive losses in the process. A Three-Star Goku Uniform would be pushing it and that is only if we had the element of surprise on our side. The power of Senketsu is not to be trifled with but I still think my sister would have been a better choice."

"Kinue's aptitude for strategies and fighting is not to be trifled with," Armstrong hummed as he scratched at his moustache. He had always felt somewhat responsible for Kinue's ragged existence for most of the past ten years. She may have volunteered for the test fit of Danketsu but nothing happened in Nudist Beach without going through him first. He had mulled over the request for days before finally authorizing it. It filled his heart with joy to see bits and pieces of the old Kinue bleeding through once more. Whatever she it was she discussed with Ichigo Kurosaki at Honnouji Academy must have really helped, "Unfortunately your sister has earned the ire of Ragyo Kiryuin. I have put her on low-key missions in Europe until Ragyo makes her next move."

"Hold on a second! That Kinue woman is your sister?" Ryuko shoved past Armstrong until she was standing right in front of Tsumugu. She couldn't help but remember the woman that attacked Ururu back

when Mako was the president of the Fight Club. The strength and speed she possessed as she went after Ururu were phenomenal and Ryuko could not help but think that if she had such power, Nui Harime would never have been able to hurt Mako.

"Yes, she is forced to wear a despicable Kamui. Its name is Danketsu and it is the reason I hate Life Fibers. I was going to give you the benefit of the doubt but after your performance yesterday, I feel that your Kamui should be destroyed," Tsumugu ignored the venomous look Ryuko was giving him to focus on the map of Karakura Town. As much as Uryu Ishida consoled him Satsuki would not dare to move through the Kitakawase Sector, Tsumugu had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach that the youngest Kiryuin would make such a move exactly for that reason.

"Damn it," Ryuko seethed as her eyes narrowed in anger, but before she could demand Tsumugu to talk she found Armstrong's massive hand on her shoulder.

"Please forgive my comrade for his harsh and unjustified rudeness!" The sparkles were back around Armstrong's face as he spoke, "The history of Kinue Kinagase is not something that should be discussed unless Tsumugu or Kinue decide the time is appropriate. Understand that Tsumugu's feelings towards Kamui and Life Fibers are due to tragic events, but that is enough about such a painful topic! It is wondrous that you are here to assist in the defense of Karakura Town, Ryuko Matoi, but I must ask where young Ichigo is. I was under the impression that Uryu retrieved him as well."

"We ran into some trouble right before leaving," Uryu handed a can of soda to Mako so that she would stop bouncing around the conference room and focus on something else for a change. Trying to follow the hyperactive girl as she teleported around and touched everything she could was giving him a headache. Sighing as he rubbed the bridge of his nose, Uryu mentally ordered himself to focus, "Ichigo was forced to stay behind to keep Nui Harime from following us. I am not sure how long she was there but we must assume she heard everything I said."

"The Grand Couturier is a very disturbed young woman. It would be prudent to assume she will inform Satsuki of what she knows," Armstrong was in a rare serious mood. Speaking about Nui Harime always killed whatever happy feelings he had. The Grand Couturier had killed hundreds of his men and women, friends and colleagues alike, throughout the years and as much as his honor and pride was demanding he take vengeance on his fallen comrades, Armstrong knew he could not do much to her. The Grand Couturier's regeneration would make any of his attacks inefficient. Blue eyes narrowing as an idea came to him Armstrong slammed his hands against the table and asked Uryu, "Has there been news from Isshin concerning the likelihood of her appearance? I do not want to engage Satsuki Kiryuin's forces only for the Grand Couturier to pop out of the woodwork! Happiness should not be used the way she uses it!"

Uryu looked to the side as he remembered the words his father had told him on the phone just a couple of hours ago. Ichigo's dad appeared to know almost everything about Life Fibers and while he was suspicious of his relation to Ragyo Kiryuin, Uryu knew better than to assume Isshin Kurosaki was the enemy, "The information I have comes from my father's mouth so you should assume it is not entirely accurate so here is what I know. Ichigo's dad apparently knows that if Satsuki could get through the shield than Nui Harime could get through as well so he designed what he called a Kaizo Trap."

"Kaizo Trap?" Ryuko asked as she sat down in one of the many chairs littering the conference room and slammed her feet onto the table. Whatever the hell a Kaizo Trap was, it sounded incredible stupid. It probably came from one of those video games she saw people playing at Honnouji Academy before Gamagori confiscated them.

"Yes, and it is quite the ingenious plan," Uryu would never have thought Ichigo's dad was a genius but what that man came up with could only be created by the most intelligent of minds. Even though

he knew the full details of the trap, Uryu was having trouble conceptualizing how Isshin Kurosaki could have invented it. Sitting down and folding his hands in front of his face, Uryu stared at the map of Karakura Town and explained, "Instead of adjusting the Anti-Life Fiber shield in the hopes that Nui Harime would be kept out, Ichigo's dad did the exact opposite. He keyed the Life Fibers circulating through her body into the IFF system and modified its response. The moment she steps through the shield, every single one of her powers apart from her regeneration will be sealed. That is why Ururu seemed to feel weak as we landed. Due to being Nui's twin sister, the shield unfortunately affects her as well, but you shouldn't worry. She is being kept safely hidden in Urahara's Shop for the duration of the attack."

"That's perfect!" Ryuko had a vicious smirk on her face as she stood and pounded her fist onto the table. She couldn't wait to fight Nui Harime and wipe that insufferable grin on her face once and for all, "I just need to wait until she shows up and then kick her ass!"

"That would be a very bad idea," Uryu grimaced at the second part of the Kaizo Trap. It only worked as long as the target was not attacked. The shield is defensive in nature and the modifications Isshin made meant the trap only works as long as Nui Harime was not attacked, "Attacking Nui Harime would trigger the IFF's defensive measures and cause the Kaizo Trap to fall apart."

Ryuko stared at Uryu for a moment before shouting in anger, "Then what's the damn point of the stupid trap in the first place?"

"You are failing to see the true genius of the trap, Matoi," Tsumugu's frown appeared to intensify as he spoke, "It only fails if we attack the Grand Couturier first. If someone can force Nui Harime to make the first move before she recognizes the trap's effects, we should be able to attack her when she's at her weakest."

"Exactly!" Armstrong clenched his fist as the muscles in his arm rippled in joy, "While I can only hope Nui Harime arrives so that I may return the pain and suffering she has inflicted onto the many

comrades no longer with us, we need to go over your role in this invasion!"

Ryuko cocked her head to the side, "My role?"

"But of course!" Armstrong flexed and posed before continuing, "Senketsu's strength will be paramount to our victory in these coming hours! While I had hoped to have the strength of Ichigo's Kamui as well, I must follow the tides wherever they choose to carry me. Now please pay attention and listen sharp, Ryuko, for what I am about to convey to you is both top secret and very important. The fate of the world lies in the balance and our victory in the battle for Karakura Town will be the key to saving it."

"I'll do anything as long as I get to kick Satsuki or Nui's ass!" Ryuko clenched her fist and grimaced. All the setbacks and losses she suffered over the last few weeks would be returned in full force to Satsuki's little army tomorrow morning. No longer was she going to let her anger at Nui Harime for killing her dad and Mako blind her in battle. Ichigo's dad was right when he said going after Nui would be a hollow victory. As long as she could stay around Ichigo and Mako and protect everyone with her power, Ryuko was content with letting the Grand Couturier come to her. It would save her the time of tracking that blonde bitch down.

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*Naniwa Kinman High School, Osaka - 12:35 AM*

"So Satsuki Kiryuin thinks she can just ignore me, does she? She thinks just because she's rich she can do whatever the hell she wants? She's going some nerve, I tell ya."

The speaker, who was visibly steaming at the news he had just received, strolled through the empty and dark halls of Naniwa Kinman High School flanked on all sides by members of the Student

Council President. Usually at this time of the day he would be sound asleep dreaming about making life sized castles out of money, but this morning Kaneo Takarada was fully dressed and wide awake. There was too much to do and for once money couldn't solve his problems, which made him giddy with excitement. For someone who had enough money to bribe the entire city of Osaka into being his private army, Kaneo relished the challenge of solving a problem like this.

"That's ok, then! Let Satsuki play in the outskirts of Tokyo! Having her around Osaka would have scared away the tourists and my profits would have gone down by fifty percent this month," Kaneo declared to his entourage, who continued to write down his words and orders. Money could buy many things but it couldn't buy competent employees and workers. Kaneo knew that you could shower people with millions of dollars and it wouldn't make them any smarter or more focused, which is why every spot on his Student Council was filled by people who he couldn't bribe. After all, what better employees were there than those that worked without looking for more money?

"Shouldn't we offer more assistance to Karakura Town?" Kaneo's Vice President asked as he handed him a more recent report on the situation, "Karakura Town is the only city north of the line of demarcation between your conglomerate and the Kiryuin's that is free of any influence. If it falls to Satsuki Kiryuin's assault, there will be nothing to deter her from focusing her attention on the Kansai Region."

"I like the way you think!" Kaneo waved a bundle of Takarada Bucks in his Vice President's face and grinned when he saw the guy's eyes not even following the money. It was so good to find competent and loyal help these days. Fanning his face with the specialized money before slapping it against his coat, Kaneo tossed his hand into the air and said, "But if you think Karakura Town will just roll over and take it from Satsuki, ya got another thing coming. Quiz time! Do you have a

clue who's the biggest player in Japan is? Come on, give me a guess. There are no wrong answers!"

One of the lesser members of the Student Council raised her hand and answered, "Is it you, sir?"

"Pft, I wish," Kaneo snapped the bundle of Takarada Bucks before tucking them away in his coat. Walking down the hall, he ran a hand through his hair before pointing his finger upwards, "Compared to the man I am about to describe, my wealth is but a bucket a water compared to the ocean. If I tried to bribe him to work with me, he would look at my money before asking if I was trying to offer him pocket change. My conglomerate may own half of Japan but Ishida Pharmaceuticals owns half the world!"

The Student Council looked to each other before one asked, "How can that be, sir?"

"Capitalism at its finest!" Kaneo shouted ecstatically into the air, inadvertently throwing his money around in the process.

For just an instant Kaneo forgot who were the people he surrounded himself with, so when his Student Council just stood around and stared at him while his Takarada Bucks drifted to the ground around them, he huffed and spun away before exclaiming, "Ryuken Ishida is a brilliant businessman that knows how the human mind works! He chose one of the few businesses that are immune to the effects of recessions, inflation, and depression! Everyone will always need medicine and hospitals. When someone goes to a hospital they are charged oodles of money for aspirin and other normally cheap drugs. If I could ever meet Ryuken Ishida, I would kiss his boots and ask him to take me under his wing in the art of money-making!"

There were three big players in Japan - Kiryuin, Takarada and Ishida. While his conglomerate was always fighting the Kiryuin's for control of the country, Ryuken Ishida had sat back and concentrated his power in Karakura Town and internationally. Kaneo even heard the man snubbed Ragyo Kiryuin's offer for a substantial partnership.

He didn't have all the details but his sources claim the offer price was in the eleven digit range.

"That reminds me of something..." Kaneo scratched at his chin before an idea came to him. As his face lit up he spun around to his Vice President, "Get the General on the line right this instant!"

"It's past midnight, sir," Kaneo's Vice President argued futilely, "She's going to be rather... upset if you call her."

"If she gets upset with me, I'll just have to remind her who's footing the bill for her organization," Kaneo retorted as he grabbed the phone out of his Vice President's hand and began dialing in the secret number only he amongst the Naniwa Kinman High School Student Council knew. Grinning and exposing the gold grill with ZENI printed on it as he heard the line ringing, Kaneo waited patiently for the line to go through before mockingly asking, "Why hello there my dear General. How are you doing this fine Monday morning?"

*"I can't stand your silliness on the best of days and early in the morning is not a time to test my limited patience."* The female voice on the other end sounded tired but that did not do anything to effect the authoritative tone in her voice. Kaneo knew better than to antagonize the General of Nudist Beach more than necessary and never to do it in person. He wanted to live and not even his money could save him from that woman's wrath.

"I have some news for you, my dear General, and it deals with Satsuki Kiryuin's little game of Risk," Kaneo grinned as he heard the woman on the other end of the line snap to attention. Giving a soft chuckle as he savored the moment while it lasted, Kaneo stepped out onto a patio overlooking the city of Osaka and continued, "I'm sure by now you've heard she decided to stand me up for a chance to go to Karakura Town."

*"I'm not in the mood for your stupid way of speaking, Takarada. You already know that I am the one that ordered the Major General to take a full detachment of Nudists and meet up with Uryu Ishida about*



*100 kilometers south of Karakura Town. If you called me just to repeat what I already know..."*

"Relax my dear General, I called because I have some news you might like to hear," Kaneo waved his Student Council away so that he could continue on the conversation privately. He may be a rich bastard with too much money but he was also quite smart. He trusted his Student Council fully but he did not trust anyone they associated with. It would be easier for a friend of theirs to plant a bug on their clothing to overhear his conversations. That is why his tailor-made suit and coat were designed to have a small electrical current constantly running through it to short-circuit any bugs that may be placed on his person, "But first there's a strange rumor going around the block about a certain French woman in your custody and her untimely demise. Dare I ask what happened to a certain Miss Jackie Tristan?"

*" Jackie Tristan attempted to escape from custody two days ago. She thought I would make an easy target for a hostage but she learned the most valuable lesson before she died from my blade piercing her heart - Don't fuck with me."*

"Scary, scary," Kaneo was glad he wasn't speaking to the General in person. He knew from experience that when the General was upset, her stare could cause the bravest of men to lose control over their bladders and his suit was way too expensive to ruin. He could always buy another one with the change from under his bed but it was the concept of the matter. "Would you like for me to pay for the funeral or are you just going to cremate her?"

*" You know something, Takarada, so spill it before I'm forced to come topside and track you down."*

"My sources claim that Satsuki Kiryuin is dedicating nearly ninety five percent of her forces to this little attack of hers," Kaneo grinned as he sensed the wheels in the General's mind spinning into motion, "It would be quite the shock if someone were to move in while she was away, wouldn't you say?"

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*Honnouji Academy - 1:47 AM*

"Damn, that's a lot of trucks."

Ichigo rolled away from the edge of the outer wall of Honnouji Academy and stared up at the starry night sky. When he was rushing back to Honnouji Academy after falling for Nui Harime's annoying prank, he hadn't known what Satsuki was planning. He may be the Student Council Vice President, but there were some things that Satsuki and her Elite Four kept secret from him and frankly he was alright with that since he never really thought of himself as a Vice President to begin with. Letting out an exasperated sigh, Ichigo turned back over onto his stomach and stared through the pair of high tech binoculars he borrowed from Gamagori.

*" I knew there were a lot of students, but I had no idea Honnouji Academy was this crowded."*

Apart from the nearly two hundred trucks lined up facing the exit of the academy, there were more than a thousand students, all wearing new track suits, passing along supplies and ammunition in dozens of bucket brigades. Narrowing his eyes and zooming in on one of the students, Ichigo frowned as he read what was stenciled on the back of the track suit - Anti-Karakura Combat-Spec. So Uryu was right. Satsuki really was planning on hitting Karakura Town instead of the Kansai Region like she told him. Ichigo knew only vague hints pertaining to her motives, Satsuki and the Elite Four weren't exactly forthcoming with explanations, but he couldn't figure out what could cause Satsuki to change her mind.

*" Maybe she changed her mind after watching Orihime save Mako. I really can't think of anything else,"* Ichigo shook his head and adjusted the focus as he saw Ira Gamagori stalking through the crowd. He appeared to be yelling incoherently at several of the

Disciplinary Committee members walking behind him and who were all wearing the same yellow track suit as him. Ichigo smirked as he watched Gamagori motion with his hands before pointing towards the main building of the academy. So Gamagori was really pissed off that he stole his binoculars, but Ichigo didn't care in the slightest. His loyalty to Satsuki extended as far as protecting his friends and family from Nui Harime and with the Grand Couturier's recent actions, Ichigo didn't have any reason to work for Satsuki anymore.

***" Ichigo, you never told me your plan. Just how are you going to get out of Honnou City without Satsuki stopping you?"***

Mugetsu's feminine voice caused Ichigo to pull his eyes away from the binoculars. Before he returned to Honnouji Academy, he had made sure Mugetsu was already transformed into her released state. While he had the strangest feeling Nui wouldn't show up again to ruin his day, he wanted to be prepared in case Satsuki felt the need to stand in his way.

Rolling to his feet, his knees popping from lying on the ground for such a long time, Ichigo stretched out a kink in his neck before answering, "Well, I'm planning on stealing one of the trucks right near the exit, which really shouldn't be too hard. Once I get out of the city I'm going to drive straight to Karakura Town. If I floor the gas, I should be able to get there in about half an hour. Hopefully that's plenty of time to stop Satsuki's plan."

Mugetsu's multicolored eyes looked at her wearer with obvious confusion, ***"How?"***

"I have no idea," Ichigo shrugged, "I'm making this up as I go. I've learned from experience that whenever I take part in a plan, it tends to fall apart at the very start."

***" I don't know whether to be amazed or scared,"*** Mugetsu commented sarcastically.

"That is quite the ingenious idea you got there, Kurosaki," a drawling voice commented from the shadows and for the second before

Aikuro Mikisugi walked towards him Ichigo thought it was Kisuke Urahara. Damn Aikuro for sounding almost identically to Kisuke.

"What are you doing here?" Ichigo asked, his voice betraying just the tiniest hint of curiosity.

"Well..." Aikuro scratched at his messy blue hair before adjusting his glasses, "... I was planning on talking to Ryuko a bit before Miss Satsuki embarked on her Raid Trip. Can you imagine how surprised I was to find that the scion of the Ishida Conglomerate not only showed up in Honnou City but spirited Ryuko, Mako and Ururu towards Karkaura Town? From the perplexed look on your face, I'm sure you're wondering how I know all this."

Ichigo's expression was deadpan as he answered, "I already know you're a member of Nudist Beach. Man, Ryuko was right. That really is a stupid name. Couldn't you have picked something cooler as a name? Anyway, I'm busy right now. Go away and flash some other poor teenager or something."

"Your dad was right about you. You really are a stubborn child," Aikuro ran his hand up his face, removing his glasses and adjusting his hairstyle at the same time. Smirking conceitedly at Ichigo's slightly shocked face, Aikuro reached into his pocket and handed over an old and weathered picture featuring him standing next to Professor Matoi and Isshin Kurosaki, "Your dad is a very smart man when he's not goofing around. After your Kamui first woke up, he asked me to keep an eye on you, but frankly you weren't as much as a handful as Ryuko has been."

"Why are you here?" Ichigo asked as he tucked the picture away for future reference.

"To thank you for saving Ryuko and Mako," Aikuro strolled past Ichigo and looked down on the students scurrying back and forth under Satsuki's orders. Unknown to Ichigo, Aikuro had watched the entire time as Orihime brought Mako back from the dead and his reaction was the same as Tsumugu's - such a power should not

rightfully exist in the world and coming from a Nudist fighting against Life Fibers that was saying something, "That girl you were with, Orihime Inoue I believe her name was, possesses very peculiar powers but I'm sure by now the Grand Couturier has informed Ragyo Kiryuin all about them."

"Why are you telling me this?" Ichigo asked as memories of running through the sands of Hueco Mundo filtered into his mind. Orihime had been captured by a madman who wanted to use her powers for his own gain once. Ichigo was not about to let a second time happen.

"Relax!" Aikuro raised his hands in surrender at Ichigo's anger expression, which was one thing he had in common with Ryuko. Chuckling nervously as Ichigo's frown only deepened, Aikuro sighed and rubbed the back of his neck and explained, "Orihime Inoue's already in Karakura Town under the Anti-Life Fiber shield your dad built. I don't know how Satsuki Kiryuin managed to figure out a way through it, but your dad informed me that Orihime will be perfectly safe. He's taken dozens of precautions to keep people like Nui Harime and Ragyo Kiryuin from kidnapping Orihime. She's safer there than anywhere else in the world at this point in time."

"Thanks for the warning," Ichigo gave Aikuro a short wave goodbye with his hand before turning to leave.

"Be careful, Ichigo," Aikuro's words caused Ichigo to pause mid-step and turn back around. The normally sly smile on the Nudist's face was gone, replaced by a look of seriousness that had Ichigo involuntarily paying rapt attention, "I know that you are a Life Fiber Hybrid and while my opinion has not changed about you, there are those that will try to use that knowledge against you. The Major General of Nudist Beach has ordered everyone to continuously monitor and watch you in case you snap and try to make a break for it. It is only due to our friendship with Isshin and Professor Matoi that Tsumugu and I have decided to give you the benefit of the doubt. I also think you will find Kinoue to be an ally as well. If you continue to

do what you're doing Ichigo, soon even the General will warm up to you... in about a year or two."

"Who's the General?" Ichigo didn't like Aikuro's threat but at the same time he was grateful the man was giving him a warning. He couldn't have expected everyone to take his new Life Fiber Hybrid status without care, especially someone who belongs to an organization dedicated to fighting Life Fibers.

"Don't worry about it!" Aikuro ruffled his hair and put his glasses back on before backing away from Ichigo, "Just remember to get out of here soon, Ichigo! Miss Satsuki is going to arrive within the next half hour to address the students before they all leave at 5:00 AM. I hope you know how to drive."

Ichigo rolled his eyes as Aikuro disappeared into the shadows. As annoyed as he looked, the truth was Ichigo didn't know how to actually drive. Most of where he needed to go in Karakura Town was within easy walking distance and even the places he couldn't walk to, like across the city for instance, his dad was more than willing to drive him. Driving was an entirely new concept to Ichigo but it couldn't be any harder than being a shinigami. He'd played those realistic racing games Tatsuki had rented a few months ago and after a couple of hours of not crashing into the sides of the road, Ichigo figured he was ready to drive a real car. He just hoped to whatever god existed that he didn't need to drive stick.

After quickly glancing around to make sure no one had spotted him, Ichigo hopped down from the wall and landed quietly just outside the entrance to Honnouji Academy. Carefully pressing his body against the wall as he snuck towards the entrance, he spotted the nearest truck and paused. He needed to be careful and not raise the alarm. If Satsuki realized what he was trying to do, she would lock down Honnou City so fast that he wouldn't even be able to reach the One-Star Residential District before he was stopped.

As he crouched along the ground clad in Mugetsu, Ichigo could not help but notice the irony in the situation. Here he was sneaking

around like a criminal while wearing one of the most powerful set of clothing in the world that was capable of flying and releasing waves of energy. If Ryuko was here, she probably would have gone with the direct approach and charged in headfirst to steal the truck. When he finally reached the truck, Ichigo stopped outside the driver's side door, counted to three and opened it before pulling the One-Star student out. As the student fell to the ground and a thin manual floated to the ground by his feet, Ichigo paused with his fist in the air as he recognized the teen.

"What the hell?" Ichigo couldn't believe the irony of the situation that out of all the trucks he could have chosen, the one he decided to steal had Jack Naito as the driver.

Rubbing his head as his senses came back to him, Jack Naito's eyes widened in fear as he recognized a very familiar pair of armored feet in front of his face. Shaking as he looked up and into Ichigo's eyes, he scurried backwards and shouted, "Please don't kick my ass again!"

" ***What are the odds, huh,***" Mugetsu pondered what Ichigo should do before commenting, ***"I don't think we have time to bother with him. Besides, if it wasn't for him I might never have woken up so soon."***

"You're right," Ichigo answered his Kamui as he grabbed Jack by the front of his green track suit before easily picking the youth off the ground with his enhanced strength. Sensing something intimately familiar pulsing from somewhere in Jack's uniform, Ichigo's eyes roamed over the panic-stricken teen before his eyes spotted something amiss. Grabbing at a single thread from somewhere deep inside the Goku Uniform, Ichigo pulled his arm back and was rewarded with a small blue Life Fiber that nearly instantly was absorbed through Mugetsu and back into his body.

" ***Was that -"***

"Yeah, one of my Life Fibers," Ichigo looked away from Jack Naito and frowned. The question of why Jack Naito's Goku Uniform had a piece of his Life Fibers in it bothered him but as he remembered what Nui had mockingly said earlier Ichigo realized just how Satsuki was planning to go through the Anti-Life Fiber shield.

*"Wait a second,"* Ichigo's eyes widened noticeably as something clicked in his mind, *"If Satsuki is going to use my Life Fibers to get through the shield, then that means dad already knew I was a Life Fiber Hybrid. I suppose that's one more thing I'm going to need to ask about when I kick the crap out of him the next time we meet."*

"I don't have time to deal with you, Jack. Just tell me what you're doing here and I'll let you go."

Jack took a series of deep breaths once he realized he wasn't in any danger of getting his ass kicked by Ichigo for the third time, "After you kicked my ass the second time Lady Satsuki demoted me back down to No-Star. I spent the last few weeks staying below the radar while clawing my way back up to One-Star so now I'm a driver for the Athletic Committee Squads. Can I run away now?"

Ichigo held out his hand, "Give me the keys first."

"Sure!" Jack tossed Ichigo the keys to the truck before stumbling back to his feet and running away. He didn't care if Sanageyama or Gamagori stopped him for running in fear. Ichigo scared the crap out of him more than the two of them combined.

***"Something's bothering me, Ichigo. How did Satsuki acquire some of your Life Fibers?"***

"I did get my heart torn out of my chest, Mugetsu," Ichigo tossed the keys up into the air before catching them and closing his eyes. He had been waiting for her to show up for the last few minutes. Turning his head around as a black blade came to rest on the junction of his neck, Ichigo said, "I knew you were there, Satsuki."



"Your intuition and deductive skills are as sharp as ever," Satsuki Kiryuin strutted past Ichigo already in the released form of Junketsu. She had easily spotted Ichigo sneaking around nearly an hour ago and decided to wait and see what his goal was. Once she noticed he had already activated Mugetsu, Satsuki thought it would be prudent to do the same with her Kamui. There was no telling what Ichigo could accomplish in the two second interval it would normally take Junketsu to transform into its true form.

Removing Bakuzan from Ichigo's neck, Satsuki held the hardened Life Fiber blade in a relaxed grip as she locked gazes with him. Junketsu's straps and lines were glowing with a faint blue illumination, causing Satsuki to stand out in the faintly lit courtyard. She knew that attempting to fight Ichigo, if he truly intended to leave, would cause irreversible damage to the Raid Trip's success rate. If the trip to Karakura Town were two or three days away, she would be able to replace all the destroyed equipment and supplies in time, but with the trip scheduled to depart in less than four hours, she could not risk a physical confrontation. Sheathing Bakuzan in a show of good faith, causing Ichigo's hand to shy away from Tournesol's hilt, Satsuki folded her arms under her mostly exposed breasts and asked, "But are your skills naturally acquired via training or are they due to the recently revealed Life Fibers permeating your body?"

"Why does everyone care that I'm a Life Fiber Hybrid? I've probably been one my entire life so nothing's really changed," Ichigo asked with annoyance tinging his words.

Satsuki's eyes narrowed and she stepped forward before answering, "I ask because two of the three other Life Fiber Hybrids in existence are insane psychopaths that are working to bring about the destruction of humanity. The third, Ururu Tsumugiyu, is emotionally stunted with a severe attachment problem that has shown to be just as dangerous, if not more so, than the Grand Couturier. I've watched the fight between Ururu and Nui, Ichigo, and I have never seen the Grand Couturier be on the losing end of a fight. What do you think would happen if Ururu were to join my mother? Stopping Nui Harime

is already taxing my plans but the addition of Ururu would be the equivalent of allowing the Life Fibers to devour us without a fight!"

Ichigo hated how Satsuki had a point but something Satsuki just said stopped him cold in his tracks, "Wait, your mom's a hybrid?"

For just an instant after Ichigo's question Satsuki looked like she had been caught lying before she quickly schooled her expression and scowled. She hadn't meant for Ichigo to know of her suspicions regarding her mother's humanity, or lack thereof. Nui Harime tearing out her heart and declaring Ururu Tsumugiya her twin sister proved they were both Life Fiber Hybrids. All her evidence pertaining to Ragyo was conjecture at best but Satsuki knew without a doubt her mother was no longer human. Brushing some dust off Junketsu's armor and looking away from Ichigo, Satsuki let out a small huff before answering, "It is simply an assumption I have deduced after months of observations. Everything my mother is capable of doing could only be explained if she were a Life Fiber Hybrid. I did not want to tell you until I was sure you were willing to work with me."

"Look," Ichigo rubbed the bridge of his nose and let out an exasperated sigh. He was starting to get tired of Satsuki only telling him just enough information. If she really wanted him to work with her to stop her mother, she needed to stop holding things back, "I remember what you told me during the Naturals Election but how the hell can you expect me to help if you don't tell me everything? I get that your mother is insane but all you've told me is that she plans to turn everyone in Honnou City into food for Life Fibers."

"That's all you need to know," Satsuki snapped and immediately felt Junketsu's armor ripple down her arms. Quickly squashing her Kamui's mental assault on the fortress that was her mind, Satsuki clenched her fist tightly and added, "But know that the truth is very similar to what I told you. Do you really need to know more information to decide to stop my mother? Despite being on opposite sides of the river, we are walking towards the same goal - stopping my mother! Everything I've done since founding Honnouji Academy,

from conquering the academies scattered across Japan to modifying Junketsu, have been accomplished to make that goal a reality!"

Ichigo began to answer when he heard something faintly whispering on the wind. While it was loud enough to hear, it was still too soft for him to make out any words or sounds. Concentrating on trying to understand what he was hearing, Ichigo noticed something off about Satsuki's Kamui that he hadn't noticed right away due to the darkness surrounding them. Nearly everything about Junketsu, from the shoulder-guards to the bikini that barely covered Satsuki's modesty was the same, but as he looked closer Ichigo spotted the difference. The once black sclera that took up most of Junketsu's eyes in its transformed state was now a shade of intimately familiar blue.

"So that's what Nui meant when she said you modified Junketsu," Ichigo's mentioning of the Grand Couturier took Satsuki slightly off guard, "I was wondering why Jack Naito had a piece of my Life Fibers in his Goku Uniform. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Satsuki mulled over Ichigo's question and turned her back to him. Staring up at the academy towering over them in the darkened sky, she took a deep breath and spoke, "I've told you I will do whatever is needed to order to achieve my goals. The Life Fibers we collected from you will grant my fellow students the means of bypassing the Anti-Life Fiber shield your father has erected around Karakura Town and lay claim to the school! I did not expect Junketsu to eagerly absorb your Life Fibers, Ichigo, but even as we speak I can feel a small part of your power thrumming through my body. Soon I will gain access to the same configurations as Mugetsu and Senketsu, allowing me to take out my mother once and for all!"

The growl that emanated from Mugetsu when Satsuki admitted to experimenting on Junketsu threw Ichigo off balance. He had never heard his Kamui sound so angry and the way Mugetsu was shivering on him implied she was one step away from killing Satsuki, ***"Do not listen to another word from Satsuki Kiryuin! She has desecrated and experimented on Junketsu without its consent!"***

Mugetsu's eyes became bloodshot as her voice grew more and more venomous with each passing word. As much as she wanted to kill Satsuki for what she dared to do to Junketsu, rip her limb from limb, Mugetsu had enough self-control to stop herself from going berserk. She knew Satsuki Kiryuin could not hear Junketsu's faint voice and Mugetsu felt nothing but pity for her. To be able to communicate with a Kamui is a privilege shared by only three people in the world. Mugetsu really wanted to shout at Satsuki. She wanted to let the human understand the scope of what she did, but it would be a pointless waste of energy since Satsuki cannot hear her wondrous voice.

***" Kamui are spun from pure Life Fibers, making us infinitely superior to Satsuki Kiryuin's Goku Uniforms,"*** Even though she was still immensely furious, Mugetsu was mentally forcing herself to calm down. She did not want to disappoint Ichigo by losing control. With her word still tinged with anger and her eyes narrowed to slits, she hissed, ***"A Kamui's Life Fibers are what makes it unique. My Life Fibers are as different from Senketsu's as his are from Danketsu's. Infusing foreign Life Fibers into a Kamui is the equivalent of altering your memories and personality. It is something you NEVER do without the Kamui's permission. I will never forgive Satsuki Kiryuin for what she did to Junketsu."***

Ichigo felt Mugetsu's anger at Satsuki bleed into his mind and he finally understood, if only vaguely, why his Kamui was so angry. It was one thing to be told something but another to actually feel it. Looking away from Satsuki's awaiting expression, her face seeming to show the hope that he would understand her motives, Ichigo thought long and hard on what he should do. His conversations with Ragyo Kiryuin have proven Satsuki was right about her mother and the knowledge that Nui was under Ragyo's thumb the entire time didn't help things. Thoughts passed through his mind that both agreed with what Satsuki was doing while at the same time claiming she was not to be trusted at any cost. Giving one final glance at Satsuki's hand before his thoughts finally came to a consensus; Ichigo frowned before rudely turning his back on her.

"Consider this my resignation from the Student Council. What's the point of stopping Ragyo if you stoop down to her level? I've put up with a lot of your crap since we've met but after seeing what you did to Junketsu, I've had enough. I'm going to find a better way to stop your mom that doesn't involve damning my soul," Ichigo spat as he tried to climb up into the truck only to find a black blade placed against his neck.

"Do not dare to assume I have sunk down to the level as my mother! You have not seen the things she has done in the name of Life Fibers!"

For the first time in as long as she could remember Satsuki could not find the strength of character to control her emotions. Since the murders of her little sister and father at the hands of her mother, Satsuki had clamped down on her emotions in order to better facilitate her plans of revenge. She would not acknowledge her friendship with the Elite Four and Soroi in case her mother found out and decided to use her ties against her. Satsuki had long ago realized that most people would collapse under the guilty and pressure of what needed to be accomplished but Satsuki had persevered where hardened soldiers would have broken from despair. Throughout her childhood, from her earliest memories of how much of a monster her mother was to the first time the abuse started, Satsuki has constantly kept her mind and sanity intact with the mantra that she would one day kill her mother for everything she's done. Nothing else would matter until her goal was accomplished.

While Satsuki regretted her actions in sending Nui Harime to Ryuko's father to collect what he was working on, she did not dwell on the past. There was no way she could have been aware that the Grand Couturier would go out of her way to torture and kill Isshin Matoi instead of simply stealing what he was working on. Everything Ryuko's faced at Honnouji Academy was nothing more than a test to make her strong enough to fight against her mother when the time came. Satsuki did not care if Ryuko hated her for the rest of her life.

As long as her mother was defeated and the world saved from the Life Fibers, Satsuki was content with being the villain.

Ichigo, on the other hand, continued to cause her an endless amount of grief. If it wasn't enough that her mother, and especially Nui Harime, had a vested interest in his progress, it was the fact that he had nearly perfect control over his Kamui while she still struggled with Junketsu. Satsuki knew her Kamui was sentient, perhaps not to the same point as Mugetsu and Senketsu, but it was a living thing. After speaking with him and observing his conversations with his Kamui, Satsuki tried to bond with her own Kamui but it was to no avail. Nothing she did worked and it was in that failure that she gave up. If her Kamui was not willing to at least converse with her, Satsuki would take what she wanted by force. Junketsu was merely clothing that needed to be worn and if it was not willing to work together, Satsuki would command it to obey her will.

"Who are you to assume you know my motives? You, that has yet to pierce through the surface of who I am!"

Satsuki grabbed Ichigo by the front of Mugetsu and leaned in close to his face. Pressing her forehead against his and with a look of absolute rage on her face from the sheer audacity Ichigo was showing her, Satsuki clenched her teeth and seethed, "The morals that you speak of are nothing more than comforting thoughts for those too weak to do that which needs to be done! My mother will stop at nothing and kill anyone in her way to accomplish her goals. If she succeeds in her task, the entire world will wither away and die beneath her cold and soulless fingers! Before my father was killed, he brought me to Junketsu and said 'This will be your wedding dress, but when you put it on, you will become a slave to clothing.' I am fully prepared to die if it means my mother will perish with me. Can the same be said about you, Ichigo? My convictions are what make me strong and my will is what drives me forward! Junketsu, even though it might be alive, is nothing more than a means to an end!"

"That right there is the problem," Ichigo, in a moment of sheer brilliance, reared his head back and slammed it into Satsuki's. While she wasn't hurt due to wearing Junketsu, Satsuki was still forced to take a step back from the shock of the impact. As her anger rose from Ichigo's unprovoked attack, she paused as she heard his next words, "You're so focused on revenge that you lost the ability to think of anything new. What's the point of stopping Ragyo if you're just going to die in the end? That's stupid. If you're going to save the world, you can't do it alone. I know that you have friends, whether you will admit it or not, and I know for a fact they will do everything they can to help you if you just ask. I can't say that I understand what you feel or what Ragyo did to you, but I can say that going alone will never work. When you have your friends fighting alongside you, if you fall there is always someone there to pick you back up."

Satsuki was pensive for a couple of seconds as she digested Ichigo's words before she closed her eyes and sheathed Bakuzan, "I see that my words will not dissuade you from your objective, Ichigo, but know that from the moment you pass through the gates of Honnouji Academy you will no longer have my protection. If we meet on the battlefield of Karakura Town I will not hesitate in the slightest to cut you down. You have made your position on the matter clear and while our goals are similar I will not stand by and allow you to jeopardize all that I worked for. Is there anything you have to say for yourself before I give the order to my Elite Four?"

"Yeah, you all can go to hell," Ichigo yelled as he started the truck and floored the acceleration. As the truck lurched forward and through the gates of Honnouji Academy, Ichigo stuck his head out the window and shouted back, "Oh, and tell that bastard Gamagori I broke his binoculars!"

Satsuki clenched her fists as she stared at the fading lights from the truck. She did not want to make Ichigo her enemy, not when there was so much at stake. Why he was so stubborn boggled her and as much as she knew she should be angry with him, Satsuki could not help but admire his tenacity to stick by his beliefs no matter the

circumstances. She was completely used to those around her bowing down and following her leadership to hell and back, but Ichigo seemed to not be so easily swayed. Allowing a small smirk to grace her face as she turned and walked towards the onrushing wave of students who had come to see why one of the trucks was driving away, Satsuki mentally noted to pass along Ichigo's message to Gamagori. The Disciplinary Committee Chair had been rather worked up over the last hour or so about his missing binoculars. It would be the fair thing to inform him of what happened to them.

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*Highway East of Karakura Town - 2:52 AM*

"Oh man, I really shouldn't be out here."

Keigo Asano stared through the binoculars down the empty highway snaking westward towards Tokyo Bay and Honnou City. As the most direct route between Karakura Town and Honnouji Academy, it made sense that Satsuki Kiryuin would send her forces this way. After the alert about the imminent invasion spread through Karakura Town, nearly ninety-five percent of the population fled south towards the Kansai Region, which was the last bastion of Japan free of the Kiryuin's control. Those that had stayed behind to fight and protect their town, barely five thousand of them in total, were quickly assigned squads and tasks to accomplish and for once Keigo Asano could say with pride that he wasn't a coward. He was terrified to hell of Satsuki Kiryuin but after living through the encounter with Sosuke Aizen, nothing could make him turn tail and run away.

Looking at his watch's digital display and noticing that it was almost three in the morning, Keigo yawned as he looked down the highway once more with the binoculars. The whole concept of Life Fibers seeking to devour humanity as food confused the crap out of him and the fact that Revocs put Life Fibers in all of their clothing just helped to cement the fact that something was seriously wrong with



the world. If Life Fibers were really that bad, why hadn't the world just bombed the crap out of Revocs and killed Ragyo Kiryuin? The fact that Karakura Town was the only place in the world completely free of Life Fibers and their influence made Keigo think of himself as the only sane man. How else would he describe himself if the entire world seemed to ignore Life Fibers?

"Life Fibers are really freaking weird. Even their name doesn't make any sense," Keigo mumbled under his breath as he picked up the final crate of explosives from the back of the truck, lifting with his legs and not his back like Tsumugu told him, before walking towards the waist-high concrete barrier on the shoulder of the highway.

As a member of the newly established Karakura Town Highway Demolition Defense Squad, it was his job to make sure all the charges were in place long before Honnouji Academy's forces arrived within the next three hours. As he placed the crate on the concrete barrier, Keigo reached for the pulley dangling off the side of the road and hooked it up. After giving the rope a few good tugs to make sure it was securely connected, he pushed it over the edge and began slowly lowering it

"This is the last box," Keigo shouted down as he lowered the rope several inches at a time.

"I got it!"

A hand reached out from underneath the road before the upper half of Mahana Natsui appears as well. As she grabbed hold of the crate of explosives and began carefully opening it, Keigo tried not to think about how the normally curious and average Mahana was an explosives genius. Deep down in his soul Keigo knew he should be extremely worried about his fellow student. She was the one, after all, to excitedly point out each of the highway's structural weaknesses to Tsumugu as he tried to explain it himself. At first everyone thought she was just being her normal self and pretending to know what she was talking about, but when Tsumugu said she

was correct on all counts, Mahana was moved from the Cargo and Supply Squad to the Highway Demolition Defense Squad.

"Keigo, do you think anything about this is strange?" Mahana's voice echoed up from under the road as she stuck the explosives onto the pillars supporting the highway.

"Strange?" Keigo leaned out over the edge of the highway standing nearly fifty feet above the ground, "We're high school students placing bombs in the middle of a highway to stop another high school from using Life Fibers to enslave us all. Let's not forget the fact that Life Fibers are alien parasites that want to use us as fast food to go! What part of this isn't strange?"

"There! That's the last of the explosives," Mahana's head appeared over the side of the highway once more as she let the now empty crate fall to the ground below before pulling herself up. Now that she was finished setting the explosives, she was looking forward to stretching her legs. Grabbing Keigo's hand as he struggled to pull her up, Mahana nearly stumbled to the ground from exhaustion.

"Man, this is going to be bad," Keigo sighed as he sat down with his back against the concrete barrier.

"I wonder why Satsuki Kiryuin is doing this," Mahana dusted her hands off and sat down next to Keigo on the ground. Staring up into the night sky, she ran a hand through her curly brown hair and huffed, "I don't think a normal school would invade a city just for the hell of it, you know. I mean, what kind of school is Honnouji Academy anyway?"

"I'm beginning to suspect that Honnouji Academy might not be a school. Stuff just isn't adding up," Keigo crossed his arms and frowned as he thought about what Mahana said. She did have a very valid point and that scared him more than anything. What kind of school was Honnouji Academy where invading other cities with the purpose of subjugating the population was part of the syllabus. Keigo

may hate going to school, but even he knew that wasn't what school was supposed to be about.

"I talked to Ichigo a few weeks ago," he continued. Leaning his head against the concrete barrier, Keigo stared up into the night sky and yawned, "I thought Ichigo would be really annoyed to hear my voice but when we talked, it was almost like he was glad to speak to me. Apparently Karakura Town is normal and boring compared to the rest of Japan. Ichigo said all he did for the first few weeks at Honnouji Academy was fighting club presidents wearing Two-Star Goku Uniforms alongside someone called Ryuko Matoi."

"Didn't that Tsumugu guy tell us a girl called Ryuko had something called a Kamui made out of nothing but Life Fibers?" Mahana asked curiously. She was still in shock from what Tsumugu told all the remaining students about Life Fibers. If he hadn't shouted at them that every bit of clothing in Karakura Town was free of Life Fibers and their influence, Mahana was sure she would have pulled off her own uniform right then and there. The things Tsumugu told them still sent shivers up her spine.

"At least you showed up after he was wearing pants! I was one of the first ones to arrive and when I did, Tsumugu was wearing nothing but belts and boots!" Keigo hugged his knees and began rocking back and forth as he desperately tried to suppress the memory of seeing Tsumugu naked, "I'm just lucky Ichigo's dad showed up when he did and threatened Tsumugu into putting on pants, but the image of his junk is forever going to be burned in my retinas."

"I still think this is something Orihime made up in that imagination of hers. I keep hoping I'll wake up in class and she'll be talking about a sumo wrestler attacking her again," Mahana joked before her expression became pensive, "Although now that I think about it, I've never actually seen Satsuki Kiryuin. I wonder what she looks like."

Keigo froze as the memory of Ichigo's going away party flashed before his eyes. Falling forward onto his hands and knees, he began slamming his fist against the pavement as he started whining about

the unfairness of it all, "I heard she's really hot with oodles of money that could buy her anything in the world! Ichigo is practically living with her and yet he refuses to make a move on her! I don't know whether to congratulate him on playing hard to get or slap some sense into him! What has this world come to if I know more about women than Ichigo? Someone give me an answer!"

"What are you upset about now, Keigo?" Mizuiro Kojima calmly walked over to his shouting friend and stared at Keigo with a passive expression. He had just finished wiring all the charges together and all that was left was to prime them. Quickly recognizing Keigo's ranting from years of being his friend, Mizuiro sighed and reached into his pocket for his cell phone. While he might not be able to make calls or text due to the information blackout enacted by Honnouji Academy, he still had access to his photos. Once he found the photo he was looking for, Mizuiro gave his phone to Keigo, "I nearly forgot that you weren't inside when Satsuki Kiryuin video chatted with Ichigo. I thought you should see what she actually looks like."

Keigo became as still as a statue as he gazed upon the picture of Satsuki Kiryuin. He didn't know how Mizuiro managed to get the picture, but the fact that Ichigo was not yet dating her causing Keigo to gape in shock before several hundred neurons in his brain connected. There was no way that someone as rich and hot as Satsuki Kiryuin would see anything in Ichigo. Sure they both seemed to scowl a lot and could probably kick his ass, but other than that they had nothing in common. Before Keigo could look at the picture any further, a hand slapped the back of his head as Mizuiro took his phone back.

"Is this really the proper time to be showing that stupid picture, Mizuiro?" Ryo Kunieda glared at the shorter boy as she began wrapping up the rock climbing equipment they had borrowed from the high school. As she tossed the equipment into the back of the truck, Ryo looked eastward down the highway and narrowed her eyes. Tokyo Bay wasn't that far away so if Satsuki Kiryuin decided to

show up earlier, they would have very little warning of her coming, "Keigo, was that the last of the explosives?"

"Yeah," Keigo stood up and grunted as he worked away a cramp in his back, "I made sure to use all of the CBSS Type IV Explosives that Tsumugu guy gave us. Man, saying all that is a mouthful, but aren't you guys worried?"

"You should be more specific, Keigo," Mizuiro commented bluntly, "There is a lot for us to be worried about. After all, it's not every day you are invaded by a high school."

"I'm serious, Mizuiro!" Keigo shouted angrily before forcibly calming himself down, "Did you not hear what that Tsumugu guy said? Life Fibers give people super powers! I know we've seen some strange and terrifying things over the last year but this is different! Will any of this actually do anything except piss off Satsuki's army?"

"You're looking at this all wrong, Keigo," Mizuiro answered stoically, "Unlike that Aizen guy that chased us last year, Satsuki Kiryuin and her students are all human. While their Goku Uniforms may grant them special powers, it should also make them cocky and arrogant. They won't even dare to think we would do something like this. Besides, you shouldn't forget about the Anti-Life Fiber shield surrounding the city. Tsumugu mentioned it should prevent any Goku Uniforms from working once they pass through."

"We should get going," Ryo walked past Keigo towards the truck. They didn't have much time to sit around and talk. While their task may be finished, there were still other things that needed to be done to prepare Karakura Town for Satsuki Kiryuin, "We just need to decide who's going to stay behind and manually detonate the charges. Honnouji Academy's control of our cell phones is really starting to get annoying."

Mizuiro thumbed the detonator in his hands and sighed, "I suppose I \_."

"I'll do it."

Noticing the looks from his friends at his sudden act of bravery, Keigo sighed and explained, "Look, I'm scared to hell of what Satsuki Kiryuin will do to Karakura Town, but this is my town too. Let me stay behind and make sure those punks from Honnouji Academy know what to expect. Besides, you all know that I have a knack for getting out of impossible situations. If the shield is as strong as you say it is, I should be able to set the charges and escape without getting hurt."

For a moment everyone was quiet before Mizuiro walked over and slapped Keigo on the back before handing him the detonator, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but that might be the bravest thing you ever said Keigo. If you keep this up, at this rate you might just have a shot at getting a date with a real woman in the future."

"Here. Take this," Ryo shoved a piece of paper into Keigo's hands. Not giving the confused youth a second look as she climbed into the back of the truck alongside Mahana as Mizuiro turned on the ignition, she waved good bye and said, "That's my number. If we somehow make it through this thing alive, call me. We can go to the movies or something."

Keigo waved goodbye awkwardly as the jeep sped down the highway towards Karakura Town. Once they were out of sight, he calmly put the piece of paper with the number in his pocket, placed the detonator on the ground and walked over to the edge of the highway. Staring into the glow on the horizon, Keigo pumped his arms into the air and shouted.

"I FINALLY GOT A GIRL'S NUMBER!"

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*New Underground Training Room, Urahara Shop - 4:45 AM*

Yoruichi stepped into the Urahara Shop and gave a curt wave of her hand to Tessai Tsukabishi as he slowly walked down the aisles of the store with a clipboard in his hands. The former captain of the Kido Corps was too engrossed in his accounting to notice her presence so Yoruichi rolled her eyes and walked past him into the back room. She knew Tessai sensed her arrival but with everything that was about to go down in Karakura Town, Yoruichi didn't fault Tessai for focusing on the small things.

*" Especially after I failed to get through to the Soul Society,"* Yoruichi bit her lip as she recalled her nearly half a dozen failures to ask the Gotei 13 for reinforcements. If what Isshin and those soldiers from Nudist Beach said was to be taken at face value then Life Fibers were something that were far too dangerous to let stay on Earth. They needed to get the full force of the captains to hunt down and take out Ragyo Kiryuin before she did whatever the hell she was going to do. The only problem was that no one was picking up on the other end of the Denreishinki, which was damn near impossible.

The Twelfth Division had invented the Denreishinki after the humans came up with cell phones. The rumor was Mayuri was jealous he hadn't thought of the concept first but his improvements to the human invention allowed one to communicate back and forth between the world of the living and the Soul Society. The signal between the two worlds could never be jammed and yet she couldn't get through.

*" What's going on in the Soul Society to ignore a Priority X call?"*

Every call that was made on a Denreishinki was giving an order of priority based upon the ranking of the shinigami. Unseated shinigami were given up to Priority II access, which mean a particular savage hollow has appeared. A seated shinigami could call in a Priority IV, which was the appearance of a Gillian, while a lieutenant could report a Priority V for an Adjuchas. It was only for captains that a Priority VII call could be sent, which was the appearance of a Vasto Lorde in the world of the living. Only one such call had been made since the Denreishinki was invented and three captains were

reportedly sent out to take out the Vasto Lorde when it appeared in the middle of the United States.

All of those problems paled in comparison to a Priority X - Threat of Global Scale Imbalance. The urgency of such a call was so great that if anyone dared to lie about it, they would be struck dead within minutes. Only one person in the Soul Society was allowed to answer a Priority X call and that was the Captain Commander himself. The fact that Yamamoto had not answered meant something was massively wrong with the situation.

*" For something of this magnitude I would normally go to the Soul Society but Isshin warned me that would be a fatal error. Although he didn't outright answer me, I feel it has something to do with what Satsuki Kiryuin is planning. Just what the hell does Isshin know about what's going on and how do Life Fibers fit in?"*

Kicking open the trapdoor leading down to the newly rebuilt underground training room, Yoruichi glanced around once before jumping down. As the wind whipped by her face and her purple hair chaotically moved about, Yoruichi wondered why the second video Kisuke made, the one she hadn't should Ichigo, had requested they rebuild the underground training room. She could see the usefulness of training in such a room but the logistics of creating one, especially without Kisuke's help, was difficult. Despite her misgivings Yoruichi wasn't about to disobey Kisuke's final request. The man knew what he was talking about nearly all the time and just because he wasn't around didn't mean he hadn't planned for such things.

Leaping along the outcropping of rocks as she made her way deeper into the hidden room, Yoruichi flipped through the air before landing gracefully in front of a makeshift clinic. When the notice came that Satsuki Kiryuin would be invading with the full force of Honnouji Academy, Isshin had mysteriously stopped by and asked Tessai and her to convert Kisuke's training room into a clinic. He told them Ryuken would do his best to accommodate anyone that's wounded but he would unfortunately prioritize major and life-threatening



injuries. A secondary clinic where those that are moderately wounded could go for help would be appreciated.

Walking past the dozen or so trained volunteers Ryuken had sent from Karakura General Hospital, Yoruichi stopped in front of a particular cot and asked, "How is he?"

Kneeling down next to the unconscious man with her Souten Kisshun activated, Orihime Inoue looked up at Yoruichi with a sad expression on her face, "Physically he's fine but it's been nearly a day now and he still hasn't regained consciousness.

"I see..." Yoruichi's amber eyes narrowed in contemplation as she stared at the unconscious man. She didn't know the man's name or where he came from but when Isshin brought him to the shop, the man's body was covered in multiple sword wounds and he appeared to be on the verge of death. When Tessai had asked Isshin about the man, all Isshin would tell them is that the man is a close friend that he was expecting days ago. When he grew worried when his friend didn't show up, Isshin tracked him down and found him unconscious and injured near the edge of town, "Did you find any sort of identification on him?"

Orihime shook her head, "No, he had nothing on him except for something stitched on his jacket that looks like the Revocs symbol I saw at Honnouji Academy."

"Revocs... this is getting complicated," Yoruichi sat down on the empty cot next to Orihime and folded her arms across her ample chest. Everything about Life Fibers seemed to come back to Revocs and the Kiryuin family. Noticing the depressed look on Orihime's face, Yoruichi quickly realized why she felt that way, "You should cheer up. Isshin's already explained what happened at Honnouji Academy with Nui Harime. From what I heard, you really couldn't have done anything against someone of that caliber. Even I would have difficulty doing actual damage to her."

"So you do know," Orihime's head sagged down as she held a hand over her chest. She could still feel the Grand Couturier's purple Scissor Blade pressed against her throat and as much as she tried to forget, Orihime couldn't put the psychotic look on Nui Harime's face out of her mind, "I didn't want to heal her, but she threatened to kill people if I didn't."

Yoruichi's eye began to twitch as she watched Orihime devolve into a fit of depression. Deciding to take the initiative, she got up and hit the girl on the top of her head before spinning her around and grabbing her shoulders, "Have you stopped to think how Ichigo will think if he sees you moping around like this? You've been to the Soul Society and Hueco Mundo without shedding a tear so something like this should be a walk in the park!"

"Ow..."

As Orihime rubbed her sore head, Yoruichi turned her back on the girl and looked around, "I know you want to go out there and help defend the town. I do too, but Isshin's ordered you to stay put and after hearing about Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime I have to agree. Nui Harime scares me enough as it is and if someone exists that's able to control that little monster, you staying here is the best thing you can do. The modifications Isshin made to the Anti-Life Fiber shield should keep Nui Harime weakened to the point where she can't do any damage but Tessai and I are going to keep watch over the store just in case."

"But that didn't work the last time someone saw my powers..." Orihime trailed off as she glanced over and cringed when she saw Ururu sitting on the edge of the farthest cot silently staring at the ground. She hadn't been there when Ururu, Ryuko and Mako arrived but from what she heard Ururu managed to take one step off the helicopter before collapsing motionlessly to the ground. Whatever it was that Ichigo's dad did to the shield to keep Nui Harime out of Karakura Town, it was also somehow affecting Ururu and it pained Orihime greatly to see the girl seem so down. She tried to talk to

Ururu before but the only response she received was a vacant stare and a single sentence - I don't feel anything anymore.

"That's why Tessai and I are sticking around, or have you not been paying attention?"

Yoruichi's loud voice snapped Orihime back to attention with a start, "It's fairly obvious Ragyo Kiryuin is going to find out why you could heal Nui Harime's eye and unlike last time, you have two captain class shinigami sticking around you at all times! As long as Isshin's Kaizo Trap holds, there is nothing Nui Harime could do to us! Even if she were to somehow regain her strength and come after you or Ururu, we've put enough plans and traps around the store to at least keep her occupied long enough to get you two girls to safety."

"Uh..."

On his cot, the previously unconscious man opened his eyes before quickly realizing that was a bad idea. The artificial illumination in the underground training room was configured to always be as bright as the noon sun so when he opened his eyes, the man found himself temporarily blinded.

"Damn," he muttered as he closed his eyes and tried to sit up only for a wave of nausea to hit him. Swallowing vigorously to keep the bile in his stomach from going the wrong way, the man noticed he wasn't feeling any pain from his wounds and began patting his body down. Once he was convinced he wasn't dead and was, in fact, conscious, the man looked at Orihime and gave her a confused look, "What happened to my injuries? I thought for sure I was dead."

Orihime gave the man a kind smile as a wave of relief washed over her, "Oh, I healed them. Mr. Kurosaki was quite concerned that you might die and asked that I heal your wounds as fast as I could."

"You healed my wounds this perfectly... and you say Isshin Shiba sent you to do it..." The man mulled over the importance of Orihime's words before he ran a hand through his dark hair and

sighed, "I thought after all these years he would still hate me for what I did and yet he had you save me from the brink of death. Sometimes I just don't know what goes through that man's head. Girl, tell me something. Am I in Karakura Town?"

"Yes, in fact -"

"Then there's no time to waste. I have to go see Isshin right away," The man managed to push past Orihime and get up only for Yoruichi to appear right in front of him. He stared into the former captain's eyes until she pushed him back down onto the cot with nary any effort.

"Calm down, will ya?" Yoruichi rolled her eyes as she stepped away from the man, "Your wounds may be healed but you still haven't recovered your energy. Let's start with the basics. Who are you?"

"Who am I?" The man chuckled mirthlessly as he looked away from Yoruichi, "I think you already know who I am Yoruichi Shihoin, 22nd Head of the Shihoin Clan."

"How could you know that? Unless..." Yoruichi stared suspiciously at the man before her amber eyes widened in shock, "Kugo Ginjo? How are you still alive?"

Ginjo folded his hands in his lap and looked at the ground, "When you tore my shinigami powers from my soul, you didn't kill me. When the Soul Society threw my body onto the streets with barely enough spiritual power to see spirits and hollows I forced myself to push forward and persevere. I held a grudge against the Soul Society for years but eventually I met Isshin Shiba and... well... my hatred for shinigami has diminished over the years. I'm sure by now you know that there are threats out there that put a stupid grudge like mine to shame, don't you Yoruichi Shihoin?"

Yoruichi glared at Ginjo but nodded and said, "Life Fibers."

Ginjo scowled at the accusatory glare from Yoruichi but let it slide, "What I have to tell Isshin concerns Life Fibers and Ragyo Kiryuin. I don't mind if you keep me under watch, but you have to get me in touch with him. It's of vital importance."

"You've been out for a few days so I'm not surprised you're late on the uptake, Ginjo," Yoruichi looked away into the distance as she thought she sensed something approaching before dismissing it. Isshin had configured sensors around the shop to trigger alarms if Nui Harime, even in disguise, were to appear, "Satsuki Kiryuin is going to arrive in a couple of hours to invade the city. While we're as prepared as we can possibly be, I'm afraid Isshin has vanished. You might have to wait until this is all over before talking to him."

"Let me put it this way so that even someone like you understand, Yoruichi Shihoin," Ginjo stood up until he was towering over Yoruichi, "I can tell that you have more than a clue what's going on so you must know the importance of what I'm about to tell you. You need to find Isshin Shiba and tell him that his estimates were wrong. Ragyo Kiryuin is more prepared and ready than even he thought. Her plans will begin not in months or years but in days... and I'm afraid her daughter's invasion is just the start."

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*Honnouji Academy - 5:00 AM*

Satsuki Kiryuin walked into the pre-dawn hours of Honnouji Academy and stared passionately at the gathered forces below. The students she had taken off the streets had spent their entire existence here learning everything they needed to wage war on her enemies. Just by gazing out at the sea of men and women clad in shades of green, pink and yellow filled her with pride at the thought of her ambitions and dreams finally coming to fruition. Noticing the Elite Four off to the side and Riruka Dokugamine waiting in the shadows with a bored expression on her face, Satsuki ignored the

pang in her chest upon Ichigo's absence as she slammed the hilt of Bakuzan against the ground while a yellow backdrop of light burst into existence behind her.

"Students of Honnouji Academy! It has been nearly three years since the first of you stepped through the gates of the academy with little to your names. Everything you have learned and studied here has led you to this day! This battle against the forces of Karakura Town is our collective first step toward the realization of our ambitions. Gamagori!"

"Listen up!"

Gamagori stalked forward upon Satsuki's verbal command and slammed his foot against the ground hard enough to dislodge the rolled up banner beneath him. As it fell towards the courtyard below, unfurling in the process, the gathered students saw pictures of Ryuko Matoi, Ururu Tsumugiyu and other people from Karakura Town on it, "There are several War Potentials within the borders of Karakura Town that can make or break our invasion! The neutralization of these War Potentials will be the key to our campaign but you should not attempt to confront these targets by yourself! If you see them, you are to contact a member of the Elite Four or Lady Satsuki to deal with them!

Satsuki listened to Gamagori give orders as she allowed her thoughts to drift back to the words Ichigo had told her earlier. He may have made several valid points that would have made her reconsider her options in every other circumstance but he did not know the true depths of her mother's depravity. He could not understand how Satsuki needed to kill her mother for all the pain and suffering Ragyo Kiryuin has inflicted not only on her, but on humanity itself over the years. She may have told Ichigo some of her mother's more atrocious actions, but Satsuki held back on the details specifically to protect him.

"Everything you do today will reflect on the power of Honnouji Academy!" Satsuki shouted as Gamagori clasped his hands behind

his back and stepped to the side, "I have but one thing to say to you - win! Fight until your heart gives out and your limbs refuse to move. Push forward through the defenses Karakura Town has undoubtedly established and raise the flag of Honnouji Academy over Karakura High School! Honnouji Academy Karakura Raid Trip, move out!"

Satsuki turned her back and began walking away as the thousands of students below began marching into the awaiting trucks before the vehicles began pulling out of the courtyard and driving towards Karakura Town to the west. Her Elite Four had already left her to take command of the brigades, leaving her alone with Riruka and Soroi.

"That was some speech," Riruka drawled as she awkwardly walked next to Satsuki. As much as she hated to admit it, Satsuki was nearly as good of a speaker as Lady Ragyo. If she didn't find Satsuki annoying, Riruka might have actually been inspired by it. Adjusting her white hat and making sure her hair was neat and proper, she asked, "But I didn't see that banner. What does Ichigo Kurosaki look like? If he's going to be a problem, I want to at least know what he looks like."

"If Ichigo Kurosaki or Ryuko Matoi decides to interfere I shall deal with them. The power of Junketsu shall be more than enough to deal with their potential insurrection," Satsuki commented as she walked towards the awaiting helicopter flanked by two rows of bowing students. Nodding to Soroi as she stepped into the helicopter, she turned to look at Riruka, "I fail to see why that matters to you, seeing as my mother gave you a more important task."

"Gee, nothing gets by you," Riruka plopped herself down in a chair and began spinning around childishly while Satsuki looked on in mild consternation, "But yeah, Lady Ragyo gave me another job to do while you're off destroying people's lives. Kugo Ginjo is somewhere inside Karakura Town and it's my job to hunt him down and kill him for betraying Revocs. It shouldn't take too long since the Grand Couturier all but shredded his raiment in his stupid attempt to

escape. That just goes to show that anyone that tries to fight Lady Ragyo is going to die."

"May I have a word with you, Lady Satsuki?"

Iori Shirou's appearance prevented Satsuki from commenting on Riruka's secondary mission. Nodding her head at the President of the Sewing Club, she followed Iori towards the rear of the helicopter and past Riruka, who had tucked her knees up to her chest and began grumbling about breakfast, towards the rear of the helicopter. Once they were alone, Satsuki turned to Iori and asked, "What do you wish to speak about?"

For a moment there was no other sound apart from Iori's heavy breathing beneath his filter mask. Satsuki noted the perspiration on the normally collected teen's face and concluded whatever it was he had to speak about was vitally urgent, "I installed the Life Fiber suppressant system and it's fully operational to your specifications, Lady Satsuki, but I must ask if it is truly necessary. The system is designed to suppress Kamui and Goku Uniforms when the wearer has lost control over them. Surely your control over Junketsu has improved since your fight against Ichigo Kurosaki to the point where you do not require such dire precautions!"

Satsuki shook her head and looked away, "Iori, if you asked me a week ago I would have agreed that such measures were without basis, but things have changed. The power displayed by Ryuko Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki is not something I can afford to ignore. That is not to mention witnessing Ichigo's betrayal early this morning."

"His betrayal?" As a close confidant of Satsuki's true motives, Iori knew she had divulged more than enough of her plans to Ichigo for him to understand her reasoning. For him to betray her at this critical stage was inconceivable, "Forgive me if I sound rude, but could it be that he choose to defend his hometown over any loyalty to you?"



Satsuki hummed thoughtfully as she pondered Iori's question. Such a notion had passed through her mind more than once in the intervening hours and while she was certain that made up a large percentage of his decision, she was certain there was more to it, "You are partially correct, Iori, but Ichigo and I spoke before he fled. He told me that my methods were incorrect and that I had no chance of winning if I continued on my current path. His betrayal was not out of malice or hatred but simply a difference in beliefs. If he can figure out a way to stop my mother that does not have him getting in my way than so be it, but for the moment update the list of War Potentials. If Ichigo is spotted during the Raid Trip, he is to be treated as an enemy combatant with no special considerations. We cannot afford to allow our attention at this critical junction to be split by past affiliations."

"Right away, Lady Satsuki!"

Satsuki emotionlessly watched Iori hurry away to update the Elite Four and their brigades of her orders. As soon as he was gone, she looked down at her trembling hand and bit her lower lip. The inclusion of Ichigo's Life Fibers into Junketsu did what she expected them to do. Already she could feel her Kamui's power increasing and she alone was able to stay within the Anti-Life Fiber shield surrounding Karakura Town indefinitely, but there was a problem she could not have foreseen - the increased power now allowed Junketsu to mentally assault her even while it was inactivate.

" *But why?*" Satsuki narrowed her eyes as she forced Junketsu to obey her will, *"Is Junketsu reacting to Ichigo's Life Fibers Iori infused within it or is it simply rebelling to my desires?"*

As she fortified her mental defenses and pushed back on Junketsu's attack, Satsuki sighed when the trembling in her hand abated. Every passing minute was making her more convinced that the way she was going about things was wrong. Perhaps Ichigo's words had validity to them concerning Junketsu and Satsuki conceded that if she had time she would try to gain her Kamui's trust and cooperation. Unfortunately time was not something she had. It could

be days, weeks or even months before Junketsu and she could come to an accord. That was time she could not afford to waste in a potentially futile endeavor. She would put up with Junketsu's mental attacks for as long as was necessary so that she had the power to take down her mother. Once that was accomplished, Satsuki vowed to treat Junketsu as Ichigo and Mato treated their Kamui.

The sound of combat boots hitting the metal flooring drew Satsuki's attention away from her thoughts. Turning around, she saw the pilot walking up to her before snapping a salute, "What is it?"

Lowering her arm, the pilot pulled off her helmet and ran a hand through her short blonde hair before answering, "The final preparations are finished, Lady Satsuki. We're ready to depart at your order."

Satsuki looked upon the pilot for several long and tense seconds before asking, "You are not my normal pilot. Who are you?"

"The name's Elena, ma'am," Elena gave Satsuki a curt and respectful nod, "I'm the primary pilot for Lady Ragyo but with the battle for Karakura Town coming up, she's decided my talents would be better suited to keeping you out of harm's way. I have extensive flying experience in war zones. Any surprises Karakura Town may possess should not be a problem."

"Very well, then. Let us depart as soon as possible," Satsuki sat down and crossed her legs while her eyes never left Elena until she was back in the cockpit. Leaning her head back against the chair and closing her eyes, she had an inkling that something was going to go wrong. She knew Iori's modifications and improvements to her Goku Uniforms increased their power by nearly twenty percent from the beginning of the school year and yet she could not help but feel that wasn't enough

"*Ichigo's power would have been highly useful if he had seen things my way,*" Satsuki lamented the fact that she and Ichigo had to part the way they did, but she knew it was partially her fault. She had

vowed to keep Nui Harime away from his friends and she failed to stop the Grand Couturier from killing Mako Mankanshoku. With Ichigo gone and potentially her enemy once more, Satsuki also lost Ururu Tsumugiya as a deterrent for the Grand Couturier.

*" Ururu Tsumugiya managed to best Nui Harime in a fight. If I could have kept her on my side, the difficulty of killing my mother would have decreased tremendously."*

"It doesn't matter at this juncture. I will just have to proceed with my plans regardless of Ichigo's involvement," Satsuki looked out the window of the helicopter into the early dawn morning. In less than an hour the battle for Karakura Town would commence and Satsuki could not help but feel nervous about facing down Ichigo on his home soil. Staring down at the palm of her hand, Satsuki wondered who would prevail if they were to fight once more before a smile crossed her features. She did not need to fight Ichigo to prove the power of her Kamui when Matoi was most likely already in Karakura Town.

"Matoi... I wonder which of us is stronger? Can your Senketsu truly stand up to the might of my Junketsu?"

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## **Kamui Tales #20 - The Blue Shell**

Ryuko sucked when it came to tight turns and just like her luck suggested, the Honnouji Academy Course was full of tight turns.

As her motorcycle was pushed forward as it hit a speed boost, she quickly turned to the left and power slid through one of the streets. Spotting a line of Item Boxes ahead she raced forward and phased through one just as she saw Gamagori's kart twisting just ahead of her. Grinning when she saw the Red Shell spinning in front of her motorcycle, Ryuko gave a sadistic chuckle as she pressed the

button on her left handle and sent the Red Shell speeding towards Gamagori.

"I'm not sorry about that, Gamagori!" Ryuko shouted triumphantly with a hint of sarcasm as she watched the Disciplinary Committee Chair's vehicle spin out of control as the Red Shell homed in on him. As he crashed into the side of the track, temporarily out of commission for a few seconds, Ryuko gave him the finger before accelerating away, "But that's for what you hit me with last lap!"

Ryuko raced through the twisting streets of the One-Star Residential District before she reached a clearing and spotted the speed-boosting ramps that would shoot her up to the Two-Star section of the track. Skidding through another line of Item Boxes as she heard Gamagori catching up to her at a speed that suggested he was using a Golden Mushroom, Ryuko noticed she had a Blooper ready to use but refrained from using it. It needed perfect timing if she wanted to get rid of Gamagori. Waiting until he was just about to pass her, Ryuko hit the brakes before she pressed down on the item button. Smirking savagely as Gamagori swerved and crashed as the Blooper squirted ink into his eyes, Ryuko hit the ramp and easily cleared the space to the Two-Star section when she saw her.

There were two paths through the Honnouji Academy Course everyone mile or so they would intersect, allowing the racers to switch paths if they chose to. That is why it came as no surprise to Ryuko when Nui Harime's pink bike appeared out of nowhere and landed next to her.

"Nui..." Ryuko narrowed her eyes at the racer currently fighting her for second place. Nui had been a thorn in just about everyone's side throughout each race but she seemed to have a certain interest in annoying Ryuko or Satsuki whenever she got the chance.

"Hi, Ryuko! I'm glad you remember me! I have a present for you..." Nui waved at Ryuko before she grinned and pointed with her finger towards the front of her motorcycle. Looking at what Nui was trying

to show her, Ryuko's eyes widened in shock as she saw the Blue Shell hovering innocently.

"But how -"

"I've been saving this baby up for a special occasion ever since I got it last lap," Nui grinned before sticking her tongue out, "Gosh, I wonder who is in first place right now? Oh, I know! It's your dad, isn't it?"

Ryuko tried to swerve towards Nui, "No!"

"Too late!" Nui pressed her item release button and the Blue Shell's spinning rapidly increased before it blasted forward down the track with the singular purpose of hunting down the racer in first place and blowing up. Ryuko stared in horror as the Blue Shell disappeared into the distance before a massive blue-tinged explosion appeared over the horizon followed by the familiar sound of her father cursing in pain.

"That's two for two, Ryuko!"

# Tonight's the Night

*So here is Chapter 33 and the first real chapter focusing entirely on the Karakura Town Occupation. There is a lot of different things going on in this chapter and a few subtle hints as to the direction the chapter is going to take so I recommend reading through once for enjoying and then again to look for everything that you may have missed. On an unrelated note, this story has finally broken 1,000 in both alerts and favorites! Thanks for everyone who took the time to do that and I look forward to seeing just how popular this story can get!*

*Also, I've seen the OVA and of course they had to throw in a last minute revelation that totally annoyed me. I won't say what it was about but it involved Rei Hououmaru. I'm not going to change anything so don't get worried about a rewrite or something like that.*

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## Chapter 33 - Tonight's the Night

*Eighteen and a Half Years Ago*

*"Ragyo was quite insistent on obtaining your input for this project. She seems to believe that your assistance is the only thing that could breed success."*

*The recently married Souichiro stoically walked through the lobby of the new Revocs headquarters as the various middle managers stopped what they were doing to bow respectfully to him and his guest. Stepping into the elevator and swiping his top level security clearance, Souichiro imputed the twelve digit passcode, the time and date of his marriage, before stepping to the side and allowing his guest to enter alongside him. As the elevator rumbled to life before*

*descending, Souichiro waited barely a second before adding, "Between the two of us, I'm relieved you decided to come back. Ragyo was on the verge of tears after you left."*

*" I figured as much. Still, I didn't think she would be that upset that I would marry Masaki." Isshin Kurosaki, no longer Shiba, ran a hand through his silver hair while ignoring the rainbow lighting that shone from within it. More than a year after his encounter with the Original Life Fiber and experiencing the changes to his body, Isshin still could not figure out a way to make his hair stop glowing. Masaki hadn't been too thrilled when he came home looking like a Christmas tree but after she and Rei Hououmaru stopped laughing and tried to fix the problem, that was when they realized it would be impossible to hide his hair. That was why when Kisuke stopped by and saw his new hair, Isshin said he lost a bet with a friend.*

*" I think Ragyo always knew Masaki would be the one to capture your heart," Souichiro fiddled with his wedding ring as he quashed the thought of being second-best to Isshin from his thoughts. Ragyo may have pined for Isshin but Souichiro vowed on the honor of his family to do his best to make her happy. He knew he would never be able to make Ragyo smile the way she used to around Isshin and Masaki but he was certain he could make her happy given enough time.*

*Isshin looked up at the digital display above the elevator doors and mentally sighed. Ragyo's reaction to his wedding had been anything but expected. He knew she would be upset that he hadn't married her but Isshin knew Souichiro, one of the best and brightest scientists hired by Ragyo to help understand the full properties of Life Fibers, felt something for his old friend. Isshin knew Souichiro would make Ragyo happy but still, the anger she displayed and the fact she destroyed a desk with her bare hand in a fit of rage concerned Isshin. As much as he wanted to deny it, over the six month period between the incident with the Original Life Fiber and announcing his wedding date he had noticed a slow but constant change in Ragyo's personality. At first it was too subtle for him to*

*notice but over time she started to become colder and more focusing on understanding the Original Life Fiber and Life Fibers in general. He had tried to warn her of the dangers and at first Ragyo agreed but over time she began to justify her experiments as a means to understanding and controlling them.*

*" So what did Ragyo need me here for?" Isshin asked a silent Souichiro, "She seemed to be doing fine without me around. Is something wrong?"*

*Souichiro's eyes narrowed for a moment before shaking his head, "No, Ragyo is about to conduct a revolutionary experiment with Life Fibers and she wanted someone she could trust to help her with it. Tell me, Isshin, have you ever heard of a Kamui?"*

*" A Kamui?" Isshin scratched at his chin as he tried to remember if he ever heard that word before. If he understood the word correctly, Souichiro was referring to something called a 'God Robe,' which did seem like something Ragyo would want to create. The only question bothering him was what a Kamui was exactly, "Can't say that I have. What is it?"*

*" Before I explain I have to tell you something. Ragyo and I have been experimenting on living creatures to study the effects of Life Fibers," Souichiro expected the outraged look on Isshin's face. He knew the man's stance on Life Fibers but sometimes one must push past their morals for the greater good. That did not mean Souichiro enjoyed what he did, however, the way some of the test animals died was starting to make him consider becoming a vegetarian, "We did not test them on people, if that's what you're worrying about. We started off on lab mice and other small animals to see the obvious effects firsthand. The results showed us that subjects experienced an increase in strength, speed and stamina proportional to the amount of Life Fibers infused. However, the same can be said about the strain on their bodies. The more Life Fibers in the mixture, the faster the animal dies from exhaustion."*



*" It doesn't sound like you made any progress," Isshin voiced his confusion.*

*Souichiro nodded, "At first it was like that but then Ragyo came up with the idea to mix Life Fibers with normal cloth fibers and threads. The theory was the additional cloth would act to shield the wearer from the effects of the Life Fibers and it was completely true. While the decrease in Life Fiber content led to a drop in the overall power increase, it massively decreased the strain on the host body."*

*" How does that have to do with whatever a Kamui is?"*

*The elevator soundlessly came to a stop and Souichiro stepped out before answering, "People have innate resistance to Life Fibers of varying degrees. Through meticulous and safe testing involving extracting blood and tissue samples from volunteers, who were all paid for their assistance, Ragyo found that children and teenagers have higher resistances to the stress from Life Fibers than adults. Using that knowledge, we are test fitting the first line of Revocs clothing containing less than one percent Life Fibers. The Kamui is the ultimate creation one can make with Life Fibers. Instead of worrying about the varying levels of stress on the body, a Kamui is composed of nothing but Life Fibers and can only be worn by those with extremely high levels of Life Fiber resistance for a short period of time."*

*Isshin gripped Souichiro's shoulder tightly and stared the man straight in his eyes, "You know how dangerous Life Fibers are, Souichiro. Why would you try to create something like a Kamui?"*

*Souichiro momentarily looked conflicted before he pulled his shoulder out of Isshin's grip and walked away, "When Ragyo first conceived of a Kamui, I was convinced that such a thing could not exist on its own. I thought if a normal bundle of Life Fibers was already inherently prone to parasitizing nearby life forms, than a Kamui would be the same. I spent weeks researching the concentration of Life Fibers necessary for a Kamui and discovered something extraordinary."*

*"What did you find?"*

*Souichiro shook his head as he gestured for Isshin to enter a room, "Ragyo will explain everything to you once you step inside."*

*Isshin looked at the darkened room suspiciously before turning to Souichiro, "You're not coming?"*

*" I'm afraid Ragyo does not yet find me worthy enough of learning the secrets of the Kamui," Souichiro shook his head depressingly. Despite marrying into the Kiryuin family and possessing one of the top minds surrounding the study and manipulation of Life Fibers, Ragyo still kept several secrets from him. He knew given enough time she would open up and share them with him but the mysteries of the Kamui fascinated him to no end. The process of creating one should be fairly straightforward but every time he tried to experimentally stitch a small patch of clothing with the Life Fiber density of a Kamui, the garment would dissolve into its constituents. There was something he was missing and he was sure Ragyo knew what it was, "But perhaps you can tell me once you're done. I'm sure I can tell Ragyo that you forcibly gave me the information in an attempt to annoy her."*

*" What? You wouldn't!" Isshin growled when he saw the humorous smirk on Souichiro's face. Storming into the room accompanied by his friend's laughter, Isshin was just about to look for the Ragyo when the door closed and sent him into nearly complete darkness. It would have been total darkness if his hair was not acting as a natural source of light. Squinting and looking around for a light switch, he was nearly blinded when the lights in the room turned on all at once.*

*" I do apologize for the abruptness," Ragyo said in amusement as she walked towards him, "But the experiments inside this chamber are classified even to my husband. Only you and I have ever seen the contents of this room."*

*Clad in a pure white business suit with a matching skirt, Ragyo's heels clicked along the ground as she walked towards the only man*

who would ever truly have her love. She was still greatly upset that she lost Isshin to Masaki but as much as she hated losing, she was not about to do anything to lose his friendship. Many things had become opened to her since her exposure to the greatness of the Original Life Fiber but none of that mattered next to Isshin. Stopping in front of Isshin, Ragyo looked at him for a moment before wrapping him in a hug, "I truly am glad you could make it, Isshin. I was starting to think you hadn't forgiven me for what I said to you and Masaki."

"I probably could have broken the news a little bit better," Isshin muttered as he made a mental note to not piss off any more women that could crush steel in her hands like it was paper. Sure it was nice to have strength, speed and regeneration that could make any shinigami jealous but there were downsides to everything. As he heard Ragyo sigh against his shoulder, Isshin gently pried her off his body and said, "I suppose I shouldn't have been that angry about it. I've always been oblivious to things and Masaki didn't explain why you were so angry until we got home. Boy, did I feel stupid for not forgiving you right away. Still, that doesn't excuse not staying in touch for so longer. I'm sure you missed talking to me."

Ragyo confidently smiled at the sheepish grin Isshin was giving her, "We both made mistakes that day but I do not deny that I started it. I overreacted to Masaki breaking the news, but I still won in the end."

"Huh?" Isshin scratched at his hair for a couple of seconds before his gaze fell to her hand placed gently over her stomach. As his jaw dropped and eyes widened upon the realization hitting him like a slap to the face, he shouted loudly enough that Souichiro, who was outside the soundproof room smoking a cigarette, turned his head at the strange shrilling noise in the air, "You're pregnant? But... how... when...?"

"You see Isshin, when two people have sexual intercourse they -"

"I know that!" Isshin waved his hands frantically in the air. He didn't need to hear about Ragyo and Souichiro's love life. While he was glad Ragyo was starting to act like her old self again, which he really

*missed, he was terrified at the prospect of a mini-Ragyo walking around barking orders to anyone they could. Such a thing could not end well for anyone, "I'm just... wow... have you decided on a name yet?"*

*" We haven't decided but if it's a girl, I've decided her name will be Satsuki," Ragyo said proudly before turning away and motioning for him to follow her. Isshin gave one last glance at the door behind him before hurrying after Ragyo.*

*As he walked closely behind Ragyo, who seemed to know where they were going, Isshin decided to look around the large room. When he felt his senses immediately go haywire upon entering the room, Isshin knew something was up, but it was only upon looking around that he realized just how much his earlier assumption was missing. Automated machines, each of which was probably custom-made and cost millions of dollars, lined nearly every wall. Isshin's maroon eyes narrowed as he focused his senses upon the Life Fibers inside each machine being manipulated, experimented upon and modified to see their physical limits. While the Life Fibers making up a large majority of his body afforded him immunity to the effects of other Life Fibers, Isshin could not think of a reason Ragyo would have extracted this many Life Fibers from the Original Life Fiber.*

*" Why do you need so many Life Fibers, Ragyo?" Isshin cautiously asked, "Do they have something to do with the Kamui that Souichiro mentioned you were working on?"*

*" I should have known Souichiro would be unable to contain his excitement," Ragyo's tone has a childish hint of amusement to it and for a moment Isshin thought she was mocking her husband's failed attempts to create a Kamui. That suspicion vanished when Ragyo turned around to face him with a bemused smile on her face, "The reason I have not yet shared with my husband the secret of the Kamui is because I have failed to create one myself. Souichiro thinks I have several Kamui already created and in storage but the truth is my skills with manipulating Life Fibers, as grand and majestic as they are, are still not enough. That is why I am glad you came here,*

*Isshin. I know that with the both of us working together we can finally create the first Kamui the world has ever seen!"*

*" I will admit that I haven't really focused on Life Fibers since settling down with Masaki in Karakura Town," Isshin chose his words carefully as he addressed Ragyo. She took enormous, some would even suggest religious, pride in being able to control and manipulate Life Fibers. Isshin had a sinking and increasing feeling the Original Life Fiber was to blame but until he had complete proof he would bide his time and try to think of a plan, "But we're the only two people in the world that are immune to the effects of Life Fibers. I know you know what you're doing, but what if you made a mistake or, heaven forbid, lose control over the Kamui? Nobody's perfect. Not even us."*

*Stopping as they reached a metal railing that overlooked a seemingly bottomless pit filled with white smoke and condensation, Ragyo cast her gaze upwards as the rainbow light from her hair seemed to intensify. With a smile bordering on psychotic spread across her face, she leaned over the railing and said, "You should have more faith in what the Original Life Fiber did to us, Isshin. Out of all those that stood before it throughout its existence, only you and I have been given a small part of its infinite power. I understand your reservations about power being given away so freely but you can sense it, can't you? Not a single Life Fiber will dare harm one that is precious to either of us. We are the chosen of the Original Life Fiber. With but a single thought we can forever protect those we care from the negative effects of Life Fibers."*

*Following her gaze upwards, Isshin looked up and nearly flinched at the third densest concentration of Life Fibers in the chamber behind Ragyo and himself. Perched upon a mannequin held horizontal to the ground and with the proportions of a teenage girl lay a half-finished school uniform. While at first glance the white and blue uniform with gold adornments along its sides seemed to be nothing more than an overly fancy garment, Isshin could sense the barest hints of thoughts coming from within the Kamui. Concentrating just a bit harder, he subconsciously took a step back when the thoughts*

*burgeoned into telepathic communication consisting of nothing his ears or mind could comprehend. This was the true and pure voice of Life Fibers and Isshin began breaking out into a cold sweat as he felt the Life Fibers inside his body start to resonate with the Kamui.*

*" Life Fibers truly have yet to be completely understood. When they are weaved into a Kamui, they develop intelligence equivalent to a human," Ragyo gently placed her hand on Isshin's shoulder and immediately the sensation he was feeling abated. Holding her other hand up into the air, she watched as several rainbow Life Fibers began emerging from her skin before with a mental thought she sent them floating in the air towards the incomplete Kamui. As the Life Fibers began integrating themselves into the basic structure of the Kamui, Ragyo sighed and leaned her head on Isshin's shoulder, "I noticed your reaction to the sound of the Kamui. At first I was frightened of the true voice of the Life Fibers but now I am fully capable of intimately understanding the emotions and feelings of the Life Fibers."*

*Isshin gathered his nerves and looked into Ragyo's eyes, "Why did you call me?"*

*Ragyo smiled, "You already know why, Isshin. Alone I am unable to complete a Kamui but with the two of us..."*

*" You want me to add some of my Life Fibers to the Kamui?" Isshin grimaced when he saw Ragyo's smile broaden. He still had massive reservations about finishing the Kamui but during his brief connection to the Life Fiber construct, Isshin hadn't sensed any ill intentions from it. Most of what he felt, for a lack of a better term, was unintelligible, but Ragyo was right about one thing. He could just barely sense the emotions and thoughts of the Kamui and not a single one of them consisted of betraying them. Holding out his hand and mentally commanding his Life Fibers to copy what Ragyo's had just done, Isshin couldn't help but notice that his Life Fibers twisted around Ragyo's before they too integrated themselves into the Kamui.*

*When more than a minute passed and nothing exciting happened, Isshin turned to Ragyo and asked, "So what now?"*

*" Just watch..." Ragyo muttered as she stared in awe as the Kamui seemed to complete itself before erupting in a flash of light that caused both Isshin and her to cover their eyes. When they could once again see, Ragyo noticed the Kamui was no longer wrapped around the mannequin but was instead floating gently down through the air towards them before landing on the ground.*

*" That was really strange," Isshin stated as the two eyes near the Kamui's lapels opened and began earnestly looking around the room while it wrapped its sleeves around anything it could find. Turning to Ragyo as the Kamui rubbed its sleeves over the ground before seemingly noticing something more interesting nearby, he whispered, "What's it doing?"*

*" It is but a child in a brand new world. It has nothing to go upon but the thoughts and experiences our Life Fibers carried," Ragyo answered in veiled amusement as the Kamui poked a machine and immediately leapt back when the machine responded. As the Kamui smacked the machine before hopping away to explore something else, Ragyo sighed wistfully and leaned her cheek onto the palm of her hand, "I knew a Kamui would be intelligent but never did I foresee it actually becoming capable of independent motion. This is far beyond my wildest dreams. What do you want to do with it, Isshin?"*

*Isshin watched the Kamui try to climb on a machine only to fall off and land on its back. He was having a really hard time associating the playful Kamui with the insidiousness of the Life Fibers composing it. Rubbing the back of his neck as he drew a complete blank, Isshin thought about it before saying, "Heck if I know. I'm still trying to..."*

*Unbeknownst to Isshin, while he was talking to Ragyo the Kamui had turned the full focus of its attention toward him. As it gazed upon the man with the rainbow glow shining from his hair, it instinctively knew that he had been one of the two beings that it could thank for its*

existence. Not knowing the best way to show its appreciation and understanding that it could not draw sustenance from Isshin unless he allowed it to, the Kamui decided to leap through the air and wrap itself around Isshin's head.

" How interesting..."

Ragyo watched in a mixture of amusement and interest as the Kamui wrapped itself around Isshin's head. As the man fell to the floor in an undignified heap and tried to pry the Kamui off his body, Ragyo telepathically reached out and was interested to see that the Kamui wasn't trying to hurt Isshin. On the contrary it was trying to show its gratitude for being alive, which made a lot of sense. The only reason the Kamui was here to show its appreciation was because she and Isshin had willingly donated some of their Life Fibers to finish its stitching. The concept of attacking either of them was not something the Kamui would ever dream of doing. It was the same concept of her rebelling against the Original Life Fiber - simply ludicrous.

Managing to unwrap the Kamui's sleeve from over his mouth, Isshin noticed Ragyo failing to conceal her laughter behind her hand, "This isn't funny, Ragyo! Get this thing off of me!"

" **Father!**"

The distinctively feminine voice that telepathically reached both of them caused Ragyo to briefly stop laughing. She didn't know Kamui could actually speak, if telepathically at that, and that opened up so many avenues of research in the future. Turning her back to Isshin as the Kamui began to lovingly nuzzle the man she assumed to be her father, Ragyo waved goodbye as she said, "And ruin your moment of bonding? I think not, Isshin. The Kamui seems to have taken a shining to the person who could be considered her father. It would be quite rude of me to stand between such emotions. I am more than willing to wait my turn."

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Clad in Junketsu, Satsuki Kiryuin leaned over the holographic map displaying Karakura Town and the surrounding area and frowned. The quick change of venue from the Kansai Region to Karakura Town limited her overall plans and thus she was dependent, more so than usual, on ground feedback from her brigades and Inumuta's Intelligence Unit. She was going into Karakura Town half-blind and any mistakes could lead to defeat. A beep from the map drew Satsuki's attention to the eastern edge as the arrow signifying Gamagori's Disciplinary Brigade appeared. Turning towards the stack of monitors, each of which was connected to one of her Elite Four, Satsuki nodded for Iori to patch her through, "Gamagori, have you made contact with the Karakura Town forces?"

Kilometers away from where Satsuki's helicopter was straddling the edge of the Anti-Life Fiber shield enveloping Karakura Town, Ira Gamagori heard a hiss of static in his ear before Satsuki's voice came through perfectly clear. Standing up to his full height and unzipping the canvas hatch on top of the truck he was in, Gamagori stared out into the early dawn before answering, "Not yet Lady Satsuki. I'm currently five kilometers from the designated rendezvous point and yet I've seen no sign of resistance. I will let you know immediately once we breach through Karakura Town's perimeter."

"Very well," Satsuki nodded in affirmation. Staring out of the windows lining the helicopter toward the rising sun while ignoring the rudely sleeping Riruka Dokugamine, Satsuki schooled her features and added, "Do not take any unnecessary risks, Gamagori. This operation is predicated by the notion that Karakura Town is full of people strong enough to oppose the power of Goku Uniforms."

"Yes, Lady Satsuki."

Gamagori let the wireless connection to Satsuki cut off. As the truck hit a pothole and lurched briefly into the air, he could not help but tense up. While the operation was going smoothly and according to

plan, Gamagori did not like it one bit. His Disciplinary Brigade is supposed to be the first of Satsuki's forces to reach Karakura town, which meant the full fury of its defenders should fall directly onto him. The lack of defenders, even as the outskirts of the city grew ever closer, suggested that either Satsuki overestimated the citizens of Karakura Town or that they were planning a trap.

"Members of the Disciplinary Brigade, listen up!" In one simple press of a button Gamagori was connected to the hundreds of students making up his brigade, "We are approaching the outskirts of Karakura Town and shall be there within five minutes! Upon arrival head to your designated combat point and do not engage any of the War Potentials if you happen to come across them. Lady Satsuki does not need any unnecessary deaths on her hands. Is that perfectly clear?"

A chorus of 'yes, sir' drifted through both the connection and the air and for just a brief second Gamagori believed he may have been overly worried about nothing. That belief was shattered when the driver of his truck slammed on the brakes, causing the vehicle to lurch to a screeching halt. After managing to keep himself upright, unlike what could be said for more than half of his brigade, Gamagori jumped out of the truck and stormed towards the front.

"What is the meaning of this? Why have you stopped?"

The driver rolled down his window and pointed forward down the highway, "There's someone in the middle of the road, sir. He's wearing the Karakura High School uniform as well."

"I see... excellent observation." It appeared that the battle for Karakura Town was about to begin, "Order the others to stay back. There is no telling what this person is capable of doing."

Gamagori didn't wait for the driver's salute before he folded his arms across his chest and viciously stared down the road. Not one hundred meters away from him and standing on the double yellow lines in the center of the road was a male teenager wearing the

uniform designating him a member of Karakura High School. While he would usually ignore such a person in terms of strength and power, Gamagori knew that anyone from Karakura Town should not be underestimated. This student might possess such power similar to Orihime Inoue's or of an entirely different nature altogether. Underestimating such an opponent, especially with his new Three-Star Goku Uniform not yet ready, could be deadly.

Gathering up as much air into his lungs as possible, Gamagori let loose a shout that could be heard nearly a mile away, "Student of Karakura High School! Step aside this instant!"

Keigo Asano's hair literally moved as he was buffeted by Gamagori's shouting. As the first drops of nervous sweat began to trickle down his neck, Keigo swallowed the bile threatening to well up in his throat and tightly gripped his hand around the detonator for the CBSS Type IV Explosives lining the highway in front of him. All the courage and bravery he had spent the last few hours prepping himself up with quickly evaporated upon seeing all the trucks and students from Honnouji Academy. Deep down he knew this was what he should have expected but he hoped to whatever deity existed in the Soul Society that it would only be a couple dozen students. The army of men and women in matching yellow track suits with the Honnouji Academy symbol emblazoned on them didn't help a bit.

*" Great job Keigo. You decide to be a man just before facing down an actual army... I need to get better timing or I might seriously die."*

As much as Keigo wanted to listen to Gamagori's order he couldn't afford to run away. Everyone was counting on him to stop Satsuki Kiryuin's army before they reached Karakura Town and despite the fear coursing through his body he was going to do just that. With his thumb nervously hovering the detonator's switch, Keigo gathered what remained of his courage and yelled back, "Uh... I don't even know who you are! Are you lost or something?"

Gamagori's eye twitched at the blatant disrespect Keigo was giving him. Did this delinquent not know of Satsuki Kiryuin's intentions or

was he simply mocking him? Deciding that either of those choices was unacceptable, Gamagori snapped his fingers and immediately dozens of members of the Disciplinary Brigade appeared in formation behind him, "How dare you ask such a question when you clearly already know the answer! I am Ira Gamagori, Honnouji Academy Disciplinary Brigade Leader! I will not allow a hooligan like you stand in the way of Lady Satsuki's glorious vision!"

Keigo had been called many names in his life, most of them by his sister, but never hooligan. It actually annoyed him to be called something like that, "Hey, I'm not a hooligan. My sister used to be Student Council President, you know. If I was a hooligan she would have kicked my ass years ago."

The Disciplinary Committee Chair's eyebrow quirked at the piece of information he just heard. Before departing on the Raid Trip, Satsuki had made sure her Elite Four was familiar with the history behind each and every one of the War Potentials. All the strengths, weaknesses and habits Inumuta discovered were memorized in order to better prepare themselves for the battle. From what the student just told him, Gamagori could only assume he was Keigo Asano, one of Lady Satsuki's War Potentials.

Pressing his finger against his ear and turning partially away from Keigo, Gamagori waited until the signal connected before speaking, "I apologize for the quick response, Lady Satsuki, but our path forward is blocked by one of the War Potentials - Keigo Asano. What are your orders?"

Satsuki's brow narrowed in contempt as she recalled the actions of Mizuho Asano at the biannual Student Council President Conferences. When the conferences started some years ago, long before she created Honnouji Academy, they were designed for the presidents to talk amongst themselves and highlight the benefits and drawbacks of their respective academies and schools. The intent of the original student council presidents was for cooperation and unity amongst themselves by making sure an academy that ran into problems could depend on other schools for assistance. By the time

Satsuki ascended to Student Council President of Honnouji Academy, it had become nothing more than a place of corruption and bickering politicians doing their best to curry favor through any means necessary.

It had not taken Satsuki long to master the game.

Within six months of creating Honnouji Academy she had manipulated the presidents that could be bought into loyalty to her while those that had some shred of morality quickly fell beneath the power of Honnouji Academy and its Goku Uniforms. After a year every school north of Nagoya was under her control except for Karakura Town. At the time Satsuki knew her mother had forbidden her from conquering the city but that did not mean she could not bring Karakura High School under her heel through more subtle means. At first everything was going well, the weak-willed 23rd Student Council President of Karakura Town was nearly broken and Satsuki was confident within a month he would be completely loyal to her. That was when everything fell apart.

In a seemingly landslide election, brought about by unknown rumors of bribery and corruption, the president was thrown out of office and replaced by Mizuho Asano. Satsuki wasn't worried initially but her first meeting with Mizuho demonstrated how wrong she was. In a burst of language and cursing that Satsuki did not believe existed, Mizuho Asano backtracked on every single promise her predecessor made with Honnouji Academy and vowed that Karakura Town will not fall under the sway of, as she put it, 'some pampered rich girl with a weird sense of fashion.' All attempts to remove Mizuho Asano from office failed and after a year of futilely trying to circumvent Mizuho's adamant stance, Satsuki felt it would be best to give up on the current course of action until a new president was elected.

"Gamagori..." Satsuki's tone had a barely concealed hint of venom to it as she addressed him, "... Keigo Asano is to be treated as a hostile enemy combatant. His sister is the previous Student Council President of Karakura High School - Mizuho Asano. You are ordered

to capture him alive and unharmed and extract any valuable information about Karakura Town's defenses. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Lady Satsuki," Gamagori stepped forward while looking as menacing as possible. The confrontation between Lady Satsuki and Mizuho Asano was legendary due to the fact that it was one of the few times Satsuki had not been able to secure victory. Slamming his feet against the ground barely twenty feet away from Keigo, Gamagori shouted, "Keigo Asano! Due to your familial relation with the previous student council president of Karakura High School, you are to surrender yourself immediately for interrogation!"

Keigo glanced down at his pocket, contemplating what he was about to do, before he stared directly at Gamagori. Slowly pulling his hand out of his pocket and holding it above his head, he grinned when he saw Gamagori's eyes widen in surprised shock, "I'm not trying to insult you or anything, but my sister is way scarier than you could ever be. If I just gave up and surrendered she would totally kick my ass."

Gamagori rushed forward, intent on stopping Keigo from pressing the detonator, but without his Three-Star Goku Uniform he was too slow. In a series of explosions that started right next to him and cascaded back down the highway, the CBSS Type IV Explosives went off with enough power to not only instantly buckle a nearly two mile stretch of highway but also be heard all the way in Karakura Town. As the highway he was standing on began to collapse downward, Gamagori jumped forward and just barely managed to grab hold of the edge of the remaining highway with one of his hands. Angrily watching his fellow students falling just far enough that they would be injured but unlikely to be killed, Gamagori was just about to pull himself up when he felt something crushing his hand.

"Aw, come on! Let go already!" Keigo stomped down hard on Gamagori's hand and was starting to get really scared when the Disciplinary Brigade Leader continued to not only hang up but actually began to pull himself up. Thinking quickly, Keigo grabbed a

piece of nearby rebar, severed during the explosions, and smacked it across Gamagori's face hard enough that the large teen was forced to let go and fall down with the rest of his troops.

"Sorry about that but I have to go now!"

Keigo didn't try to wait around as Gamagori fell through the rising smoke and dust before hitting the ground with a solid thump. The moment he saw the massive teen's grip on the edge of the highway fail, Keigo immediately turned tail and sprinted back towards Karakura Town as quickly as his legs could move. In just the last minute he had expended all the bravery and courage built up and Keigo didn't want to turn around and watch a seriously pissed off Gamagori pulling himself back onto the road. Keigo didn't know if his bladder could survive seeing something like that.

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Uzu Sanageyama sat perched on top of the lead truck in the Athletic Brigade as the convoy of vehicles made their way across the western highway following the Onose River. So far everything had been exceptionally quiet but Sanageyama was not fooled by the seemingly enemy-free environment as his troops and the other members of the Elite Four. His Shingantsu could detect at least three dozen enemy students running through the mostly empty streets of Karakura Town just across the river. Judging from their speed and ability to continue running for at least five minutes Sanageyama hypothesized that they most likely belong to one or more of Karakura High School's athletic clubs.

"This is going to be interesting," he muttered as he leaned his forehead against his shinai. His battle and subsequent defeat at the hands of Ichigo Kurosaki opened his mind up to the possibility that there would be opponents that his Shingantsu would be unable to predict and counter. His Blade Regalia was but a tool for him to use and, by extension, a means to an end for Lady Satsuki's plans. If he

wanted to be as useful as possible to help her achieve her dreams he needed to improve himself beyond his human capabilities.

As the minutes trickled by and Sanageyama was focusing on the upcoming battles against Karakura Town, his ears picked up a massive explosion to the east. Standing up and turning towards the source of the sound with his bandanna blowing in the cold morning wind, Sanageyama grit his teeth when he pinpointed the source of the explosion as coming from Gamagori's last reported location.

"Damn it, they already started?" Sanageyama pressed a finger against his earpiece and waited for the device to connect to Satsuki, "Lady Satsuki, there was a -"

"I am already aware of the situation, Sanageyama. Continue with the operation. It will take more than simply explosives to stop Gamagori," Satsuki stared passively at the holographic map of Karakura Town as the arrow labeled 'Gamagori' flashed bright red while information trickled across the screen. When the explosives near Gamagori's location went off her helicopter had been close enough that the flash of light was bright enough that Iori, who had been looking out the window at the time, was momentarily blinded.

"Wow! That was a big explosion! I wonder if anyone died down there." Riruka pressed her face against the window and stared at the column of smoke rising lazily into the early morning sky. Forced to wear her glasses by Satsuki, how Ragyo's daughter managed to procure a prescription she would never know, Riruka squinted and watched as members of the Disciplinary Brigade began to pull themselves out of the smoke and rubble. She had to give Satsuki's troops credit. To be able to survive a point blank explosion with nothing more than bruises and scratches was pretty damn awesome.

"It is unlikely that is the case," Satsuki sat down and closed her eyes as Soro prepared her a cup of tea. Calmly sipping the bitter liquid, Satsuki paused for a couple of seconds before continuing her train of thought, "While the explosion was indeed massive and devastating, the devices responsible were placed underneath the highway along



the support structures. Inumuta's Intelligence Unit already confirmed that the explosives were designed to impede Gamagori's progress and would have little to no chance of actually killing them. All the defenders of Karakura Town managed to acquire from their gamble was an extension of their freedom, nothing more."

On the ground and oblivious to Satsuki's train of thought, Sanageyama stood up on top of the truck. He could not appear to look weak in front of his men after Gamagori was taken down like a common criminal. As long as he could draw breathe and hold a sword Sanageyama vowed to be a source of inspiration for the Athletic Brigade, "Push forward! Do not let those who dare to resist Lady Satsuki and her dreams stand in our way!"

Upon hearing his words the Athletic Brigade surged forward, the students within unwilling to allow Satsuki's dreams to fail at such a critical juncture. It was only when they began turning onto the bridge that would take them across the Onose River and into Karakura Town that Sanageyama realized something was wrong. It was very faint and if he did not have Shingantsu Sanageyama was positive it would have escaped his notice as well. Focusing on all the noise within one hundred feet while eliminating the sounds from the trucks, Sanageyama frowned as he tried to place the scraping sound he could just barely hear. While it was quite simple to figure out was what causing it, sharp bits of steel scrapping along the asphalt surface of the road, the actual source eluded him until everything came to him on one sudden burst of inspiration.

"Stop the convoy!"

Sanageyama's warning came a moment too late as multiple lines of spike strips, covering the entire surface of the bridge, were rapidly pulled taunt by more than a dozen students of Karakura High School. As the driver of the truck he was standing on ran over the spike strips and abruptly lost control of the vehicle, Sanageyama leapt into the air moments before the truck behind him also lost control and flipped onto its side. Within seconds of the initial impact

every single vehicle belonging to the Athletic Brigade was thrown out of commission before even reaching Karakura Town.

"Damn it."

Flipping through the air and landing deftly on the ground, Sanageyama cursed as he watched his entire brigade screech to a halt before they even stepped foot on Karakura Town's soil. As pissed off and annoyed as he was at the situation he could not help but give Karakura Town credit. It was well known that Honnouji Academy had one of the largest student bodies in all of Japan with only the academies of major cities like Osaka being able to fight them man for man. Karakura High School had a total population of about a fifth of Honnouji Academy's so it would make sense they would fight not with strength and power but with subterfuge and espionage.

"The first move is yours, but don't think it means you won," Sanageyama muttered as he sensed the members of the Athletic Brigade pull themselves out of the convoy's wreckage. It would be several minutes at the least before they were ready to proceed forward, which was not something Sanageyama was looking forward to doing. Their Anti-Karakura Combat-Spec Goku Uniforms may afford them superhuman powers but they alone would not be enough to guarantee them safe passage across the rest of the bridge. If his troops tried to run across right now Sanageyama knew it would be like walking into a death trap. Clenching the shinai tightly enough that his knuckles turned white, Sanageyama stepped forward to deal with the threat himself.

"So it's an ambush, is it?" Sanageyama cocked his head slightly to the side as he felt several people surrounding him. He hadn't heard nor felt any of the Athletic Brigade approach him from the wreckage of the convoy so by deduction the people surrounding him must be students of Karakura High School. Swinging his shinai through the air and allowing a savage grin to adorn his face, Sanageyama rushed at the closest opponent and shouted, "But none of you are anywhere close to being strong enough to stop me!"

Sanageyama skidded to a stop in front of his first opponent while swinging his shinai through the air towards her face. Even though she managed to quickly cross her arms in front of her face to cushion the blow, she was completely unprepared for the raw strength behind it and was sent tumbling through the air. Without even waiting for the sound of his first opponent striking the metal support of the bridge, Sanageyama was already on the move. Wasting not a single shred of energy as he heard the muffled steps of his next opponent rushing towards him, Sanageyama dodged around her well-timed blow to his kidney before attempting to counter the attack with a heavy strike to the back of her neck.

When the Athletic Brigade Leader felt his target somehow manage to twist away from his strike, he barely had a moment's rest before he heard her pivot on the ground in order to slam her elbow into his stomach. Awkwardly bringing his shinai in front of his body, Sanageyama managed to block the attack with a great deal of effort but found himself forced back by the sheer power behind it. Growling in annoyance as he felt his opponents covering each of their blind spots and weaknesses, Sanageyama let out an involuntary gasp when he felt his feet swept out from beneath him. He cursed himself for allowing his Shingantsu to focus exclusive on the opponents he was fighting. He should have sensed another, hidden, opponent waiting in the wings for an opportunity to strike.

*" They're too good to be street fighters."*

Sanageyama shifted his body in midair while planting his shinai against the road for balance. Waiting for his new opponent's attack to sail harmlessly inches beneath him, Sanageyama spun around and slammed both of his heels into the small of her back. Even as her body crashed into the ground with a resounding impact, Sanageyama was already using her as a springboard to avoid the combined assault from two of his other opponents. Leaning back as he felt the air in front of his face shift menacingly, courtesy of one of the girl's fists, Sanageyama decided to stop fooling around. While he would have liked to continue fighting such experienced enemies

Lady Satsuki had given him a task. Flipping through the air to avoid a low blow from one of his opponents, Sanageyama swung his shinai at her vulnerable forearm while shouting, "KOTE!"

Instead of the expected shattering of bone followed by a scream of pain, Sanageyama heard the wooden shinai impact against steel with a reverberating ring. Quirking an eyebrow in interest, he leapt back away from his opponents and with his unseen eyes narrowing behind the bandanna, adjusted his grip on the shinai, *"Hidden steel armguards for additional protection against weaponry and experience with martial arts....these girls are not random students thrown together for a makeshift army."*

"Fall back!" A female voice filled with confidence and authority shouted from the Karakura Town side of the Onose River.

Sanageyama stood tensely as his opponents retreated across the bridge while making sure to gather their fallen comrade. Resting his shinai on his shoulder and grunting as he massaged a cramp out of his neck, he glared heatedly across the bridge as the members of the Athletic Brigade gathered behind him, "Who are you to dare stand against Lady Satsuki's ambitions?"

"Who am I, you ask?" Tatsuki Arisawa stalked forward through the thin morning mist onto the bridge. Clad in the standard white karate gi with a confident grin on her face, Tatsuki folded her arms across her chest and watched passively as the Athletic Brigade lined up in formation in front of her. Mentally counting the opponents in front of her and eliminating any that did not pose a significant threat, Tatsuki found that there were still several, Sanageyama included, that would give her a difficult time. She may have obtained Godan in karate but the way Sanageyama moved and used his shinai indicated he was a master in the art of kendo.

"The name's Tatsuki Arisawa!" Tatsuki stomped her foot on the ground and pointed at Sanageyama. As the wind kicked up, exposing the steel armor covering her forearms, Tatsuki grinned savagely as the din in the background grew louder by the second,

"And you all can go straight to hell! I'm not going to let a single one of you cross this bridge into Karakura Town!"

The entirety of the Athletic Brigade flinched back as more than one hundred members of the Kendo, Jujutsu, Karate, Taekwondo and Judo Clubs appeared out of the morning fog behind Tatsuki. Each and every one of them was wearing the standard uniform for their respective martial art and from the glint of slightly reflective metal indicated they wore the same protective armor that stopped Sanageyama's earlier strike. It had taken both political savvy and outright threats to get all the martial arts clubs together like this but Tatsuki knew they wanted to defend their city just as much as she did. Even if that meant they had to stare down and battle against an army from Honnouji Academy, they would damn well make sure they took down as many of them as possible before falling.

"You have got to be kidding me!" Stepping out of the crowd of gathered students wearing a complete set of kendo armor sans the helmet, Mizuho Asano scoffed at the lack of style in Sanageyama's technique. Spitting on the ground in annoyance, she turned to Tatsuki and asked, "What the hell is his deal anyway? He looks like some sad excuse for a Zatoichi!"

Sanageyama tensed up at the insult. Waving his wooden shinai at Mizuho he shouted, "Just who are you to speak to me like that?"

Mizuho huffed angrily at the rude tone in Sanageyama's voice and a deranged look entered her eyes. Gripping the shinai in her hands tightly enough that the wood began to crack and strain, Mizuho grinned when the Athletic Brigade took a collectively step back as she walked forward, "I remember you, quite well, you asshole. That stuck up bitch always had one of you at her side at the Student Council President Conferences. At first I thought she was stupid for trying to conquer all of the Japanese academies but now I know she's insane. My name is Mizuho Asano, former Student Council President of Karakura High School, and the girl that going to kick your sorry ass for daring to think you know kendo!"

*" Mizuho Asano and Tatsuki Arisawa. Two of the War Potentials in the same place at the same time... this is going to be difficult. Where's Iori with my new Blade Regalia?"*

Sanageyama slammed his shinai on the ground, the wooden impact echoing through the area, as he mentally cursed his luck. He had no delusions that battling for Karakura Town would be easy without his improved Blade Regalia to assist him. He even assumed he would have to fight one or more of the War Potentials that Lady Satsuki warned him about. The one thing he could never have anticipated was fighting both Tatsuki Arisawa and Mizuho Asano at once. Sanageyama already knew how strong Tatsuki was, so he would need to be on his guard if he fought her. Mizuho Asano, on the other hand, frightened him not from her attitude or history but by the way she was standing. He could sense that she was clad in the traditional kendo uniform but what had him on edge was that her stance had no gaps or weaknesses. Such a thing could only be accomplished by someone of the fourth or fifth dan. The problem was he was only a third dan. If he fought Mizuho without his Blade Regalia he would surely lose based on skill and experience alone.

"Tatsuki Arisawa and Mizuho Asano. I generally give those who raise a hand against Lady Satsuki a chance to flee but you're too dangerous to be allowed to resist." Pointing his shinai at a scowling Mizuho, who viewed Sanageyama's words as nothing more than insane rambling barely worth her time, Sanageyama narrowed his scarred eyes, "Armed Archery Club! Armed Tennis Club! Armed Track and Field Club! Take them out with a salvo attack!"

"I thought you would never ask," Omiko Hakodate stepped forward with the other two club captains and smirked menacingly at Tatsuki. With her sharpened teeth visibly in the orange and red light of the dawn, Omiko held up her massive tennis racket as the members of the Tennis Club gathered behind her. After her defeat against Ryuko Matoi and her subsequent failure to shine in the Naturals Election, Omiko was proud to regain her rank as captain for the Karakura Raid

Trip, "You shouldn't have gotten in Lady Satsuki's way. Now take this  
- 220 Million Cannonball Serve!"

"Let's show them what happens to those that mess with our city!"  
Tatsuki shouted as she rushed forward, ducking and weaving around the spiked tennis balls aimed at her. Deflecting any projectiles that came at her way with the metal guards on her forearms, Tatsuki led the rush of martial arts clubs towards the Athletic Brigade. With her mind completely focused on the task at hand, she twisted her body around several arrows before closing the distance to Sanageyama. As she reared her fist back and focused all the energy in her muscles to taking him out, Tatsuki saw Sanageyama already moving forward to intercept her.

"This is where your futile resistance ends Tatsuki Arisawa!"  
Sanageyama shouted savagely as his shinai connected with her fist. As the two leaders struggled to overpower each other, Sanageyama grinned as the prospect of fighting someone nearly as strong as Lady Satsuki enveloped his mind.

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Nonon Jakuzure, clad in her pristine blue and gold Symphony Regalia Mark III, marched quietly through the streets as she led the Non-Athletic Brigade south across the border of Karakura Town and into the Yumisawa Sector. While she would normally be shouting orders and directions with just a hint of musical flair to her subordinates, the events simultaneously going on in the west and east had put her on edge to the point her entire convoy of students was completely silent and on guard. The surprise attack on Gamagori's troops before he even managed to reach the city was one thing but the panicked communication from a member of the Athletic Brigade just a few minutes ago indicated Sanageyama had fallen headfirst into an ambush led by Tatsuki Arisawa and Mizuho Asano, two of the War Potentials that Lady Satsuki claimed could make or break the occupation and subjugation of Karakura Town.

*" Tch, it's not like those two bitches could do anything to me,"* Nonon smirked and adjusted the unattached cuffs adorning her wrists. As the only member of the Elite Four still wearing a Three-Star Goku Uniform she was the second most powerful member of the invasion force under Lady Satsuki herself. As strong as Tatsuki and Mizuho may be, they did not have Goku Uniforms and would fall beneath the might of her cute and jaunty power.

"Entrance march! Let's play this pianissimo, everyone!" Nonon raised her baton in the air as she took not only her first step into Karakura Town but also the first one from any of Satsuki's forces.

As the Non-Athletic Brigade quietly and methodically marched into Karakura Town with their pink Goku Uniforms violently clashing with the dark and dreary landscape of the dawn's light reflecting off of the empty streets, Nonon could not help but notice how much everything was different than she expected. She had been to many places under Lady Satsuki's orders and every single one of them had their own brand of weirdness that set them apart. Even as much as she would never admit it, Honnouji Academy was strange in its own special way. Karakura Town, on the other hand, was just too normal.

Carefully walking through the empty streets of northern Karakura Town, her eyes and ears open for any sign of an ambush, Nonon looked to her right at one of the closed shops. At first glance it didn't seem to have any importance but Nonon remembered what was special about Karakura Town and realized with a hint of surprise that all the clothing on display, with labels denoting them as locally made, were free of Life Fibers. As much as she wanted to stop and take a look around, Nonon reminded herself she had a mission to fulfill. Lady Satsuki's ambitions for a world free of Life Fibers called for Karakura Town to cower beneath her vast power.

"Who is that?"

The confused question from one of the students behind her drew Nonon's attention away from the store. Squinting so her pink eyes could see through the rapidly disappearing morning fog, Nonon



blinked in confusion when she saw a random civilian dressed in the uniform of Karakura High School walking across the intersection in front of them with a small bag dangling from his elbow. Seemingly oblivious as to what was going on around him, the student was about halfway across the street when he finally noticed the Honnouji Academy student brigade.

"Hey!" Nonon may not have known who the teenager was since the morning fog made it too difficult to make out facial features, but the Karakura High School uniform he wore meant he was the enemy. Even if he had no intention of fighting her, Nonon wasn't going to let him just walk away. Pointing her baton at him and sneering, she asked, "Who the hell are you and what are you doing out here so goddamn early in the morning?"

Instead of appearing even the slightest bit nervous in the face of the entire Non-Athletic Brigade, the teen looked around in mild curiosity before sighing and pointing to the west, "I live a few blocks that way and while I know it seems like a complete surprise to see a student such as myself up so early in the morning, the truth of the matter is that I was getting some sewing supplies. My stock was running a bit low and I decided to go out and pick up a few things. The shop that I frequent allows me to come in early in the morning for the best prices. I don't remember seeing you around before. From your uniform I'm assuming you're the drum majorette of a marching band. Wouldn't it be more prudent to march in the middle of the day when people are around? Although if you are simply practicing, I suppose -"

"Just shut up already! Your rambling is giving me a headache!"

Nonon stomped her foot angrily against the ground. She was getting sick and tired of the teen's stupid rambling about stuff she didn't care about. All she wanted to know was his name and instead he just goes on and on about stuff that made her want to take a nap. Waving her baton in the air as several members of the Clay Sculpting Club stepped forward, each of whom was brandishing a kiln-dried weapon sharp enough to slice through metal and stone,

Nonon gave the teen a harsh grin as she said, "Since you're up and about so early in the morning, you're going to have the special privilege of being my hostage. Put the bag down and raise your hands into the air where I can see them! You try any funny stuff and I'll show you just how much music hurts, you four-eyed idiot!"

The teen looked down at the clay weapons pointing at his neck before slowly and deliberately holding his bag out to the side. Carefully leaning over and placing it against the ground before raising his hands into the air, the teen looked around and asked, "Do you mind if I ask you a question? If I am going to be your hostage, should you not know my name?"

While Nonon did not care about finding out his name anymore, especially after his annoying prattle, she felt that if she didn't then he would just keep getting more and more annoying. Stalking forward and placing her baton under his chin, Nonon snorted and asked, "If it will make you shut up and not talk anymore, than fine! What is your name, you stupid four-eyed idiot?"

Adjusting his glasses and giving a victorious smirk, the teen said, "I am Uryu Ishida and you, Nonon Jakuzure, fell into my trap hook, line and sinker."

As the true revelation of her supposed hostage's name hit her, Nonon was forced to flinch as the windows and façades of the buildings and shops surrounding the Non-Athletic Brigade burst outward as the Nudist Beach soldiers opened fire with Anti-Life Fiber needles and weaponry. Unbeknownst to Satsuki Kiryuin or her Elite Four the entire northern quadrant of Karakura Town had been gutted and repurposed, allowing Nudist Beach free access to the interior of homes and office buildings with the express purpose of laying down traps and pitfalls for the incoming forces. Thanks to the various sources and satellites owed by Ishida Conglomerate, which Inumuta had been unable to hack or detect, they had been able to notice the splitting of Satsuki's forces as soon as it happened, allowing the final stages of their countermeasures to be put in place.

"What the fuck? There are nudist bastards here?" Nonon growled angrily as her troops cowered and wilted under the massive assault by Nudist Beach. Sensing Uryu had long since run away in the confusion, she raised a hand to her collar as the three gold stars on her shako twinkled menacingly, "It doesn't matter if this was a trap or not, you four-eyed bastard! Do you think your nudist friends can stand against me? Three-Star Goku Uniform: Symphony Regalia!"

In a burst of light and blue stars, Nonon Jakuzure emerged in her Symphony Regalia Mark III and soared into the air above the fighting. While at first glance her new Goku Uniform superficially resembled the old Mark II Ichigo had so easily dealt with, Iori had spent hours ironing out the various flaws and weaknesses in the stitching. The two massive woofers that used to appear on either side of her shoulders were now replaced by six smaller ones that enabled her fire three times the attacks, each with the same amount of power as the Mark II's blasts. The rest of her Symphony Regalia, compared to the evolved woofers, was nearly identical to the previous model apart from minor changes to better increase its power.

Hovering in the sky over the battle raging below, the pink and white scheme of her Symphony Regalia muted in the early morning lighting, Nonon pointed at one of the buildings she knew nudists were hiding in and forced her recorder thrusters forward. As her hat began to glow with a purple light, Nonon shouted down "I hope you enjoy Beethoven's Symphony! It will be the last thing you -"

In the midst of Nonon's monologue two well-hidden grapple guns, modified with a wireless connection in order to be remotely maneuvered via a close-range controller, fired twin cables at Nonon. As one end of each cable wrapped around the diminutive member of the Elite Four, the other end was anchored deep into the ground to prevent her from simply cutting it off at the base.

"What the hell is this?" Nonon screamed as she attempted to free herself only to find the cables holding firm and tight, which should have been impossible. Life Fibers were the strongest material known

to man and could tear apart anything that came close to them. Getting annoyed at her failure to break the cables, Nonon shifted one of her free thrusters and fired a stream of notes as sharp as diamonds at one of the cables, only to be stunned when the notes bounced off without leaving a scratch.

"I'm sure inside that thick skull you are wondering why your Goku Uniform's attacks are ineffective," Nonon whipped her head around at the condescending voice and saw Tsumugu Kinagase lazily smoking a cigarette as he walked out of the shadows on the rooftop behind her. Holding the Carnifex he had borrowed from Kinue in his left hand while he pulled the cigarette out of his mouth with his right one, he let out a weary sigh before continuing, "Let me give you two pieces of important information that will help clarify things for you. The first is that the cables currently constricting your movements are made entirely of carbon nanotubes. You may think Life Fibers are the epitome of strength but carbon nanotubes have them beat in terms of both durability and tensile strength. While carbon nanotubes are expensive as hell, I do think that they are enough to hold you down. The only thing that could escape from them is a Kamui and you do not have a Kamui."

"Is that what you think?" Nonon sneered and pointed her recorder thrusters, the only thing not constricted by the cables, at Tsumugu, "Before I kill you why don't you tell me the second thing? I don't want you to die without finishing your stupid thought!"

The second..." Tsumugu flicked the cigarette onto the roof before crushing it under his boot, "... is that you should never take your eyes off an opponent."

"You call that advice, you stupid nudist? You're standing right in front of me!" Nonon shouted at Tsumugu in a mixture of sarcastic and incredulity. There was no way in hell that the man who single handedly took out three of the Non-Athletic clubs was this stupid.

Tsumugu didn't flinch under Nonon's threatening gaze as his eyes shifted subtly to her right, "When did I tell you that I was your

opponent?"

"Thank you for stalling Jakuzure for as long as you did, Tsumugu," Uryu Ishida's voice, originating from behind her, caused Nonon to turn around as best she could within her bindings. Standing on the rooftop opposite Tsumugu with a small white and blue bow held in his right hand, Uryu gave Nonon a condescending shake of his head before speaking, "But I can take it from here. You should get out the way while I prepare to finish her off."

"Prepare for what, you four-eyed idiot? That little bow of yours doesn't even contain any Life Fibers!"

In her anger at Uryu supposed threat, Nonon did not see or hear Tsumugu bolt across the rooftop before jumping off the far side and sliding down a rope to the ground. She could not have known that mere hours before Satsuki's invasion Uryu and his father had explained their powers as Quincy to the Nudist Beach operatives. At first Tsumugu was stunned by the supposedly impossible powers, especially without the use of Life Fibers, but after mentally comparing them to Orihime Inoue's abilities to spit in the face of causality by bringing Mako Mankanshoku back from the dead, Tsumugu was completely unsurprised. What were arrows made out of nothing but spiritual energy compared to raising the dead and reversing time?

"For this," Uryu narrowed his eyes as he focused the spiritual energy in his body as well the energy permeating Karakura Town into his bow. As it began to glow with a faint blue light that caused ominous shadows to dance across his face, he raised his arm at Nonon and said, "Goodbye Nonon Jakuzure. I will not kill you so that you can send my regards to Satsuki Kiryuin for her warm hospitality the past summer. Licht Regen."

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"I thought I might find you up here."

Alex Louis Armstrong, once again wearing his full uniform upon the insistence of Ryuken Ishida, walked out onto the roof of Karakura General Hospital. With the battles raging around town and the target he was specifically assigned to not yet appearing Armstrong was starting to get bored. He would have liked to talk with Ryuko about her father and Senketsu but she was off waiting for her part to play in this battle and as much as Armstrong wanted to, he had to put Nudist Beach first and foremost in his mind. Bonding and friendship could wait until after the fighting was over.

"The injured have begun to trickle in from the west and north," Ryuken looked over his shoulder as Armstrong approached him, the lit cigarette dangling from his mouth bathing his face in various shades of orange and red. Without saying a word, Ryuken turned away from Armstrong towards the north. From the outpouring of spiritual pressure his son was most likely using Licht Regen right off the bat. A most prudent move given who he was fighting but as smart and analytical his son tried to make himself appear, there were a few things Uryu could not learn except through experience. Some people might call his decision to let Uryu suffer at the hands of Nonon Jakuzure's Goku Uniform abuse but Ryuken knew exactly what he was doing. As long as Nui Harime did not show her face in town, even though she could do nothing with Isshin's Kaizo Trap in place, he was content with Uryu learning just how dangerous Life Fibers truly were.

"As much as I abhor giving undue credit and compliments, my son's plan actually had some merit to it. It seems that he's managed to inherit something from my genetics after all," Ryuken blew out a stream of smoke from his mouth as he spoke, "His ideas have managed to limit the number of injured people and as a doctor that is something that I appreciate. As a businessman, the loss of ten million dollars for medical needs is nothing in the long run. I'll just call it charity work and let the accountants sort it out later."

"Charity work you say? If I didn't know any better, I would say you are doing this pro bono," Armstrong chuckled heartedly as he stood next to Ryuken and stared out over the Karakura landscape. Already he could see smoke rising from the clashes and it saddened him that he was forced to rely on teenagers for fighting. Teenagers should be in school and having fun, not fighting in a war to save the world. Focusing on the fighting in the east drawing ever closer to the actual city, Armstrong clenched his hands and said, "It was quite the sight to see your son come up with a plan to so effectively neutralize a Three-Star Goku Uniform in such a short time. Tsumugu was quite pleased with the overall plan's success rate and asked if he could stay in contact with Uryu for future deliberations."

"What my son does is his business but as his father I will not have him drawn into a war without his consent," Ryuken answered as he removed the cigarette from his mouth before violently stubbing it out between his fingers.

"I completely agree," Armstrong stood tall next to Ryuken before chuckling, "During my years in college I dreamt of playing football professionally but my entire family for the last seven generations has given part of their lives to the service of our country. After much internal debate and consideration I decided to do the same. That was more than twenty five years ago and while I have accomplished many other things during that time, my heart has always been for the betterment of humanity. If Uryu does not want to get involved in what is most likely a life or death war, than I will not force the boy."

"Bold words but I'm afraid Uryu might not have a choice in the near future," Ryuken didn't flinch as a blue explosion lit up the northern sky. It seemed Uryu was being forced to use more and more power against his opponent, "My son is about to learn a very valuable lesson about how being a Quincy does not mean he has the answers to every one of life's problems."

Armstrong felt a cold sweat break out over his body as he was buffeted by something he could not recall ever feeling, "This feeling

must be Uryu's spiritual pressure as you called it. It is truly a unique experience."

Ryuken closed his eyes for a moment before answering, "My son may appear to be strong but he is nowhere near my level. If I truly wished to harm a single hair on his head I could do so in such a manner that Uryu could not counter it."

"If that is the case than surely taking out Ragyo Kiryuin is well within your power." Armstrong waited for Ryuken's response for nearly a minute before pressing just a little bit more, "I heard from Isshin about your battle against Nui Harime. From what he told me you were able to hold up quite spectacularly against the monstrous power of the Grand Couturier."

"Holding up against and actually winning are two entirely different concepts," Ryuken felt a flash of phantom pain in his leg as he remembered the various wounds he sustained in his clash against Nui Harime. Never before has he been so humbled in battle to the point of looking like a mere child. Upon the start of the battle he had assumed his blut would afford him ample protection against the purple Scissor Blade Nui wielded but upon the first strike easily slicing into his shoulder Ryuken realized just how strong an opponent she was.

"And yet you are still alive," Armstrong countered with a wave of his hand, "That is something that no one in Nudist Beach apart from Kinue can say."

"She wasn't trying to kill me. Isshin extracted a Life Fiber from my leg that was supposed to record what I did," Ryuken pulled out another cigarette and lit it. He didn't want to admit knowing that Ururu Tsumugiya was not only Nui's twin sister but also possessed all of the Grand Couturier's powers frightened him. One Grand Couturier was bad enough but if there were two of them running around... well, Ryuken was glad Ururu was raised by a man like Kisuke Urahara, "Quincy powers are useful for fighting but in this case they cannot be counted on."



Armstrong looked at Ryuken in confusion, "What do you mean? From the demonstration you gave earlier, it is clear that your arrows are strong enough to punch straight through reinforced steel and concrete without much effort."

"If life was that simple I would be a much happier man," Ryuken took a long drag from the cigarette as he saw a black dot hovering in the air to the east, "While it is true my powers afford me some measure of superhuman abilities and that I could take on any of Ragyo Kiryuin's Xcution members, it would be with great difficulty. I do not fully understand it but my powers have less effectiveness on higher concentrations of Life Fibers. I do not know if it is due to the process in making Goku Uniforms and the like but I cannot deny that the more Life Fibers the more resistance they possess to Quincy spiritual energy. If I were to attempt to confront Satsuki Kiryuin and her Kamui, I would need to use roughly twenty times the normal energy and ten times the concentration per Heilig Pfeil just to achieve the desired effect."

"That would make fighting the Grand Couturier and Ragyo Kiryuin impossible I take it," Armstrong was silent as he processed the information. Ryuken and Uryu's powers would be beneficial in fighting Satsuki Kiryuin's forces but that still left the problem of how to confront Revocs when the time came for it, "Is Ragyo Kiryuin truly invincible?"

"Not necessarily," Ryuken held his hand out and immediately a solid shortbow appeared within his grip. Aiming it towards the approaching black dot, which could now be seen to be a helicopter, he narrowed his eyes and added, "Isshin might not have talked about what happened, but when he and Masaki returned from Revocs I confronted her about the events that transpired. While I refuse to utter what Ragyo Kiryuin did to Isshin's son, I will gladly say that in the ensuing conflict, Masaki managed to leave several permanent scars on Ragyo's back."

"I see," Armstrong stroked his mustache as he saw Ryuken gathering spiritual energy on his bow, "Might I ask what you're

doing?"

"Just giving my foolish son and his friends a better chance of winning," Ryuken answered bluntly as he released the Heilig Pfeil at the helicopter. In less than five seconds the arrow composed of light blue spiritual energy soared through the morning sky before slamming into the helicopter's main rotor. While Ryuken could have easily made it strong enough to destroy the helicopter, and probably kill Satsuki Kiryuin in the process, that was not what he was trying to do. His intentions were to cause the aircraft to crash to the ground and limit Satsuki's ability to micromanage and command her forces.

"That should buy my son enough time to win the battle," Ryuken muttered as he ignored the sound of the helicopter crashing into the park east of the hospital. Letting his shortbow dissolve back into its constituent spiritual energy, he turned to Armstrong as he walked towards the entrance to the roof, "Well, are you coming?"

"Yes," Armstrong stared to the east for just a bit longer before turning to follow Ryuken. With most of Satsuki Kiryuin's forces tied up in battle, it was almost time for him to play his role in the conflict. Adjusting the massive gauntlets covering his hands and forearms, Armstrong's gaze intensified, "It is time I entered the battlefield. The secret techniques of hand to hand combat that have been passed down the Armstrong line for generations are about to burst out in all their glory!"

"You can do whatever you want just so long as it's not on my property," Ryuken warned before he abruptly stopped walking. There was someone in his office and the only ones capable of bypassing the wards so easily belonged on a very short list. Adjusting his tie as he allowed his shortbow to emerge within the palm of his hand once more, Ryuken took a deep breath and said, "You'll have to forgive my hasty departure but it appears I have an unscheduled appointment. It might take some time to remedy the situation so you'll need to find the exit without me."

Ryuken didn't bother to wait for Armstrong's answer as he quickly made his way down to his private office. He had vague theories how his guest managed to bypass the Quincy wards surrounding his office but Ryuken decided to hold off on assumptions until after the interrogation was finished. Whoever it was that was waiting for him, they were extremely powerful. The wards, personally designed after years of painstaking research, were crafted to prevent anyone from entering or leaving without his express and willing permission. They were even sophisticated enough to distinguish between Ryuken and someone trying to mimic or copy his appearance, memory, voice and spiritual signature.

Kicking open the door to his office and triggering the emergency wards designed to activate only if he did such an uncharacteristic thing, Ryuken leveled his shortbow at the figure standing in the shadows of his office and said, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you now."

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Satsuki Kiryuin listened to the various reports emerging from the battles raging below with a calculating look on her frowning face. Leaning over the holographic map and focusing on the symbols denoting both her own forces as well as Karakura Town's, she found herself impressed by the sheer tenacity of the defenders as well as the methodical plans they were implementing to counter Honnouji Academy's strengths and strategies. Curling her fingers inwards as she saw Jakuzure's marker abruptly stop just after entering Karakura town, she narrowed her eyes and asked, "Iori, why has Jakuzure halted her advance?"

"We've lost contact with the Intelligence Unit detachment assigned to the Non-Athletic Brigade shortly after the Nudist Beach ambush," Iori's response caused the gears in Satsuki's mind to rapidly shift directions. The main base of the nudists was supposed to be in the Kansai Region, most likely under Osaka. The notion nudists could be

in Karakura Town in such numbers as to effectively ambush more than a thousand students indicated a connection she had somehow missed. Usually in such occurrences she would lambast herself for a lack of preparations but retrieving any information about Karakura Town was notoriously difficult even for Inumuta's prodigious hacking skills.

"Simple nudists should not pose any threat to Jakuzure's Goku Uniform," Satsuki pressed a finger against the symbol for the Non-Athletic Brigade and brought up the information concerning the number of active versus unconscious students. Nearly four hundred students had already been knocked out or rendered unable to fight in less than five minutes, "Did the Intelligence Unit manage to report anything before we lost contact?"

"Yes. I'm bringing up the footage now," Iori nodded and ran his fingers along the keyboard before bringing up a silent high-definition recording of the Nudist Beach ambush on Nonon's brigade. Satsuki and Riruka both turned towards the screen as Uryu Ishida appeared in the middle of the street and said something to Jakuzure before quickly running away as the windows and walls on either side of the street exploded outwards.

"That's all you managed to get? It's completely boring and useless!" Riruka huffed with disappointment evident in her tone. There was a massive battle going on below and she was expecting something amazing or awesome to make actually hunting down and killing Ginjo much more interesting. Subconsciously patting down her Duveteux Raiment, she squinted at the screen and mentally concluded Uryu Ishida was a huge nerd. The prim and proper school uniform mixed with the fancy glasses he was wearing suggested he was weak and probably mooching off his dad's money or something. Sure Riruka remembered Lady Ragyo commenting on the intellect portrayed by Uryu but she just wasn't seeing it. What kind of man pretends to surrender before running away anyway?

Iori's amber eyes narrowed as he forced himself to refrain from sarcastically answering Riruka. She may have annoyed him

countless times since Lady Satsuki ordered him to refit her raiment with Ichigo Kurosaki's Life Fibers, but as a member of Xcution, Riruka was all but untouchable. He needed to simply put up with Riruka's childish and boorish behavior until Satsuki decided it was not worth keeping up the charade any longer.

"There is more than just that," Iori explained condescending, taking a small bit a pride in the angry look Riruka was shooting him. Pressing several keys in quick succession, his breath fogged up the orange mask covering his mouth as he decrypted the rest of the video Inumuta had just finished sending him not a minute ago, Iori continued, "Due to the speed and ferocity of the ambush by the Nudist Beach forces, the second part of the video was heavily corrupted upon arrival. I sent it to Inumuta's Intelligence Unit and they just finished cleaning up the rest of it. I'm bringing it up now, Lady Satsuki."

For a few tense seconds there was nothing but snow and static on the screen but eventually the picture began to cut back in. From the unconscious bodies of the Non-Athletic Brigade littering the street alongside nearly nude members of the appropriately named Nudist Beach, the video must have resumed recording an unknown period of time after the initial ambush. Satsuki watched as the camera, mounted on the shoulder of a student, panned upwards into the sky where Jakuzure was hovering in her Symphony Regalia Mark III.

*" Even with her short temper Jakuzure would not activate her Goku Uniform unless the odds were against her. What am I missing?"*

"Iori," Satsuki's tone cut through the tension in the air like a knife, "Pause the recording and zoom in on the building Jakuzure is facing."

Iori nodded in affirmation while his fingers raced along the keyboard as he zoomed in and enhanced the image. Standing on the rooftop in front of Jakuzure was the same man that not only infiltrated Honnouji Academy and stripped several Two-Star captains of their uniforms but also helped Lady Satsuki in dealing with Matoi when

she lost control of her Kamui, "Comparison software indicate a 99% match to the images we have on record. It is without a doubt the same man who's infiltrated Honnouji Academy. His presence explains how -"

"Hey!" Riruka shoved her way forward and pointed to the screen, "What the hell is that nudist doing?"

Satsuki was about to reprimand Riruka for interrupting Iori's explanation when she stopped as her eyes caught what the Xcution member was referring to. Leaning forward with her blue eyes focused completely on the video, Satsuki watched in confusion as Tsumugu turned around and fled after somehow managing to capture Jakuzure within some sort of trap. Even though Life Fibers, especially those within a Three-Star Goku Uniform, should be one of the strongest materials in the world Satsuki could count several that could beat Life Fibers in one or two areas. She did not know how Nudist Beach acquired a substantial amount of carbon nanotubes but they were the only things Satsuki could see being able to bind Jakuzure's movements effectively for so long.

Satisfied with apparently deducing the reasons behind both Jakuzure's reactionary release of her Goku Uniform and the well-planned and coordinated movements of the Nudist Beach forces, Satsuki opened her mouth to give Iori the order to turn it off when she saw someone she hadn't expected to see on the roof opposite from where Tsumugu was been standing not a minute ago. Narrowing her eyes, Satsuki rested her hand on Bakuzan's hilt and frowned, "Uryu Ishida. What is he doing confronting Jakuzure?"

"Does it really matter? I bet he's just going to die or something," Riruka commented offhandedly as her attention shifted away from the boring video to examine her nails, "It not like his clothes are made out of Life Fibers. He doesn't stand a chance against your shabby regalia or whatever it was you called it."

"Shabby?" Iori took great offense to Riruka's insult. Spinning around with anger on his face, he countered, "I'll have you know that I

personally designed and modified each and every Goku Uniform in Lady Satsuki's collection. I don't cut corners and I certainly don't sew shoddy and weakly stitched uniforms!"

"You really think so?" Riruka leaned forward with her hands on her hips and smirked victoriously, "My Duveteux Raiment was sewn by the Grand Couturier herself. Every single Life Fiber in my wondrous outfit is sewn with love and care while your Goku Uniforms are ugly!"

"That's enough!" Satsuki slammed Bakuzan against the floor before the argument could escalate any further. Casting her authoritative gaze back and forth between Riruka and Iori, she frowned and said, "Such a trivial argument is unimportant! If you two do not refrain yourselves I will not hesitate to intercede and put an end to the conflict through any means necessary. Do I make -"

A flash of blue light from the video, which had continued playing in the background while Riruka insulted Iori, cut Satsuki off midsentence. Without needing to be told, Iori rushed back to the console and furiously typed on the keyboard before the video automatically rewound itself twenty seconds. Not a single word passed between the three teenagers as they watched Uryu draw a bow out of the thin air and point it at Jakuzure. After speaking to the Non-Athletic Brigade leader for a few more seconds, the image of Uryu proceeded to fire hundreds, if not thousands, of glowing blue arrows out of thin air at Jakuzure right before the video cut out entirely.

"What the fuck was that?" Riruka slammed a hand against the table while pointing to the computer screen with the other, "What the hell did Uryu Ishida just do? Am I the only one that saw him seriously pull arrows out the air and fire them? I thought Karakura Town didn't have Life Fibers so how did he do that?"

"Even Life Fibers would not be able to accomplish something like that..."

Iori's cryptic words drew Satsuki's attention, "Explain."

"Where to begin..." Iori thought deeply before he turned around and typed in a command. As he brought up the design for the Archery Two-Star Goku Uniform, Iori explained, "Here is the Goku Uniform I designed for the Archery Club President. As the specifications indicate, Artemis would have been able to draw out a seemingly infinite supply of arrows while in realistic terms she would have a limit of almost two thousand arrows before the Life Fibers overheated and tore apart. Still... all of those arrows would still be physical in nature. The barest spectral analysis of Uryu Ishida's ammunition suggest his arrows are composed of pure energy that is somehow shaped and molded via unknown processes into their observed structure. I've never seen anything like it before."

Satsuki did not speak as she turned away from Iori and looked out the window of the helicopter. In the early morning light already casting the city below in its warm embrace, Satsuki could see plumes of smoke rising from the battles growing closer to the heart of the city. As much as she preferred not to, Satsuki could not get her mother's warnings out of her thoughts. Could it be that her mother already knew of Uryu Ishida's special abilities and just chose not to tell her? If her assumption about her mother already knowing her plan to kill her was correct, Satsuki easily extrapolated that her mother must have allowed her to proceed with the invasion of Karakura Town in order to weaken her. Tightening her grip on Bakuzan and clamping down control on Junketsu before it could assert any type of control, Satsuki vowed that she would defeat her mother whatever the cost might be. Ichigo might have the same goal as her, but he could never know the true depths of her depravity. He could never truly comprehend the nightmarish experiments she's conducted in the name of Life Fibers or what she did to her for so...

Satsuki shook her head to dissolve that train of thought before it could take hold. There was too many things she needed to do for her to be focusing on the past, "The power that Uryu Ishida possesses is something that none of us could have anticipated. Therefore it is my duty to correct that. Send out a message to the Elite Four, Iori. Tell them that the War Potentials might be in possession of unique



powers that potentially puts them on par with Three-star Goku Uniforms."

"Right away, Lady Satsuki," Iori moved as quickly as he could to connect to each of the Intelligence Unit detachments remaining. With Inumuta's main unit staying hidden on the outskirts of Karakura Town to prevent being taken out, it was up to him to keep every brigade and convoy connected. When he heard the static blare through the wireless connection, Iori cleared his throat and said, "Attention Honnouji Academy! This is a Priority One message from Lady Satsuki! As of now, all War Potentials are to be treated as -"

Iori stumbled and fell over as a massive impact followed by an explosion rocked the helicopter. As alarms and sirens went off, Satsuki steadied herself against the table and shouted, "What happened?"

"We've been hit by some sort of anti-aircraft weapon like I've never seen before! The fucking system didn't even see it coming until it already hit us!" Elena's panicked voice came over the loudspeaker. From the way her voice was still coming through, curses and swears included, it appeared Elena was more focused with keeping control of the helicopter than worrying about her language, "It knocked out the main rotor but I can still land this thing. Just hang on to something, Lady Satsuki, because it's going to be a rough landing!"

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"Pick up the pace! Lady Satsuki is in trouble!" Ira Gamagori's loud voice caused the students in the Disciplinary Brigade marching behind him to pick up the pace. As the southern entrance to Karakura Town drew ever closer, Gamagori scowled when he saw a massive blockade of randomly destroyed cars and other vehicles stretching across the highway.

It hadn't taken long for the Disciplinary Brigade to recover from Keigo Asano's cowardly attack. The explosives Keigo used might have appeared powerful but the blast was focused on the support structures for the highway and not Gamagori's troops, which meant they had not suffered a single casualty apart from a few broken arms and legs. When Gamagori jumped back onto the road and noticed Keigo had already vanished into the distance, he put his vengeance on the backburner so that he could report to Lady Satsuki. After finding out that the Intelligence Unit detachment assigned to his brigade had been damaged beyond repair due to the explosion and subsequent fall, Gamagori managed to push aside his fury at Keigo. Gathering every capable student left in his brigade, Gamagori ordered an impromptu bucket brigade to bring as many supplies out from the wreckage. An hour later and with his brigade back on the move to Karakura Town, Gamagori was beginning to assume everything would be fine.

That all changed when he saw something slam into Lady Satsuki's helicopter.

In front of Gamagori's eyes the heavily armored helicopter carrying Lady Satsuki was struck by some sort of glowing anti-aircraft missile. He watched in silence as the helicopter, belching smoke from the destroyed main rotor, spiraled through the air before crashing against the ground in the distance. As much as he wished to simply bull rush towards Satsuki and offer aid, Gamagori knew that she was most likely alive and relatively unharmed. The missile, or whatever it was that hit the helicopter, had only destroyed the main rotor. Any experienced pilot could technically land such a damaged aircraft providing they were close enough to the ground. So swallowing his nervousness and apologizing to Satsuki for taking his time, Gamagori broke into a sprint towards the barricade.

"A simple barricade will not stop me!"

In one massive leap Gamagori nearly managed to clear the twenty foot high barricade. Grabbing hold of one car, the rusty and old steel crumpling beneath his fingers, Gamagori flipped over onto the other

side before landing in a crouch. Standing up and taking a brief look around, he frowned when he saw someone standing in the middle of the road facing away from him. Knowing that he had no time to waste, Gamagori took a deep breath before bellowing, "Step aside this instant!"

"I'm sorry but I'm afraid I can't do that," Yasutora Sado, better known as Chad to all his friends, replied stoically. Everyone knew that Satsuki Kiryuin would not be stopped by a few explosions destroying the road. That is why Chad had spent the last few hours using his Brazo Derecha De Gigante to block the highway. He had only finished the final touches after Keigo ran by with tears in his eyes.

Pulling off his jacket before throwing it to the side, Chad massaged his wrists as he made his way toward Gamagori. He had seen some tall people in his life, that espada he fought in Hueco Mundo briefly came to mind, but Chad was not about to let that intimidate him, "I do not like fighting. Is there any way I can simply convince you to walk away?"

"I am Lady Satsuki's impenetrable shield! I will not flee from battle!" Gamagori sized up Chad as the two respective right-hand men approached one another. From years of disciplinary work, both under and before meeting Lady Satsuki, Gamagori could instantly determine that Chad was extremely strong and yet his opponent's words indicated a reluctance to fight. It was rare for Gamagori to come across someone with so much physical strength who also possessed an aversion to using it. Such a man could be dealt with using respect.

Walking up to Chad until he was standing barely a foot away from him, Gamagori looked down at his opponent and said, "Unlike Keigo Asano you seem to possess honor and control. It would be rude of me to fight you without first knowing your name."

Chad was pensive a moment before responding, "... it's Yasutora Sado but my friends call me Chad."

Gamagori's eyes narrowed as he recognized the name as belonging to another one of Karakura Town's War Potentials. Folding his massive arms across his chest and staring into Chad's eyes, Gamagori took a deep breath before speaking, "Lady Satsuki has declared all Karakura Town War Potentials to be enemies of Honnouji Academy and thus it is my obligation to capture you. However the way you hold yourself up and the inflections behind your words signifies that you are neither a delinquent nor someone that would fight simply to gain power or glory. Therefore, with the Disciplinary Brigade currently preoccupied with trying to scale the fortifications behind me, I will give you a single chance to run away. I will not pursue you and neither will I inform Lady Satsuki that you were here."

"I can't," Chad shook his head before looking back at Karakura Town. He hated unprovoked fighting but the people living in Karakura Town were counting on him and Chad was determined not to let them down, "To be perfectly honest, I don't understand why Honnouji Academy is attacking Karakura Town and I'm especially confused how Life Fibers fit into this. It's like something out of one of those old science fiction movies. But one thing I do understand is that Ichigo would give his life to protect this city from anyone trying to destroy it and therefore I will do the same. I vowed to cover Ichigo's back and therefore I will fight you to protect it as well."

Chad's words reverberated inside Gamagori's head and for a brief instance the Disciplinary Committee Chair was convinced he was looking at another version of himself. Quickly shaking his head to dissuade the thought from taking route and spreading, Gamagori angrily frowned at Chad, "I assumed you would be a man able to understand when you could not win. Standing up for one's friends in the interest of protecting them is a most admirable quality but we are on either sides of the battlefield! I will not allow Lady Satsuki's ambitions and dreams to die! As her impenetrable shield it is my duty to not only protect her, but to also remove obstacles from her path!"

Gamagori sped toward Chad with the sole goal of removing the teen from his path and clearing the way to Karakura Town. Usually his large and imposing size would intimidate his opponents into cowering, but Chad was nearly the same size and thus wasn't all that surprise. Bolstering his strength by reminding himself that Lady Satsuki could not only be in trouble but also possibly hurt, Gamagori rushed forward with a cross punch, intent on taking Chad out in a single punch. Without his Shackle Regalia, Gamagori was forced to fall back on the skills he learned from his father before his parents divorced on angry terms. While Gamagori greatly disliked his father, he would be the first to admit the man could throw a punch.

"My strength is an extension of Lady Satsuki's will!" Gamagori shouted passionately as he closed the distance to Chad, "Those that try to stand in her way will be thrown aside like the garbage they are!"

Grunting as he drew his arm back, Chad waited until Gamagori was nearly upon him before making his first move. Ducking under the surprising fast cross from Gamagori as the larger teen's fist passed dangerously close to his face, Chad clenched his left hand into a fist before countering with an uppercut to Gamagori's chin that forced the Disciplinary Committee Chair to briefly leave the ground. Chad watched as Gamagori slowly flew through the air and was shocked when his opponent managed to land back on his feet without much effort before countering with a kick to the solar plexus that forced the air out of Chad's lungs and sent him skidding several feet back along the road.

"That was a brilliant counter," Gamagori admitted as he wiped a small trail of blood from his lip, "But you seem surprised that I was able to endure your blow. With Lady Satsuki potentially in trouble, my strength and stamina have doubled. Did you expect such a weak attack to overcome my determination and stamina?"

"Yeah," Chad stood up tall as the brief pain in his abdomen abated. Gamagori had a powerful kick, that was certain, but it was nothing compared to what an arrancar can do. Raising his arms into the

standard boxing stance, learned over the past year to help him better control his strength and powers, Chad stared down his opponent and said, "But apparently I was mistaken. I may dislike violence but allowing you to pass would only lead to innocent people getting hurt. I will stop you right here and now, Ira Gamagori. I swear on my abuelo's honor that I will not let anyone get hurt when I have the strength to save them."

"I see that you are unwilling to open your eyes to the truth of the matter," Gamagori shook his head sadly as the barricade behind him exploded in a shower of burning metal and smoke. As the Disciplinary Brigade gathered behind him, Gamagori shouted, "Your dedication to Ichigo Kurosaki is but a gust of wind compared to the hurricane that is my loyalty to Lady Satsuki! Yasutora Sado, your insurrection against Lady Satsuki and Honnouji Academy ends here!"

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## **Kamui Tales #21- The Kurosaki Family Reunion**

"This is just great!" Isshin Kurosaki leaned back on the grass and stared up into the blue summer sky, "Good food, a beautiful day and my son hasn't got into a fight in over a week. This is truly the perfect day to host a family reunion!"

Sitting at the nearby picnic table along with his sisters, Ichigo huffed in annoyance at his dad's stupidity. It wasn't that he had a problem with having a picnic. On the contrary, he was surprised that his dad actually managed to put it together without anyone winding up in the hospital like last time. The issue he was having was that there couldn't be a family reunion if the only people who showed up were the four of them.

"Does dad even know what a reunion actually is?" Karin mumbled as she watched Isshin leap to his feet as the grill began emitting smoke.

Ignoring the smell of slightly burnt hamburgers in the air, she looked past Yuzu, who was playing with a dressed up Kon, and blinked in confusion, "Hey, what is Ururu doing here?"

"Good afternoon, Ichigo!"

The sudden appearance of Nui Harime in the seat right next to him, compounded with her surprise greeting, caused Ichigo to instinctively leap back. Unfortunately for him he had forgotten that he was sitting down and as his feet clipped the bottom of his chair, he fell to the ground in an undignified mess. Staring up at the Grand Couturier, who still had that perpetual smile on her face, Ichigo scowled, "What the hell are you doing here? My dad's going to kick your ass."

"Hmm..." Nui thought about Ichigo's threat with a childish expression on her face. Closing her eyes and sticking her tongue, she answered, "Nope! I was invited for the family reunion, silly!"

Ichigo pushed himself back onto his feet and narrowed his eyes, "Just because you may call me your cousin doesn't make us family."

"Gosh, I don't know about you but it sure does!" Nui giggled and looked towards Isshin with curiosity evident in her eyes, "But it's kind of strange that you have no idea what's going on. Didn't your dad explain anything to you? He has all the answers, you know."

"Hey dad, did you know about this?" Ichigo slowly turned towards his father, who had in the span of time since Nui's arrival managed to face completely away from his son. Sensing that his dad was ignoring him, Ichigo cracked his knuckles and began to storm over to get some answers. If his dad had the answers like Nui said, then the fact he was keeping them a secret was deserving of a righteous beating. Who knew how many of his problems at Honnouji Academy could have been solved if only his dad had bothered to explain everything.

"Well, if you really want to know I suppose I can explain," Isshin gulped as he looked at the enraged expression on Ichigo's face.

Sure he could pretty much tank whatever his son threw at him but if he wanted to make it look good he would need to feel actual pain, which was something Isshin hated. Swallowing nervously after making sure the grill wasn't about to catch on fire, he began explaining, "Well, it all started about seventeen or so years ago..."

"Giving spoilers away this early in the story?" A regal voice asked rhetorically from behind Ichigo. Walking across the park towards them from a helicopter that landed in a far field were Ragyo and Satsuki Kiryuin. Giving a wide smile upon gaining their attention, Ragyo sighed in fake sorrow and shook her head, "You truly have no sense of timing, Isshin. You're supposed to explain everything only at the last minute so nobody can use the information effectively."

"That's stupid though," Isshin pouted childishly before adding, "But I'm glad you could make it. How was the traffic?"

"Hold on just a damn second!" Ichigo pointed to Ragyo and Satsuki while looking at his dad, "Why are they even here? I thought this was a family reunion."

Isshin nodded sagely, "It is, my boy. I'm glad you were paying attention to my earlier speech."

"But WHY are they here?"

"I'm afraid I don't have the time to answer that question," Isshin wrapped an arm around his son's shoulder and pointed to the table. Sitting next to Ururu and as far away from Nui as possible was Ryuko, "But the last guest just arrived. Why don't you go talk to her? I'm sure Ryuko wants to find out all about you. Isn't she like your designated love interest or something?"

The punch to his dad's nose was immensely satisfying but Ichigo still didn't have a fucking clue what was going on. Sitting down next to Ryuko and holding his head in his hands, he muttered, "This is just so damn confusing."



"You are not the only one to be confused, Ichigo," Satsuki said as she sat down on the opposite side of Ichigo. Ignoring the slight huff emanating from Ryuko, Satsuki reached for a plate and added, "When my mother informed us we were to attend your family reunion, I too asked her for the reason why. She was just as enigmatic and infuriating as your father, but perhaps not to the same level. Unfortunately the Grand Couturier was more than willing to make up the gap."

"Oh, you are such a kidder, Satsuki!" Nui giggled as she reached over and took the hot dog Ryuko was just about to take, but before she could put it on her plate Ururu snapped her fork out and recovered it. Shrugging in defeat, Nui leaned forward on her hands and smiled, "Am I like the only one that knows everything going on besides Lady Ragyo and Isshin? Gosh, it's really nerve-wracking to know the plot while everyone is stumbling about in the dark."

"I don't want to hear any of your lies, Nui Harime!" Ryuko growled before turning away. No matter how much time had passed since the Naturals Election she still could not stand looking at the Grand Couturier without feeling the urge to sink her Scissor Blade into Nui's heart.

"That's a really mean thing to say, Ryuko," Nui closed her eyes and puffed her cheeks, "You know that I never lie."

"You just leave out everything you choose to," Ichigo added.

"Yup!" Nui nodded happily, "Your dad taught me to do that. He said that if you always tell the truth you should make sure that your promises are super specific. That way you can exploit all the loopholes you want! Isn't that awesome?"

"I see..." Ichigo turned towards his father, who was enraptured in a conversation with Ragyo. Slowly standing up, his hands clenching into fists tightly enough to leave trail marks on the table, Ichigo asked, "Hey Ryuko, do you want to help me teach my dad a very valuable lesson?"

"I sure do," Ryuko nodded and stood up. She may appreciate what Isshin did for her, but if he taught Nui to be as infuriating as she was he needed to have the crap beaten out of him.

Satsuki did not bother to get up as she listened to Ryuko and Ichigo beat Ichigo's dad to within an inch of his life. While she was never a fan of mindless violence, there were some people in the world that needed to be beaten in order to learn their lessons. Unfortunately for everyone involved Satsuki had a sinking suspicion that Isshin Kurosaki would not only fail to learn a lesson from this experience, but go on to teach the Grand Couturier a few more tricks.

# The Long and Winding Road

Here is the long awaited Chapter 34. Sorry about the extra-long spacing between chapters, but I spent a few days rewriting Chapters 6 and 7 (which you should go check out and review if you have the chance). About 75% of the chapters were rewritten from scratch along with the following being done: grammatical corrections and additions, plot holes filled in, plot hints added for your convenience, new dialogue for 'Shinjiro' in Chapter 7 (seriously, go read it). Anyway, this chapter has A LOT of stuff going on in it so I really do hope you enjoy it. Watch out for that ending though... it's quite the kicker.

PS #1: Check out my tvtropes page (it's To My Death I Fight) and add/update anything you can. I enjoy the fact that you, my readers, willingly do stuff like that.

PS #2: Always looking for fanart. So PM if you're interested.

PS #3: I post updates regularly on Spacebattles and Sufficientvelocity. So if you're impatient about the next chapter, you can go there and read everything as I write it.

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## Chapter 34 - The Long and Winding Road

Kugo Ginjo, wearing clothes completely free of Life Fibers for the first time in more than fifteen years, ignored the random explosions drawing ever closer to Karakura Town. When Yoruichi explained to him that Satsuki Kiryuin was assaulting the city in order to bring Karakura High School under her control, Ginjo assumed it was only a matter of hours until Satsuki succeeded. To his surprise not only was Karakura Town resisting but was actually pushing Satsuki's

forces back. If the reports he was allowed to hear were accurate, Satsuki Kiryuin's Elite Four were being held back on the outskirts of Karakura Town.

Turning his attention to the man standing next to him, Ginjo looked away at the ground before asking, "Why did you save my life? After what I did, I thought you would have let me die. It's the least I deserve."

Standing next to Ginjo on the roof was Isshin Kurosaki, his eyes focused on the horizon as Satsuki Kiryuin continued to push forward into Karakura Town. Dressed in a pair of beige pants with a white lab coat over a blood-red buttoned-up shirt, Isshin could sense the slightest remnants of Ichigo's Life Fibers in each and every Goku Uniform from Honnouji Academy and was admittedly impressed. He didn't think Satsuki would have been able to figure out a loophole in his Anti-Life Fiber shield so quickly but she wasn't the first Kiryuin to have surprised Isshin in his life. Pursing his lips as he sensed Junketsu's Life Fibers, Isshin honestly didn't know what Satsuki was thinking when she added the Life Fibers of a hybrid into a Kamui. That was really dangerous territory Satsuki was treading on.

*"But then again, Junketsu is not the same as I remember,"* Isshin frowned as he recalled the behavior of Junketsu at Honnouji Academy. He knew something was wrong when he didn't hear the Kamui speak and quickly realized Ragyo must have done something to it in the interim.

Thinking about Ginjo's question, Isshin folded his hands in the pockets of his lab coat and turned to Ginjo, brown eyes bleeding into maroon, as he spoke, "The better question is why I saved your life when I know what you did sixteen years ago."

"I didn't know what Ragyo wanted to do!" Ginjo shouted in his defense as he roughly grabbed Isshin's shirt. Gnashing his teeth together, the guilt he felt over his actions all those years ago preventing him from looking Isshin in the eyes, Ginjo paused before continuing, "Do you think I would have done what I did if I had even

the slightest clue what Ragyo had planned? I didn't even know I was kidnapping him! Ragyo... she said you had given her permission to bring Ichigo to Revocs. I... I should have realized something was wrong."

Sixteen years ago Xcution was radically different than its present iteration. When it was founded nineteen years ago by both Isshin Shiba and Ragyo Kiryuin, its primary goal was to prevent the various corporations and governments around the world from getting their hands on Life Fibers. The true power and effects of Life Fibers were still unknown at the time and Xcution was supposed to be the front line soldiers that would make sure every single Life Fiber was kept under lock and key in Revocs. Six people composed that first generation of Xcution, headed by Rei Hououmaru, and Ginjo was one of them.

When he ran into Isshin Shiba somewhere outside Naruki City, Ginjo had thought the man would kill him without a thought. His departure from the Soul Society hadn't been the easiest. Despite years of dedication and near-death experiences that involved taking on a Vasto Lorde, Ginjo could not believe they would not give him the benefit of the doubt about a series of murders he had nothing to do with. He had given the captains and Central 46 not only a solid alibi but also witness testimonies putting him nowhere near the murders, yet they didn't so much as second guess themselves. If all that wasn't enough, the squad of Onmitsukidou that was sent to arrest him instead tried to assassinate him. It was too much of a coincidence that after Ginjo was forced to kill them to stay alive that two captains arrived to see the aftermath.

Instead of killing him, Isshin had instead patiently listened to his story and said he believed every word Ginjo told him. Promising that he would not turn Ginjo in to the Soul Society, who were still trying to keep surveillance on the former substitute shinigami despite being completely powerless, Isshin offered Ginjo a position at Revocs. At first Ginjo was immensely suspicious of Isshin's generosity but after meeting with the Ragyo Kiryuin from nineteen years ago, Ginjo had

agreed to join the newly founded Xcution. Due to still possessing enough spiritual energy to detect the spiritual pressure of people around him, Ginjo had sensed the faintest traces of spiritual energy from Life Fibers and knew something was off about them. Vowing to keep Life Fibers out of the hands of humanity, where they could do an untold amount of damage, Ginjo had thrown himself into his work for Xcution.

Then three years later things began to change.

At first it was subtle changes in the way Xcution was supposed to handle Life Fibers but eventually their orders to keep Life Fibers out of the hands of humanity were rescinded. Ragyo Kiryuin had gathered those six members of Xcution and explained that after three years of research she had finally understood the true beauty of Life Fibers. She said that Life Fibers were not inherently dangerous and could be worn in small amounts by humans without any side effects. Ginjo had been stunned into silence not only by Ragyo's announcement but Hououmaru's desire to follow Ragyo's ruling without question.

The other four members hadn't been so quiet.

Genesis Rhapsodos, member of Xcution and Ragyo Kiryuin's bodyguard, was a man who knew just how dangerous Life Fibers were. In his employment at Revocs he had nearly been killed a dozen times by experiments designed to harness the incredible power of Life Fibers. That constant exposure made him the top proponent for the utter destruction of all Life Fibers and whatever their source may be. Ginjo shoulders slumped as he remembered the fateful day Genesis gathered the other three members of Xcution to confront Ragyo about her foolish decision.

*Sixteen Years Ago*

*" Goddamn it, these bastards just keep coming!" Batou, Head of Revocs General Security as well as Interrogations, growled as he ducked down beneath the bullet-ridden metal desk he was using as*

cover. Removing the partially spent clip from his weapon, he grimaced as he pulled his last full clip off his belt. Mentally counting to three before popping back up, he shot several private soldiers and shouted, "How's the elevator coming, Olivier?"

Olivier Mira Armstrong, Head of Revocs Military Planning and Operations, gave Batou a scathing look as she continued trying to override the lockdown, "My men should be giving us a harder time. I must not have trained them hard enough. If I were leading their operation, I would have recommended suppressive fire while a secondary team snuck around back."

Flinching as a burst of gunfire sprayed over his head, Batou glanced over the side of his cover and mentally swore as he saw the soldiers doing exactly what Olivier just said. Reaching to his belt, Batou pulled the pin out of the grenade before counting to three and throwing it. As the grenade detonated with a large explosion, bathing the lobby in crimson and orange, Batou sat with his back to the desk and looked at Olivier, "Did you really have to give them fucking pointers? They are trying to kill us, you know."

"Is that insubordination I hear?" Olivier glared at Batou, who simply sighed and looked through the smoke and dust in case any more soldiers tried to attack. He had to hand it to Ragyo. She had reacted a little too quick and lethally for someone who hadn't known about Xcution's uprising. If Batou had to guess, he would think she was expecting something like this for quite some time. That would explain all the new personnel and military hardware that had arrived in the past few months.

Olivier stepped back as with one final spark of electricity the elevator sprung to life. As it descended the nearly fifty stories from Ragyo Kiryuin's office, Olivier drew her sidearm and took cover behind a nearby pillar. She wouldn't be surprised if the elevator was full of Revocs security personnel in full riot gear and high velocity rounds. It is what she would do, after all. When the elevator doors opened with a metallic ring and nothing came out, Olivier glanced over her shoulder and shouted, "Motoko! Genesis! We're all clear!"

*Motoko Kusanagi, Head of Life Fiber Search and Recovery, and Genesis Rhapsodos turned around upon hearing Olivier's announcement. Taking one last look at their prisoner, Motoko scoffed and asked Genesis, "What should we do with him?"*

*Genesis stared at Kugo Ginjo, his feet and hands bound together, before shaking his head, "Allow me to deal with him. It shouldn't take more than a minute."*

*" Alright," Motoko shouldered her submachine gun and jogged towards the elevator, "Ragyo already knows about our plan. Odds are she's waiting for us in her office."*

*" It would make sense given the opposition we're encountering," Genesis waited until Motoko was out of earshot before speaking, "Why have you not joined us in our cause? Surely you can see that Ragyo Kiryuin is no longer working to benefit humanity! There is no reason to weave Life Fibers into clothing! Why are you defending her?"*

*" It's complicated Genesis," Ginjo refused to look his friend in the eyes as he spoke, "I know what Ragyo's trying to do but I owe her too much to betray her. There has to be another way to make her see reason. She cannot be as bad as you claim -"*

*Genesis slammed his hand against the nearby wall hard enough to crack the plaster, "There's no other way! Ragyo has gone completely and utterly insane! We've prevented Life Fibers from escaping Revocs for three years now and how many times have you seen those things try to devour people? There is no reason Ragyo would want to spread Life Fibers unless that is what she's trying to do!"*

*A burst of gunfire sounded from behind them before Batou's voice rang out, "Genesis! We've got to go!"*

*Looking Ginjo in the eyes and seeing nothing but shame, Genesis sighed and turned around, "I see. You've made your decision, have you? I'll respect your wishes old friend, but you should ask yourself*



*one thing. Can you truly live with yourself working under Ragyo Kiryuin?"*

### *Present Day*

Genesis's rebellion against Ragyo Kiryuin and Ragyo, while righteous, was over in less than five minutes. None of the first generation of Xcution had ever seen Ragyo's true power granted to her by the Original Life Fiber and so they were caught completely off guard. It wasn't until the next day that Rei Hououmaru told him what happened and Ginjo wished he hadn't asked.

Batou was the first one to fall to Ragyo's overwhelming power when she effortlessly picked him up and casually threw him through the bulletproof windows of her office. As Batou fell to his apparent death, Motoko had grown enraged and peppered Ragyo's body with dozens of bullets only to witness the Life Fibers in her body nearly instantly heal the wounds shut. Motoko had been so shocked by the inhumanity of her former boss's body that she did not see Ragyo literally teleport across the room and stab her arm through her chest, nearly instantly killing Motoko.

Olivier and Genesis, the last two Xcution to remain standing and the most physically capable, had tried to team up against Ragyo and for a moment it worked. Ragyo's speed and strength were nearly god-like but her opponents were humans that trained for years in combat and lethal scenarios. Such experience enabled Olivier and Genesis to dodge Ragyo's attacks long enough for Genesis to stab his sword through her heart.

If only Ragyo had been that easy to kill.

From Rei's testimony after Ragyo's body slumped to the ground, a pool of blood growing beneath her corpse, Genesis had let out a relieved chuckle and offered Olivier the chance to take over Revocs and make the company what it should have been. Neither of them saw Ragyo's fingers twitching before she began standing up. They also did not see Ragyo draw a Life Fiber blade in the shape of a

sewing needle out of her body. Olivier, who was facing in the same general direction as Ragyo, had barely noticed the CEO's movements before she was stabbed through the shoulder and launched out the window while bleeding to death. At that point a fully healed and suitably enraged Ragyo had turned to Genesis who, as the mastermind of the failed Xcution rebellion, she had saved for last. As much as Ginjo tried to shut out the memory of the video Rei had showed him of Genesis's torture and subsequent death, he could never forget that Genesis had not screamed in pain once.

It was not even a week later Ginjo found himself standing across from Ragyo Kiryuin in her newly refurbished office. With her hands folded in front of her mouth, she thanked Ginjo for his loyalty to Revocs and went on to say that Xcution would be needing more members, specifically ones that had enough resistance to Life Fibers that they could wear them without being affected by them. While Hououmaru was busy going over the potential candidates for the second generation of Xcution, his task was to go to Karakura Town and bring Isshin Shiba's son to Revocs.

Ginjo knew of Isshin's past with Ragyo and at the time he didn't see any problem with the request. He himself had visited Karakura Town enough times that all of Isshin and Masaki's friends knew him by sight. Still, he wasn't about to just take Isshin's kid without permission, so when he asked Ragyo if it was alright she handed him a signed letter giving her permission pick Ichigo up from day care. As Ichigo's godmother and Isshin's close friend, Ragyo wanted to see Ichigo but after Genesis's potential coup she could not leave the safety of Revocs for a while.

The signatures on the letter were identical to Isshin and Masaki's, despite Ginjo's mind telling him something was wrong. Ragyo was close friends with Isshin despite the straining of their friendship over the past few months. Who was he to argue with his superior, especially one that nearly died from his friend attempting to overthrow her? As he headed into the lobby of Revocs after leaving Ragyo's office, Ginjo decided to call up Isshin to see if it was alright.

After failing to get either him or Masaki to pick up after several attempts, Ginjo swallowed his nervousness and started the short drive to Karakura Town.

Even sixteen years later Ginjo could still see the smile on the smile on Ichigo's infant face as he picked him up from daycare with the promise that he was going to take him to see 'Aunty Ragyo.'

"You weren't the only one Ragyo's fooled. I knew her better than perhaps anyone else but I still failed to see her descent into insanity," Isshin sighed as he clenched a fist. It enraged him that with all the knowledge he had about the Original Life Fiber and Ragyo's plans he couldn't so much as breathe a word of it to anyone. Instead he is forced to rely on making those around him naturally come to the conclusions about Life Fibers.

"I knew something was wrong for several years and yet I did nothing," Isshin closed his eyes and thought back on all the times he would be around Ragyo and notice a slight slip in her tone, a change of emotion that was completely unexpected or a look of fervor in her eyes. The changes didn't come all that often at first and at the time Isshin hoped it was merely a temporary side effect of what the Original Life Fiber did to them, but as time went on and Ragyo began to exhibit stranger and stranger behavior Isshin realized the woman he had known for so long was slipping away from him.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you," Ginjo clasped his hand around his necklace, the symbol for Xcution modeled in plated gold, as he pondered what he wanted to ask, "You were with Ragyo when she found the Original Life Fiber, right?"

Isshin paused and mulled over his words before answering in the most neutral way possible, "Yes. I was with her that night. Why do you wish to know?"

Ginjo opened his mouth to answer but thought twice about it. Truth be told, he didn't want to know the answer to his question. Perhaps some things were just better left unanswered in the long run. As

much as he wanted his revenge against the Soul Society for what they did to him, some of the events that he witnessed still didn't make sense in his mind. Ginjo didn't want to find out that what he saw and what actually happened were two entirely different concepts, "Never mind. Something about it was bothering me for a second. Not a single member of Xuction, past or present, has been allowed to see the Original Life Fiber. I don't think even Satsuki Kiryuin has seen it."

"Ragyo's always been secretive about that sort of thing," Isshin answered with a shrug. After years of dealing with whatever block the Original Life Fiber put in his mind, Isshin has gotten rather experienced at giving extremely vague answers. If Kisuke was here, Isshin was sure the exiled captain would be proud.

Deciding to move the conversation forward in a more positive manner, Isshin slapped Ginjo on his back and leaned forward, "You need to stop mopping around over the past! I knew for years that you were completely innocent of anything that happened to Ichigo! Ragyo admitted as much when Masaki and I confronted her in her office! If you truly wish to make up for what you did, you need to help me prevent Ragyo from finishing her plans! Risking your life against someone like the Grand Couturier is a good start but there is still much to be done."

Ginjo stared in mute shock at Isshin before he started chuckling, "You can't take anything serious, can you? You have a point though. Dwelling on the past isn't going to change anything. If I want to make up for my mistakes I need to work to make sure Ragyo doesn't succeed. That's going to be hard. She not only has Nui Harime at her beck and call, but the entirety of Xuction apart from Jackie Tristan and Tsukishima. It's going to be tough taking them down."

"Which is why I made this!"

Isshin reached into his lab coat in search of something. After several tense and awkward seconds passed and he still hadn't found it, Isshin's searching started to become more and more frantic until,

with a shout of triumph, he pulled out a plastic-wrapped package from some unseen pocket and handed it to Ginjo.

"What is this?" Ginjo gingerly grabbed the plastic parcel and turned it over in his hands. At Isshin's excited nodding, Ginjo tore open the covering and saw to his amazement an exact replica of his destroyed Cuirassé Raiment. Staring at the replica of his old raiment, Ginjo swallowed the lump in his throat and asked, "How is this possible?"

Isshin looked at Ginjo like the former shinigami had grown a second head, "What? Did you think that Ragyo was the only one that could create Life Fiber clothing? I am the same as her, after all! Just because thinking about fashion causes my skin to break out in a rash doesn't mean I can't do anything she can! I am the great Isshin Kurosaki! Even the forces of Revocs fear to earn my ire and two of the most powerful girls in the world clamor for my son's hand in marriage!"

Ginjo didn't dare encourage Isshin's childish behavior. Somehow the man that had Ragyo Kiryuin scared to attack Karakura Town could act serious one moment and the next be begging him for a couple of dollars for lunch. Rubbing his temple and turning away before he got dragged into a conversation he didn't want to have, Ginjo decided to simply push through the idiocy, "What's the point of sewing this? My Cuirassé Raiment wasn't strong enough to even wound Nui Harime in Moscow."

"What makes you think you're going to fight Nui Harime? That would be insane! There's no way you could hope to stand up to her!"

Isshin looked at Ginjo with an expression that clearly asked if he had hit his head on the way over. Simply put, it was impossible for a regalia or raiment to stand up to the Grand Couturier. Even if Nui wasn't able to instantly locate and cut the Banshi holding the uniform together, her strength was on a level far beyond human comprehension. Isshin didn't think even Ragyo knew how powerful Nui was because, simply put, Nui didn't know her own strength. The

only ones capable of fighting Nui without getting killed in the first minute or so were those fully synchronized with a Kamui and even that wasn't enough to guarantee a victory, especially with her regeneration and lack of fighting style. As much as he hated doing it, there was only one person capable of stopping Nui in her tracks - Ururu.

Ginjo looked at the raiment in his hands, "Then why would you make this for me?"

Coughing into his hand before giving his best impression of a haughty and mocking laugh, Isshin allowed the barest trace of rainbow light to shine out from his hair, "As much as Armstrong would have loved to have you in Nudist Beach, the truth of the matter is you would be much more efficient wearing a Life Fiber uniform. Your innate resistance to the effects of Life Fibers means you can wear something that contains fifty percent Life Fibers and be perfectly fine. Even if you can't face Nui in battle without getting your ass kicked, there are still quite a few members of Xcution to deal with."

As Isshin's brown eyes bled away into familiar maroon, Ginjo realized just why Ragyo was scared of Isshin. Looking away over Karakura Town, where the early morning sun was beginning to force the shadows of the night back into hiding, Ginjo ran a hand through his hair and let out a huff before asking, "I thought you were terrible with fashion, Isshin. How did you make something like this with your own hands? I bet it's going to fall apart the minute I wear it. Or maybe it'll explode when I try to activate it."

"There's a big difference between picking out dresses and making something useful for battle!" Isshin snapped angrily. Folding his arms and quickly reining in his power before someone unwanted sensed it, he scratched at his chin and said, "While it is true my ability to follow fashion trends is probably too low to judge, I am more than capable of creating raiment. However, unlike the one Ragyo gave you, the one in your hands will not subtly influence your thought processes."

Ginjo's eyes snapped open at the revelation, "What?"

Isshin rubbed the back of his neck and turned his head away, "I'm not surprised Ragyo didn't tell you. The fact of the matter is anything above a forty percent Life Fiber weave is impossible for a human to make. While I'm sure Satsuki's little couturier has tried time and time again to create something like your raiment, he undoubtedly ran into the problem of his volunteers going berserk. There is a key component in making raiment and Kamui that Ragyo has purposely hidden - Life Fibers from a hybrid."

For a moment Ginjo could hear nothing but the sound of his own beating heart racing in his chest. If what Isshin said was the truth, then the subtle thoughts he had over the years of how Ragyo was correct in her actions were actually being caused by his Cuirassé Raiment. Swallowing nervously as his mouth dried up, Ginjo said, "That explains a lot. Most members of Xcution start out fairly normal but after about a year they become fanatically loyal to Ragyo. Hell, the only reason I'm not like them is because I've seen firsthand what she's capable of doing."

"There's something else you should know if you're going to help stop Ragyo," Isshin hummed thoughtfully to himself before continuing, "Through a process I cannot begin to explain to you, I have woven the Life Fibers of another hybrid into your new raiment. I've checked over the stitching and I can guarantee you fully that the Life Fibers will not influence your thoughts in any way, shape or form. That should make fighting Ragyo and her forces a lot easier."

A wave of relief passed through Ginjo, "So is this still my Cuirassé Raiment or have you changed things up?"

"Well, when you put it that way..." Isshin looked away in embarrassment as he recalled the French lessons Ragyo made him take. He wasn't the only one. Masaki had been dragged along as well but she took to the language like a fish in water while he was left drowning on dry land, "Ragyo force fed me French! I don't know why she made me learn it but she claimed it was the language of love or

something! As for the name... hmm... how about we call it the Sauvegarde Raiment? It means safeguard in French."

"Sauvegarde, you say?" Ginjo didn't hesitate before he began changing into his new raiment, much to Isshin's horror. As he finished putting it on, comforted by the missing Xcution and Revocs logos, Ginjo turned and asked, "I suppose you want me to go help repel Satsuki Kiryuin's invasion?"

"Nah!" Isshin exclaimed childishly as a burst of spiritual pressure emerged from the east, "Ichigo's friends should be more than capable of forcing Satsuki back. Even though her couturier will probably manage to deliver them their new regalia, Ichigo's friends should be strong enough to counteract them. The main issue is Satsuki Kiryuin and the member of Xcution that arrived alongside her."

Ginjo laughed at the irony of the situation, "It appears Ragyo has already sent someone to kill me. It would be rude to just sit back and let them come to us. They are our guest. I should go greet them properly."

Before he could leap off the roof towards the park where Satsuki's helicopter crashed, Ginjo found Isshin's hand gripping his arm, "You should go but I would prefer if you wait until after Ryuko spoke with Satsuki. There is a lot of unfinished business between the two of them, more than you could imagine, and I would like that to be dealt with. The minute it looks like Ryuko and Satsuki are going to start fighting, that's when you can introduce yourself."

"Understood," Ginjo nodded but stopped a second time and asked, "Hey Isshin, where's Ichigo?"

Isshin had a frown on his face, "Hell if I know. All I care about is whether or not he's helping Satsuki. If he is, I'm going to give him the grounding of a lifetime."

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In the hour or so since the Non-Athletic Brigade was confronted by the entrenched Nudist Beach forces, Uryu Ishida had been forced into a running battle against Nonon Jakuzure and her Symphony Regalia Mark III. After his initial attempt to end the fight with Licht Regen unexpectedly failed to do anything other than pissing Nonon off, Uryu had quickly run away until he could figure out a reason why his attack failed.

Sprinting across the rooftops of the Kitakawase Sector, Uryu was quite mindful of the fact Nonon was closing in on him by the second. Her speed and reflexes made attempting to fight her in the air extremely dangerous. The blood running down his right arm from where one of her musical notes pierced his shoulder was proof enough that despite her mannerisms and behavior, Nonon Jakuzure was a highly dangerous opponent. Skidding around a corner, his hand grabbing the handle of the building's emergency rooftop exit for balance, Uryu raced forward and leapt over an air conditioning unit just as Nonon rocketed past him. Twisting around in midair and aiming his bow at one of Nonon's woofers, Uryu released several powerful *heilig pfeil* but grimaced when they accomplished nothing more than causing Nonon to know his exact location.

*" My heilig pfeil's are still ineffective even after I doubled their power,"* Uryu cursed when he saw Nonon smirking confidently as she turned around to face him. With nary a scratch on her Symphony Regalia, she retaliated against his sneak attack with a salvo of weaponized musical notes sharp enough to not only pierce through the roof around him but also penetrate several floors downwards. As the rooftop he was standing on became unstable under the onslaught and began to collapse in a shower of dust and debris, Uryu waited until he was obscured from Nonon's sight before using *hirenkyaku* to vanish and reappear on the next building over.

*" Is her power greater than my own?"* Uryu ducked behind an outcropping of pipes and machinery as he watched Nonon look for

his corpse in the debris. Ignoring the angry curses that spewed from her mouth when she failed to find his body, Uryu looked down at his bloody arm and clenched his fist, *"No, that's impossible. In our initial confrontation I managed to get an accurate sense of Jakuzure's full power. It's roughly the same as my own, which means my attacks should be having some sort of effect. Yet she doesn't have a single scratch from my heilig pfeil's. What am I missing?"*

Nonon Jakuzure, unaware of Uryu's thoughts, hovered around in the air over the destroyed building with a grimace of annoyance on her face. Even though Lady Satsuki had given her Elite Four permission for collateral damage, as long as it was contained, Nonon hadn't meant to destroy the building. She was just really pissed off at Uryu constantly ambushing her and firing those weak arrows before rolling back into cover. Over an hour they had fought and Nonon had yet to get more than a single blow against Uryu. Upon noticing that Uryu wasn't in the debris of the building she just destroyed, Nonon flew up into the air and looked around.

"Where are you hiding, you four-eyed bastard?"

Holding a hand to her forehead and squinting, Nonon didn't see any trace of Uryu. Far to the east she could easily tell where the Non-Athletic Brigade was fighting the nudists from the columns of smoke rising into the air. Were the nudists entrenched in Karakura Town really this strong? The Anti-Karakura Goku Uniforms should have more than powerful enough to deal with a few nudists. Either Lady Satsuki underestimated the power of Nudist Beach, which was blasphemous to Nonon's mind, or they were wrong about the location of Nudist Beach's headquarters.

"Don't tell me he ran away?" Nonon gnashed her teeth as the supposed cowardice of her opponent. While topping the list of people whose asses she really wanted to kick was Strawberry, Uryu Ishida was a very close second. It wasn't enough that he was somehow fast enough to avoid attacks from her Symphony Regalia Mark III, but he did it in such a condescending way that Nonon was sure he was mocking her.

A flash of movement on the rooftops below immediately caught her eye and Nonon was instantly on the offensive. Aiming both her woofers and clarinet thrusters at the sprinting Uryu, as the energy within the music-based weaponry beginning glowing with a bright pink light Nonon laughed victorious and shouted, "I'd like to see you try to dodge this! Symphony Regalia: Vivacissimo Assault!"

Uryu looked over his shoulder at the incoming medley of musical notes and heart-shaped beams and cursed his bad luck. Using hirenkyaku as rapidly as possible without severely compromising his muscles from the high speed movement, Uryu dodged and weaved around the attack while only sustaining minor cuts and wounds. As he was forced to leap over onto another building Uryu noticed Nonon's altitude had decreased, most likely to better train her attacks on his location, and decided to give his theory a shot. Jumping into the air before spinning around, Uryu gathered spiritual energy in his bow before hitting Nonon with a fully-charged Licht Regen.

*" Let's see what you do..."*

Watching carefully as his thousands of heilig pfeil slammed into Nonon's hovering form, Uryu narrowed his eyes when the sheer magnitude of arrows caused Nonon to spiral out of control into a building across the street.

*" That proves part of my hypothesis was correct. She certainly feels the force of my heilig pfeil even if they don't do any damage."* No longer threatened by Nonon's Vivacissimo Assault, Uryu skidded to a quick stop and stared at the rising cloud of dust from where Nonon had crashed. Several things weren't adding up about her peculiar resistance to his attacks. If she possessed a defensive ability like an arrancar's hierro or a quincy's blut, than Nonon would have barely noticed the force behind his heilig pfeil. What was he missing?

Wrapping his finger around one of the Seele Schneider's hanging on his belt, Uryu stabbed the quincy weapon into the roof before leaping to the side as a heart-shaped beam of energy burst through the air.

As the sound of the attack detonating against a building behind him reverberated through the air, Uryu knew his dad was going to yell at him when the battle was over. Someone was going to have to pay for all the reconstruction and Uryu knew Ryuken well enough to realize his father would not simply write a check.

"I'm getting really sick and tired of your arrows!"

Bursting from the rubble with an enraged expression on her face, Nonon forewent trying to hit Uryu with her Symphony Regalia's armaments in lieu of something much more practical. With her clarinet and flute thrusters firing at full power, Nonon shot forward, dodging around Uryu's arrows, and slammed her armored fist into his face.

For a brief moment both combatants were frozen in time before a massive shockwave of pressure expanded out from the point of impact. Accompanied by a sonic blast that vaporized the roof he was standing on, Uryu was sent rocketing through building after building before he crashed into the middle of a road several blocks away with a loud thud. With a smirk on her face that showed just how happy she was at finally hitting Uryu, Nonon flew through the skies over Karakura Town until she was directly above Uryu.

"Well, how did you like that, you four-eyed bastard?" Nonon mockingly asked as she watched Uryu pull himself off the ground. His Karakura High School uniform was torn and bloody from her surprisingly direct attack and Uryu thought one of his ribs was broken.

*"So this is the power of a Three-Star Goku Uniform? It certainly is something special. I don't think a shinigami below a lieutenant could have hit me that hard,"* Uryu stumbled briefly as he stood up before he regained his balance. Wiping some blood trailing from his mouth onto the back of his hand, Uryu chastised himself for taking Nonon for granted. Just because she appeared to be a primarily ranged fighter did not mean she wasn't able to fight in close quarters. That punch was quite powerful and Uryu knew he would be feeling it

*tomorrow, "I may still be learning how to properly use blut but that attack tore right through it even when I maximized blut vene. Could it be related to why my heilig pfeil have little to no effect?"*

"Are you stupid or something? Why are you getting back up when I'm just going to kick your ass?" Jakuzure placed her hands on her hips and angrily watched as Uryu pushed himself back onto his feet. As she was about to yell at him once more for not knowing when to just surrender, Nonon remembered what Lady Satsuki told her Elite Four about her debates with Uryu Ishida during the previous summer.

*" How could I have forgotten? This is the guy that Lady Satsuki admitted out-debated her several times during his internship at Revocs."*

Floating backwards and away from Uryu, Nonon began charging up her woofers in preparation for the finishing strike. Vivacissimo should have been more than enough to deal with Uryu but since he managed to somehow avoid her wonderful music, she needed to increase the tempo a bit, "Since you're the Student Council President of Karakura High School, it would be quite rude to not let you go out with a bang. While I'm sure Lady Satsuki would have liked to deal with you herself, I'm sure she'll forgive me for taking the initiative! Enjoy the sounds of my sonata of death! Symphony Regalia: Prestissimo!"

"Hah... you think this is over?"

Nonon let the intense glow from inside her six woofers die down a bit, "Eh? What are you mumbling about, you four-eyed weirdo? You may have supernatural powers or something but nothing you do can even scratch my Symphony Regalia!"

"Wasn't it just a little too easy to hit me?" Uryu took off his glasses upon noticing they were cracked before throwing them away. Pulling out a spare set that he kept for just such an occasion, Uryu winced as he accidentally touched the cheek Nonon had hit, "I mean, for the

last hour I was able to dodge each and every one of your ranged attacks. Attacks, which I might add, were of a higher velocity than your most recent physical assault. Doesn't it seem odd that I was unable to avoid your straightforward attack?"

"What are you talking about? Are you making fun of me?" Nonon demanded childishly before she noticed Uryu pulling another Seele Schneider out from his belt.

"Instead of answering your questions, let me ask you one of my own." Uryu spun the Seele Schneider around his index finger before abruptly grabbing it midair with the tip of the blade pointing downward, "What does Satsuki Kiryuin hope to gain from attacking Karakura Town? It doesn't take a genius to realize a brazen assault such as this one would most likely not succeed. Is attacking Karakura Town part of her plan to assimilate all of Japan's schools or is there another, more insidious, motive to her actions?"

"You must think I'm dumb enough to tell you Lady Satsuki's dreams!" Nonon shouted as she allowed the energy in her woofers to reach a peak in preparation for her Prestissimo. Years of being Satsuki's best friend gave Nonon the experience needed to know when someone was fishing for information. Even if Uryu was likely to be vaporized by her attack, if he somehow survived and escaped with the true purpose of Satsuki's ambitions, than Nonon didn't know what she would do.

"Not at all," Uryu shrugged as he stabbed the Seele Schneider into the middle of the road and reached into the breast pocket of his school uniform. Pulling out a small silver cylinder with the Quincy symbol emblazoned on the side, Uryu tossed it into the air once before catching it in his hand, "As Satsuki Kiryuin's oldest friend, and yes she told me that herself, you most likely are the one most intimate with her mannerisms. It would make sense that you would be intelligent enough to not give away any information about her plans, whether willing or otherwise. But that was not the purpose of my asking."

Nonon's eyes watched the silver tube in Uryu's hand with apprehension, "Then why did you ask?"

"I needed you to stay within the boundary of the Quincy Zeichen," Uryu smirked as he flicked the lid off the Ginto, careful to not spill the liquid spiritual energy inside.

"Quincy what now?"

Nonon may not have had a clue what Quincy Zeichen meant but only an idiot wouldn't realize it wasn't anything good. Deciding that attacking before Uryu finished whatever it was planning was a prudent move, Nonon doubled the distance between her and Uryu while charging her thrusters to unleash her Prestissimo Assault. Since Prestissimo was the most powerful attack her Symphony Regalia Mark III possessed it would take some time and Nonon was confident that Uryu couldn't hit her with anything powerful enough to hurt her. All his other attacks hadn't even caused her to flinch in pain so whatever he was planning to do would probably be the said. Still, Nonon wasn't going to just sit back and assume the best. Even if his Quincy Zeichen or whatever didn't hurt her, it was better to err on the side of caution.

"I'm afraid that your attack will not be fast enough," Uryu stated evenly as he tilted the Ginto over and allowed the liquid held within it to fall onto the hilt of the Seele Schneider impaled in the ground at his feet. As the spiritual sword began glowing with an ominous blue light, Uryu took a single step back as the light traveled down the length of the blade before shooting off in two directions at an obtuse angle before disappearing up the sides of two buildings lining either side of the street.

Becoming aware of strange static in the air, Nonon was about to demand what Uryu did when she saw the look of utmost confidence on his face and faltered. She had seen a look like that only on Satsuki's face when she was completely certain she had won. To see that same look on Uryu unintentionally filled Nonon with the fear that whatever Uryu was trying to accomplish would actually work.

With only fifteen seconds left until her woofers could unleash Prestissimo on Uryu, Nonon grit her teeth and asked, "What did you just do?"

"Throughout our battle I noticed that my powers were having very little effect on your Symphony Regalia," Uryu watched as the lines making up the boundary of the Quincy Zeichen began intensifying and realized it would only be a few more seconds, "At first I thought you might be immune but I soon threw that notion out. The thing I realized is that the Life Fibers in your Goku Uniform afford you immense resistance to Quincy powers. Once I knew that, it was simply a matter of setting up an attack powerful enough that even if you could negate most of the damage it would still cause you a lot of pain."

"W-What's going on?" Nonon saw the ground around her trembling violently as the lines making up the outer boundary of the Quincy Zeichen extended upwards into the morning sky before a single line trailed along the ground beneath her.

"Gezielt Sprenger," Uryu calmly stated as he felt the power in Nonon's Symphony Regalia reach a crescendo. Without even blinking in surprise, he watched as the sextuple blasts shot forth from her woofers with enough force to shatter the glass along the street before screaming towards him. Right before the blasts were able to consume him, they violently and chaotically struggled against the Sprenger boundary, which distorted and bent out of shape before dissipating the blasts into nothingness.

*" That was close. If it was only a little more powerful she would have torn through the Quincy Zeichen and escaped."*

"Gezielt Sprenger can be thought of as the evolved form of Sprenger. Instead of encompassing everything inside the boundary in a massive explosion, Gezielt Sprenger focuses that intense power onto a single target marked with the Gezielt seal while leaving everything else intact and unharmed. I must thank you for hitting me.



In that brief moment of physical contact I was able to mark your body with the seal required to finish the technique."

Nonon was floored at the ease in which she was outmaneuvered in the battle by Uryu. She couldn't fathom how every single clash in her fight against Uryu was nothing but an act. It was impossible for Uryu to have planned this out from the beginning. Gnashing her teeth together and unleashing everything her Symphony Regalia had, she slammed the full force of her Goku Uniform against the Quincy Zeichen barrier. She could feel the power within the technique getting stronger by the second and there was no way in hell that she was just going to sit back and let it hit her.

"Good bye, Nonon Jakuzure," Uryu turned his back to Nonon as the five ley lines of spiritual energy met in the center of the formation. He knew that with her immense resistance to his powers, Gezielt Sprenger would not kill Nonon. It would, however, hurt very badly. That much he was confident about. As the sky behind him erupted in a pillar of blue spiritual energy and the sound of Nonon screaming filled the air, Uryu adjusted his glasses and scoffed, "I would say this has been a pleasant encounter but you destroyed my carefully selected sewing supplies. That is an unforgivable offense. You can be sure Satsuki Kiryuin will receive the bill."

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The scene outside the eastern entrance to Karakura Town could be defined by a single phrase - complete disaster.

While the opposition encountered by Uzu Sanageyama was fairly even to the Athletic Brigade in terms of overall power based on skills and numbers while the Non-Athletic Brigade was fighting a full division of Nudist Beach operatives trained to counter Goku Uniforms and those who wore them, the hundreds of unconscious members of the Disciplinary Brigade littering the highway were all

the result of attempting to rush a single opponent and utterly failing to land a single hit on him.

Yasutora Sado, more commonly known as Chad to Ichigo and his friends, stumbled back as Ira Gamagori's bare fist slammed into his cheek. With spittle and blood flying free from his mouth as his head slowly whipped backwards, Chad managed to quickly recover before he lost his balance. Planting his left foot against the ground to arrest his momentum, Chad clenched his left hand into a fist and retaliated to Gamagori's attack with a powerful uppercut to the solar plexus that had the Disciplinary Brigade Leader temporarily gasping for breath.

"You are a most worthy opponent, Yasutora Sado!" Gamagori gave Chad a respective nod as he pushed through the pain radiating out from his abdomen, "It is unfortunate that we must meet on opposite sides of the battlefield since you lost the moment you dared to stand in the way of Lady Satsuki's victory!"

Rushing forward at full speed with his fist cocked back, Gamagori tried to connect with another haymaker only for Chad to grab his hand out of midair. Grimacing as the muscles in his arm quivered from the effort of holding Gamagori's monstrous strength back, Chad thought quickly and attempted to use his free arm to deliver a jab to his opponent's exposed neck. When Chad saw Gamagori block the punch without much difficulty he mentally cursed and said, "... you are stronger than I thought."

"The same can be said of you, Yasutora Sado! Your strength reminds me of the strength Lady Satsuki wielded when she defeated me five years ago!" Gamagori boasted before rearing his head back and slamming it into Chad's forehead. As a trail of blood cascaded down his stunned opponent's face, Gamagori grabbed Chad by the front of his shirt and spun around before throwing him down the road, "Give up! You cannot possibly win against me!"

"Like I said before..." Chad waited until he finished skidding along the ground before pushing himself back onto his feet, "... you're not

going to take a single step into Karakura Town. If I fall here... I don't think I'd be able to look Ichigo in the face when I see him again."

As he slipped into a boxing stance once more while Gamagori quirked an eyebrow at his opponent's defiance, Chad was actually quite pleased with how things were turning out. He still despised fighting for anything other than protecting those you care about but it was the notion of fighting someone as equally strong as him without relying on spiritual energy or powers that caused the blood in his veins to flow. Until only a day ago the only human that Chad could remember being stronger than him was his abuelo, then he met Alex Louis Armstrong and suddenly Chad found things weren't making much sense anymore. Armstrong was entirely built of muscles and the handshake he gave Chad was stronger than his own.

*" He seemed like a really nice guy,"* Chad leaned his head to the side as Gamagori's fist passed through the space it had just been occupied. Countering with a cross that Gamagori ducked beneath, Chad leapt back to avoid Gamagori's knee from slamming into his chin, *"... but the way he always stripped off his coat and flexed his muscles was very disturbing."*

Wiping a trail of blood leaking from his mouth onto the sleeve of his yellow tracksuit, Gamagori gave Chad a pleased grin, "In my entire life I never imagined I would meet a worthy adversary other than Lady Satsuki. Unfortunately it appears that our fight will have to end."

Conscious of a slight whine in the air growing louder by the second, Chad asked, "What are -"

His question was cut off as a large wooden armoire landed in the middle of the highway directly on top of Gamagori's body. Looking up into the morning sky, Chad watched as an unmanned drone piloted by the Intelligence Unit flew around his location several times before heading somewhere to the south. As he stared at the vanishing drone into the distance, Chad became aware of a static charge filling the air. Turning his gaze back to the armoire, Chad took a tense step

back as purple and green bolts of electricity began circulating around the fixture.

Chad was forced to cover his eyes as the wooden armoire exploded outwards and littered the roads with splinters of wood and paint. Lowering his arms when it was finally safe to see again, his eyes widened behind his messy hair as he beheld the uniform Gamagori was clad in. Instead of the form-fitting yellow tracksuit identical to the rest of the Disciplinary Brigade, Gamagori now towered over him wearing a suit of full-body armor with the appearance and theme of an Egyptian mummy. The armor had a grey and white coloration with white pauldrons and gauntlets covered with menacing orange spikes. Stepping back as a spark of energy in the shape of a chain whipped across the ground surrounding Gamagori, Chad raised his arms and asked, "That is an interesting Halloween costume."

"You think my Shackle Regalia is a mere costume?" Gamagori growled as he loomed over Chad. As he took a step forward, causing the pavement beneath him to buckle and crack, Gamagori clenched his right fist as chain-like cords of electricity surrounded it, "This Three-Star Goku Uniform was personally granted to me by Lady Satsuki herself! It is my duty as Disciplinary Committee Chair to not only enforce the sacred and ironclad rules of Honnouji Academy but also punish transgressors! Feel the pain of my tough love, Yasutora Sado, and tell me if you still think this is a mere costume!"

Chad looked away at the ground as he processed what Gamagori said before asking, "So... you're saying your Shackle Regalia grants you superhuman abilities far beyond that of a normal human?"

"You are quite observant, Yasutora Sado," Gamagori helmeted head gave Chad a nod of appreciation before he took a second step forward. Looming over his smaller adversary, arcs of electricity sparking between the orange spikes on his Shackle Regalia, Gamagori's voice came across as a lot less intimidating than his appearance, "Since you are indeed a worthy and honorable adversary, I shall grant you a chance to surrender. Now that I am

wearing my new and improved Shackle Regalia, your chances of victory have fallen to zero."

The tall Mexican teen looked up at Gamagori's hidden visage without a hint of fear in his expression, "... why would I surrender to you?"

Gamagori was so taken aback by the obviously ridiculous question that he literally could not form words for a few seconds, "Why would you not surrender? Surely you can see that your strength, as great and well-used as it may be, is no match for the power of my Shackle Regalia. I could kill you with but a single attack and that is something I would prefer not to do! Now step aside, Yasutora Sado! Do not make me angry! You will not like me when I'm angry!"

"... I didn't want to have to use this. I would have preferred to settle this with my own two hands but since your Shackle Regalia grants you superhuman abilities I feel I no longer have any choice," Chad looked to the side as he rubbed his right wrist. Grimacing before spitting out a glob of bloody saliva, Chad stared into the distance as he held his right arm out and said, "Brazo Derecho de Gigante."

From Chad's knuckles a silvery liquid similar to mercury began flowing up his arm towards his shoulder. Gamagori watched behind the masked visor of his Shackle Regalia as the liquid metal morphed and shaped itself to conform around Chad's arm before nearly instantly solidifying into form-fitted black and magenta patterned armor with an extension that trailed up over his shoulder for nearly a foot.

"What... is that mysterious armor, Yasutora Sado?" Gamagori did not know what was going on but the sensors Iori and Inumuta built into his new Goku Uniform hadn't sensed any Life Fibers from the mysterious substance covering Chad's right arm.

"... it's called Brazo Derecho de Gigante," Chad replied as he flexed his right hand. Feeling the surge of spiritual energy flowing through his body upon the activation of his powers, Chad had nearly forgotten what that feeling was like. Ever since the war against Aizen

and his arrancar drew to a close with the loss of Ichigo's shinigami powers, Chad hadn't felt the need or the desire to use his powers. While he did have to deal with the occasional hollow attack over the intervening months, the hollows were of such low power that his base strength was more than enough to vanquish them.

"A Spanish themed technique..." Gamagori did not know much Spanish but since his father was an American soldier he had picked up more than a few words over his lifetime, "That means Right Arm of the Giant, am I not correct?"

"... Yes, you're absolutely right," Chad nodded as he allowed his spiritual energy to flow through his armor. As the shoulder extension split open into three segments and began glowing with a bright blue light, he slid into a fighting stance and said, "As much as it bothers me that I have to fight someone like you, I will not hold back. The power coursing through my right arm will be more than enough to stop Satsuki Kiryuin's plans."

*" Yet another human with powers that aren't derived from Life Fibers,"* Gamagori frowned behind his visor as the energy being emitted by Chad's Brazo Derecho de Gigante doubled in intensity and caused the dust and dirt surrounding him to ripple away into the air. He had heard the report about Orihime Inoue's powers from Lady Satsuki, who bore witness to the mysterious girl's ability to warp time and space, and it didn't take a leap of faith to assume Yasutora Sado's newly revealed powers might be similar in nature, *"If Yasutora Sado's abilities are as reality defying as Orihime Inoue's, then it would be prudent that I make the first move. I cannot allow him to continue gathering energy for whatever ability he plans to use."*

Raising his arms into the air, crackles of purple and green electricity emerging from between the bandage-like armor covering his body, Gamagori grabbed one of the chains of electricity and whipped it through the air, "You continue to surprise me, Yasutora Sado! It is clear to my eyes that your Brazo Derecho de Gigante is designed for

defense instead of offense, but you are neglecting one crucial concept. Sometimes the best defense is a good offense!"

Chad tensed his body and took a step back as dozens of chain-like whips of electricity arced out from Gamagori's Shackle Regalia before hovering in the air similar to that of live cables. Sensing the power welling up in his opponent's body, Chad ignored the bead of sweat dripping down his cheek and increased the spiritual energy pulsing through his Brazo Derecho de Gigante. Feeling his hair beginning to stand on end from all the electricity charging the atmosphere, Chad slid his foot back and clenched his right fist, "... your Shackle Regalia is quite impressive but tell me something, Ira Gamagori. Do you think what Satsuki Kiryuin is doing is right?"

Gamagori's massive armored fists clenched tightly in anger at Chad's audacity, "Lady Satsuki's cause is righteous in every meaning of the word! There is nothing I would not do to see her dreams and ambitions fulfilled. If that means the complete and utter subjugation of Karakura Town then so be it! Your interference in Lady Satsuki's operation ends here, Yasutora Sado! You've not only spurned my offer of leniency but had the nerve to question my motives! Prepare for your well-deserved punishment! Secret Technique: Electrical Flagellation!"

Pushing off the ground as the electrical whips and chains surrounding Gamagori suddenly and quickly shot towards him, Chad cocked his right arm back as the extension on his shoulder began blasting out blue spiritual energy. Ducking his head to the side as one whip came dangerously close to skewering his neck, Chad leapt into the air as dozens of whips attempted to converge on his location. Grimacing but saying nothing as several of the chains tore through his body, rivets of blood already staining his clothing, Chad pushed forward until he was nearly upon Gamagori. Descending through the air while the chains of electricity gathered together to stop him, Chad threw his arm forward and shouted, "El Directo!"

The spiritual technique, honed and improved by Chad's time in Hueco Mundo, faltered momentarily against the electric chains and

whips surrounding Gamagori. Grimacing as he increased the force behind El Directo, Chad watched as his arm pushed forward, shattering the chains into thousands of sparks, before slamming against the golden stars crossing Gamagori's chest with the force of a small bomb and sending him flying backwards into the destroyed remains of the Disciplinary Brigade convoy.

Watching as the convoy burst in the flames, Chad waited a moment for his opponent to reappear before lowering his arm. Grunting as he felt the muscles in his shoulder protesting, Chad had to admit that Gamagori's defenses were stronger than he anticipated. It had taken the full power of his Brazo Derecho de Gigante's basic form to break through the Disciplinary Committee Chair's impressive armor. Turning around toward Karakura Town, Chad had barely taken his first steps when a massive pillar of spiritual energy soared into the sky to the north.

"That's Uryu's spiritual energy. He might be in trouble if he's using that technique."

As much as Chad wanted to help Uryu, he knew there would be nothing he could do. Uryu told them that Sprenger was a technique meant to be used as a last resort. Whoever he was fighting must be extremely tough. Deciding to put his trust in Uryu's abilities as a Quincy to deal with whoever his opponent was, Chad was about to start running to help Tatsuki to the west when a loud and boisterous voice stopped him cold.

"That was quite the powerful attack, Yasutora Sado, but did you think that it was enough to deal with Lady Satsuki's invincible shield?"

Stalking out of the flaming wreckage of the Disciplinary Brigade, careful to avoid stepping on the unconscious and groaning students lying about, Gamagori seemed to be little worse for wear. While his Shackle Regalia was cracked and dented in places and the visor covering his face had been shattered, forcing him to tear it off in order to see, Gamagori appeared to be relatively uninjured.



Walking up to a surprised Chad, Gamagori surprisingly bowed to him, "From your expression I can tell that the technique you just used was your strongest one! Let me take the opportunity to apologize for my earlier comments, Yasutora Sado. In my hubris I did not believe someone could match a Three-Star Goku Uniform in terms of power without the use of Life Fibers. The damage you have inflicted to my Shackle Regalia has proven me wrong but I will not drag this fight on any longer! Prepare for your new punishment! Secret Technique: Shackling Punch!"

Shackling Punch was one of the new techniques Gamagori had thought of when Iori had asked if they wanted anything special about their new Goku Uniforms. After much internal debating and several trashcans full of crumpled up ideas, Gamagori had managed to come up with the brilliant idea that was Shackling Punch. The premise behind the attack was quite simple. By wrapping his fist in the electrical chains constantly created by his Shackle Regalia Gamagori could transfer them to his opponent, binding their movements while the six million volts shocked them into unconsciousness. Gamagori would rather not have used such a painful technique on Yasutora Sado but the subjugation of Karakura Town was the priority and any feelings he had would be painfully and violently suppressed.

"Feel the full force of Honnouji Academy's ironclad rules and suffer! You're meaningless rebellion against Lady Satsuki ends here, Yasutora Sado!"

There was a resounding explosion as Gamagori's fist connected with Chad's right arm before a massive outpouring of electricity lit up the surrounding area. Forced to squint due to the intensity of the lightning carving through the sky around him, Gamagori knew something was wrong. Shackling Punch was not meant to be this destructive. Something like this could only be caused by his attack hitting against something strong enough to withstand it but before Gamagori could even begin wondering what sort of defenses Chad

possessed he nearly doubled over as black and magenta fist pierced right the armor over his stomach.

"Gah!"

Gamagori gagged as Chad's fist slammed into his body. As drops of sweat flew off his body and his eyes widened in shock, Gamagori gasped as Chad easily removed his arm and took a single step back. Staggering on his feet while using all of his willpower to remain standing, Gamagori kept himself conscious by remembering the last time he had felt such focused pain and agony. Gritting his teeth as he forced his body back up, Gamagori looked down at the hole in his Shackle Regalia with shaking eyes and saw the steel armor his uncle created for him was dented and cracked.

Taking one step forward and then another, every step causing his conviction and determination to increase tenfold, Gamagori approached the smoke and dust from his Shackle Punch that was enveloping Chad and shouted, "I did not kneel to Lady Satsuki five years ago and I shall not kneel in defeat to you, Yasutora Sado. My strength comes from upholding and enforcing the ironclad rules of Honnouji Academy. Hit me with all the strength you can muster but it shall not be enough to defeat me!"

"How unfortunate..." Chad slowly walked out of the smoke and dust with a passive expression on his face, "... you're tenacity is admirable but my strength is greater than yours. It would be best if you simply surrendered so this fight could be over."

"What... did you armor change, Yasutora Sado?"

Gamagori could not understand it but somehow the armor covering Chad's right arm had shifted forms after his Shackling Punch since he could still remember the original form of the armor attempting to blow his attack. The wing-like protrusion that used to be on Chad's right shoulder was gone and in its place was a large shield that extended from the back of Chad's hand all the way up past his elbow. While the strength in Chad's new armor was enough to worry

the Disciplinary Committee Chair and make him wish another member of the Elite Four was around to back him up, it was the white and red armor now covering Chad's left arm that caused Gamagori to swallow nervously.

"How did the armor on your right arm change, Yasutora Sado?" Gamagori steadied his nerves as he pulled out the full power dwelling within his Shackle Regalia. As the bursts of electricity around his body tripled and then quadrupled in power, Gamagori's size appeared to increase as he shouted, "And you had yet another power-up in reserve... such secretive behavior is most dishonorable for an opponent of your stature!"

Chad looked at his hands, one black and the other white, before clenching them both tightly. It had been so long since he was last forced to call upon the full weight of the power dwelling within his soul that Chad nearly forgot just how much power it actually was, "... I dislike using my full power. I wanted to stop you with only my Brazo Derecho de Gigante but it seems I was wrong."

"Do you see this?" Chad held up his completely transformed right arm for Gamagori to see. With the early morning light reflecting off the shield on his arm, Chad gazed directly at Gamagori and continued, "The soul of my abuelo flows through my right arm. He taught me that true strength should be used to protect those that can't defend themselves. Therefore the true power of my right arm is not offensive... but defensive!"

" *Those words...* "

A memory flashed across Gamagori's mind of his father, a man of similar stature, looming over him while speaking similar words to what Chad just said. While his father was a career soldier from the United States and his mother a nurse, Gamagori's earliest memories were completely happy and carefree. That was why he hated his father for not only divorcing his mother out of the blue but not even giving a good excuse for doing so. However despite his intense loathing of the man Gamagori could not deny that his motivation and

desire to defend the weak and innocent from those that would flaunt their power without care began in those earliest lessons.

As purple bolts of electricity arced between the orange spikes of his Shackle Regalia, Gamagori took a moment collect his thoughts before speaking, "Those are bold and inspiring words. From your wording, am I to assume that your left arm contains your offensive power?"

"Brazo Izquierdo del Diablo," Chad said with a curt nod.

It made sense to Gamagori that Chad's left arm would have a similar name to his right arm. Letting out a groan as the power of his Shackle Regalia reached its utmost maximum, Gamagori smirked before speaking, "I can see in your eyes that you have the utmost confidence in winning, Yasutora Sado. The power you possess is truly surprising and if I were not standing in front of you I would not believe it. I may be Lady Satsuki's invincible shield but can the same not be said about you for Ichigo Kurosaki? Let us end this fight as equals! Come at me with all the power you can muster, Yasutora Sado, and let us determine whose philosophy is correct! Secret Technique: Infinite Chastisement!"

Upon Gamagori's declaration of his final technique, the electricity surrounding his body swirled upwards into his waiting hands. In a massive burst of purple and green light that caused Chad's eyes to momentarily squint, Gamagori's hands clasped tightly around the massive chakram made of electricity. Spinning it deftly around the fingers of his right hand before holding it out to the side, Gamagori stomped on the ground and shouted, "Let us end this, Yasutora Sado! Karakura Town shall be conquered by Lady Satsuki!"

Chad's entire body tensed up at the power coursing through the chakram in Gamagori's hands. He could tell just from the massive amount of electricity and power making up the chakram that Gamagori was stronger than the Privaron Espada he found in Hueco Mundo. He didn't know exactly how much stronger Gamagori was

than Gantenbainne Mosqueda but he was not going to risk falling because he held back.

*" Abuelo, please forgive me for what I am about to do."*

Gathering as much spiritual energy onto the tips of his left fingers as he could, Chad waited until he could push no more into his left arm before he clenched his fingers tightly into a fist. He instinctively knew that this next attack would be the last attack either of them made so as he sprinted forward to meet Gamagori, Chad cocked his arm back as he shouted, "La Muerte!"

For a single instant nothing happened as Chad's La Muerte connected with Gamagori's Infinite Chastisement before an eruption of energy blasted outwards in a massive explosion that blinded anyone unfortunate enough to be watching. That is, of course, except for the single person watching from the roof of a building close enough that they could see the final clash between Chad and Gamagori but still far enough away that their eyes weren't too bothered by the intense light. Watching the light die down with a stoic expression on their face, the observer turned around before disappearing into the shadows without saying a single word.

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Satsuki Kiryuin slammed the heel of her foot several times against the emergency hatch of the helicopter before with one final strike the dented and deformed door was torn off its hinges before hitting the ground with a soft echo. Gracefully jumping out of the destroyed helicopter with barely a sound escaping her lips, Satsuki brushed dust and dirt off of Junketsu, mindful of the soft rippling coursing through her Kamui. She was fortunate to know that despite Junketsu's recently increased animosity, the Kamui possessed the necessary self-preservation instincts to willingly grant her its power a split second before crashing into the ground.

Looking around Karakura Community Park, completely empty and devoid of life apart from several species of birds chirping in the nearby trees, Satsuki closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. She was quite impressed by the amount of citizens that were able to escape before her forces arrived. It took skill and coordination to evacuate a city of more than one hundred thousand people in only a few hours. Placing a hand on the hilt of her sheathed Bakuzan, Satsuki cocked her head to the side as the smoke rising from the helicopter behind her shifted, "Are you injured, Iori?"

Iori Shiro coughed harshly as he emerged from the smoke-filled helicopter, "I am fine apart from a few cuts and bruises, Lady Satsuki. It was lucky we were so close to the ground before that anti-aircraft missile hit us. Any higher and our injuries would have been much worse."

Satsuki twisted around as Soroi, helped by his nephew, climbed out of wreckage. Noticing the concerned expression on her face, Soroi gave Satsuki a reassuring smile, "I'm quite alright, Milady. Despite how bad I may look, it's nothing more than a few bruises ribs and a sprained ankle. I'll be fine after a few days of rest."

"I'll stay here and watch over my uncle," Iori helped Soroi sit down with his back to a tree before turning his attention once again to Satsuki, "I saw several of Inumuta's drones flying around a few minutes ago. He must have been able to deliver the Elite Four's new Goku Uniforms on time."

The delivery of the newly weaved and upgraded Three-Star Goku Uniforms was a key part of Satsuki's plan to subjugate and conquer Karakura Town. While her analytical mind had urged her to hold back and wait until the uniforms were finished before commencing with the operation, Satsuki knew from experience that waiting would be worse than starting the School Raid Trip ill-prepared. If her interactions with Ichigo Kurosaki and the subsequent reveal of Orihime Inoue's reality-defying powers taught her anything, it was that Karakura Town should not be underestimated. Her forces were

to hit hard and fast while the War Potentials were dealt with by the Elite Four.

Nodding in affirmation at Iori's words, Satsuki snapped her head towards Elena as a frown crossed her face. The destruction of her transportation was not part of the operation and while it luckily had not caused any fatalities, the injuries Soro and Iori sustained were unforgivable, "Contact Honnouji Academy and have them send another helicopter with several members of the Medical Club on board."

Elena flipped the small bang from over her right eye before snapping a salute, "Understood, Lady Satsuki, but it might take a while. Most of the equipment was damaged in the crash. I can fix the radio easily but I don't know how long it will take."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed, "How long?"

"Thirty minutes to an hour," Elena shrugged before she started climbing up to the cockpit. Pulling the door off with ease, she gave Satsuki a second salute before adding, "I had to do something like this during my time in the army. It's more tedious than hard. I'll contact you as soon as I get it working."

Giving a curt nod to the pilot before she disappeared into the helicopter, Satsuki didn't bother turning around as something soft hit the ground behind her, "I see that you managed to escape the crash uninjured as well."

Spread eagle on the grass with an annoyed frown on her face, Riruka Dokugamine blew a strand of magenta hair off her face and grumbled incoherently before flipping back onto her feet. Adjusting her rabbit-like hat back into place, she strutted forward and huffed, "It's a good thing my Duveteux Raiment managed to soften the landing. That could have really hurt."

"Am I to take it that the screaming I heard before the crash was simply the method of activating your raiment?" Satsuki ignored the

flustered and embarrassed look on Riruka's face as she began walking away."

Hurrying up to Satsuki, a look of frustration evident on her face, Riruka folded her hands against the nape of her neck and looked around. Karakura Town was actually pretty nice for a city but it was a shame Lady Ragyo had forbidden Xcution from entering the city. Riruka had never actually seen Isshin Shiba in person but he was powerful enough to keep Lady Ragyo at bay and that meant she couldn't let her guard down. As the two teenage girls walked past an empty playground, the swings moving in the gentle morning breeze, Riruka decided to break the silence, "Karakura Town is not that bad. I could definitely see myself living in a place like that but it's too bad we're going to have to destroy it."

Satsuki's stride did not falter as her brow creased in suspicion, "What do you mean, Dokugamine?"

Riruka blinked owlishly at the supposedly stupid question coming from Satsuki and scoffed, "What do you think I mean? I heard the same reports as you did! It's obvious that there are Nudist's here and they're putting up enough of a fight that your precious Elite Four is struggling to even get into Karakura Town. If you really want to kick their asses, you need to stop holding back and completely destroy the city and defeat every single man, woman and child."

In a flash of light accompanied by a slight burst of wind Satsuki drew Bakuzan from its scabbard and placed the razor-sharp edge against Riruka's neck. Staring into the slightly fearful member of Xcution's eyes, Satsuki leaned forward and growled, "You are here simply because my mother ordered you to guard my back. If you try to question my wisdom and intelligence one more time, or even dare to think you know more than me, you will see just how much of a difference exists between our respective strengths. Am I clear, Riruka Dokugamine?"

"Y-Yes," Riruka let out a breath in relief as Satsuki removed Bakuzan from her neck and sheathed the Life Fiber blade once more. Gritting



her teeth as she angrily watched Satsuki begin to walk away from her, Riruka placated her anger with the knowledge that Satsuki needed to remain alive for Lady Ragyo's plans to succeed. Satsuki's eventual fate would be orders of magnitude worse than anything she could do. As a menacing smirk stretched across her face, Riruka was about to catch up to Satsuki when a massive pillar of light stretched up into the sky to the north.

"What the fuck is that?" Riruka demanded as everything briefly glowed with an intense white-blue light.

As the pillar faded away, allowing the early morning sun to once again bathe the city in shades of orange and yellow, Satsuki stared north into the epicenter of the blast with a worried look on her face, "*Jakuzure...*"

Satsuki was intimately familiar with each and every attack, technique and ability used by her Goku Uniforms. If someone were to miraculously abscond with one of them or tried to use them against her, Satsuki needed to know each uniform's strengths and weaknesses. What she saw, however, was not something any of her Goku Uniforms possessed. From the location and the last correspondence with the Intelligence Unit, the perpetrator of such a massive technique could be none other than Uryu Ishida.

" *Such a technique without Life Fibers is truly stunning,*" Satsuki's mind ran at full capacity as she broke down and analyzed the structure and power of Uryu's Gezielt Sprenger. While the technique was massive in comparison to the attacks Junketsu was capable of, Satsuki could easily tell the overall power was not nearly as great. Closing her eyes and expanding her senses, Satsuki concluded that despite its appearance, Uryu's Gezielt Sprenger was no stronger than Sanageyama's Hissatsu: Isshin Zensanken. While that was a comforting thought, the fact Uryu was able to use a technique with a level of power comparable to a Three-Star Goku Uniform both worried and excited her.

*"The possibility of adversaries able to use such abilities without Life Fibers never occurred to me,"* Satsuki twisted around as a second, and almost as strong, blast occurred from the east. Realizing that Gamagori must have run into someone with similar abilities to Uryu, Satsuki chuckled, *"It is a shame that their recruitment had to be by force. If I could have recruited such powerful allies without my mother's ever-watching eye hovering over my soul my plans would have had a nearly one hundred percent chance of success."*

Perking up as a familiar presence made itself known to her, Satsuki looked off to the side as her hand drifted towards Bakuzan, "Have you come to stop me... Ryuko Matoi?"

Already clad in Senketsu's revealing, but no less powerful, armor, Ryuko walked towards Satsuki. With her heels sinking into the wet grass, Ryuko rested the red Scissor Blade on her shoulder as she looked at Satsuki and Riruka, "I'm not going to let your ambitions destroy Ichigo's hometown, Satsuki Kiryuin!"

"Ryuko Matoi?" Riruka glanced back and forth between the two Kamui wearers with a confused expression in her magenta eyes. It took her a moment to realize why that name seemed so familiar to her and when it hit her, Riruka was shocked. Ryuko Matoi was the daughter of the late Isshin Matoi, who Lady Ragyo sent the Grand Couturier to kill seven months ago for both his crimes against Revocs as well as his attempt to break the ultimate taboo and make a Kamui. Squinting due to her myopia screwing with her vision, Riruka raised a hand to her forehead and muttered, "Wait a second, I know that name. Isn't she the girl -"

Raising a hand in front of Riruka and silently ordering her to be quiet, Satsuki stared intently at Ryuko's expression. Gone was the look of fear and self-loathing that had been apparent in Ryuko's eyes in the aftermath of her rampage across Honnouji Academy due to Nui Harime's attempt to kill Mako Mankanshoku. Satsuki had seen such sights before and thus had been able to deal effectively with Ryuko's berserk state with a calm and collectiveness that only she could have. She remembered her mother's failed attempts to create

perfect Kamui over the years, each of which caused the woman to lash out at her failures more and more violently. Ryuko's inability to control her rage and anger at Nui Harime and allowing her Kamui to devour her mind and body was simply a more powerful version of what happened to her mother's misguided volunteers.

The fact Ryuko could not push the disturbing memories to the back of her mind only made Satsuki pity her all the more.

"It is quite the surprise to see you here in Karakura Town, Ryuko Matoi," Satsuki slowly and deliberately drew Bakuzan from its scabbard as she took several slow steps towards Ryuko. Running a finger over her blade, Satsuki stared into the distance where Jakuzure was undoubtedly still fighting Uryu Ishida when something strange about Ryuko's interference caused her mind to think deeply about what was missing. When it hit her, the slight narrowing of her eyes was the only indication of her worry. Turning her head just enough that she could stare into Ryuko's eyes Satsuki asked, "Where is Ichigo, Matoi?"

Ryuko didn't like the look in Satsuki's eyes and immediately it made her want to show the youngest Kiryuin what her exact opinion on the matter was. There was no reason Satsuki should be worried about Ichigo, especially since everything she promised him was a lie. Hefting her Scissor Blade off her shoulder and pointing it at Satsuki's face, she scoffed and said, "I don't see the need to tell you anything, Satsuki Kiryuin!"

The expression on Ryuko's face told Satsuki all she needed to know - Ichigo Kurosaki had never arrived at Karakura Town. The last time she had seen him was around two in the morning when he tried to sneak into Honnouji Academy and steal one of her School Raid Trip vehicles. There was no reason she should have gotten here before him, especially with the nearly three hour gap between their respective departures. Something must have happened to Ichigo and the list of who could have stalled someone with a Kamui as powerful as Mugetsu was very, very short.

"Ichigo's absence makes any resistance on your part futile, Matoi! Without the power of his Kamui to save your skin a second time, there is no chance of you winning this battle!" Satsuki shouted authoritatively as she stabbed Bakuzan into the wet grass before sweeping her arm to the side. Motioning to the pillars of smoke and fire rising in the distance, Satsuki adopted an expression of tranquil fury as she shouted, "Look around at what the fruits of your disobedience have wrought! Everything you see is because of your refusal to bow down to Honnouji Academy's rule. Every life that is lost today, innocent and guilty, falls squarely on your shoulders! What do you have to say for yourself, Ryuko Matoi?"

"What do I have to say?" Ryuko bit her lip as she mentally kept a firm grip on her rising anger. There was no way in hell she was going to let Satsuki kill innocent people. Tightly clenching the handle of her red Scissor Blade, Ryuko narrowed her eyes and shouted back, "I think you're fucking insane! Subjugating schools and academies under the threat of complete annihilation is one of the most idiotic things I've ever heard of!"

"I do not expect you to grasp the intricacies of my ambitions," Satsuki growled in return as she gently pulled Bakuzan out of the ground. Flicking the blade once through the air to remove the dirt and soil from it, Satsuki marveled at her blade before gripping it with both hands, "Someone like you whose ambitions and dreams are shallow enough to be swept away in the tide has no right to give their opinion!"

Ryuko scoffed at Satsuki's argument, "My strength is enough to make my dreams come true! Senketsu's strength as well! We will work together to stop you before you destroy Karakura Town or anywhere else! I'm sick and tired of listening to you talk about how you're so much better than the rest of us! You know what? You're not! You're just a psychopath nearly as bad as Nui Harime. No, you're worse than her! At least she doesn't hide who she truly is! I bet your mom is so proud of you right -"

"How dare you!"

Rushing across the ground with Bakuzan aimed at Ryuko's throat and a look of rage on her face, Satsuki wordlessly flipped the three blue bands on her left arm. Clad in Junketsu's released form before she was even halfway to Ryuko, Satsuki swung down Bakuzan against Ryuko's red Scissor Blade with enough force that the ground crackled and caved downwards beneath Ryuko's heels.

"The truth hurts, doesn't it?" Ryuko pushed back against Satsuki's surprising strength and with Senketsu's assistance managed to recover her balance. Slamming her forehead against Satsuki's as a pulse of power rippled outwards from where their blades clashed Ryuko growled and shouted, "Everything that's happening here is your fault! The only reason you're trying to blame Ichigo and me for what's happening to Karakura Town is because you're trying to clear your own damn conscience!"

Rearing her left arm back, Ryuko clenched her hand into a fist and slammed it against Satsuki's cheek hard enough that the shockwave of power nearly caused Riruka, who was earnestly trying to watch the fight, to fly backwards. White and blue heels skidding along the ground as she grimaced in pain from Ryuko's punch, Satsuki swiftly recovered and rushed back towards Ryuko. Snapping her leg out with the intention of connecting with Ryuko's stomach, Satsuki was surprised when Ryuko not only dodged her attack but countered by swinging her Scissor Blade horizontally through the air.

"Are you surprised that you missed?" Ryuko gave Satsuki a cocky grin as they locked blades once more, "Senketsu may not be as fast as Mugetsu but he's fast enough to deal with Junketsu! Face it, Satsuki Kiryuin! There is no way that you can beat Ichigo or me, especially when you cannot even hear your own Kamui's voice!"

As Ryuko's superior strength slowly pushed back her struggling arms, Satsuki mentally noted that she had no choice but to use Junketsu's full power. She quite vividly remembered what Ichigo told her earlier in the morning about what putting his Life Fibers into Junketsu was actually doing. If Ichigo was correct, and Satsuki had no doubt he was, then what she had to do to Junketsu was one of

the worst things she ever authorized. However despite that knowledge swirling violently in her head, Satsuki placated her conscience with the mantra that everything she did, every life she may have ruined or destroyed, was to help save the world from her mother's goals concerning Life Fibers.

If her actions led to a future where humanity survived, Satsuki was more than willing to accept the consequences of her actions.

Bringing her leg up and kicking off Ryuko's Scissor Blade, Satsuki flipped backwards through the air before landing softly on the ground. Staring intently at Ryuko, her eyes shadowed by her hair, Satsuki held Bakuzan vertically in front of her body, "You have grown stronger Matoi but your hubris will be your downfall! Witness the true power of Junketsu and despair!"

Much like when Ryuko or Ichigo first activated a new configuration, Satsuki's body was surrounded by an intense blue glow that began kicking up a small whirlwind. In a flash of light that caused Ryuko to squint and Riruka to turn her head completely away, Satsuki stepped forward and smirked confidently as she plainly stated Junketsu's new configuration, "Junketsu Zenkan!"

Unlike Senketsu or Mugetsu's battle configurations, which subtly shifted and morphed the Kamui into a more powerful state, Junketsu's transformation was much more drastic and altering. The white leggings that extended nearly to Satsuki's waist had vanished and were replaced with a pair of pleated hakama that wrapped around the top of her legs and ended right above her ankles, allowing the familiar white and blue high-heels to show through. Satsuki's arms, where Junketsu's armor had once been as form-fitting as Senketsu's apart from the protrusion extending over the back of her hands, had morphed into a slightly bulkier and intimidating force.

"Such power..." Satsuki stared at her newly armored hand with a look of barely suppressed joy. The power she could feel coursing through her body was greater than anything she could have

imagined. She knew without a doubt that the power she currently possessed was far greater than what Ichigo used against her during their ill-fated match. Even Nui Harime would be forced to take her seriously when, not if, they fought. Flicking a strand of hair off larger and curved horns emerging from her temple, Satsuki gave Ryuko a bemused smirk, "You seem nervous, Matoi. This is the true power of Junketsu..."

Ryuko, despite the look of utter shock on her face, was not fearful of the power Satsuki possessed. Zenkan had certainly increased the already formidable power of Junketsu but Ryuko was confident Senkou was more than enough to counter it. No, what was causing her to break out into a cold sweat was the look in Junketsu's eyes. Every time Ryuko had seen Junketsu's released state, the Kamui had always seemed to be completely calm and collected. Now Junketsu's eyes were bloodshot, the irises shrunken down to pinpoints, as blue capillaries spread across its eyes.

**" You sense it, don't you Ryuko?"**

"Yeah," Ryuko nodded briefly, "What's going on with her Kamui?"

When Senketsu answered, Ryuko was surprised at the amount of anger in her normally calm Kamui's voice, **"It is very faint and even I can barely sense it but it seems Satsuki Kiryuin has woven some of Ichigo's Life Fibers into Junketsu's body."**

Watching as Satsuki effortlessly swung Bakuzan through the air, cutting through several trees nearly thirty meters away, Ryuko grit her teeth, "I take it that's a bad thing?"

**" Yes, but not in the way you think. My memories are still fragmented but one thing I instinctively know is that a Kamui should never have the Life Fibers from a Life Fiber Hybrid implanted into it without its consent. Doing so will change not only a Kamui's memories but also its personality,"** Senketsu closed his one good eye for a moment as he listened to the sounds of pain coming from Junketsu. After hearing everything he needed

to, Senketsu opened his eye and Ryuko was perplexed when he sounded relieved, ***"It seems we are in luck."***

"How so?"

***" Whoever inserted the Life Fibers did a shoddy job. Junketsu is rejecting his Life Fibers with every fiber of its being. The look you see in its eyes is Junketsu's internal struggle against the power of Ichigo's Life Fibers."***

"Damn it..." Ryuko bit her lip in anger. While it was true Satsuki used Junketsu's powers to always stand in her way and generally make Ichigo and her lives a living hell, Ryuko could not find it in her heart to blame the Kamui. Much like Mugetsu and Senketsu, Junketsu probably could not do anything unless Satsuki was wearing it, "Senketsu... is there anything we can do to help Junketsu?"

***" I'm afraid not,"*** Senketsu's eye dropped in shame at his inability to help out a fellow Kamui from suffering a fate worse than death, ***"The only one that could help Junketsu is the one whose Life Fibers were used."***

"And Ichigo's not here right now," Ryuko spit on the ground and clenched her Scissor Blade with both hands. Wordlessly transforming Senketsu into his Senkou configuration, Ryuko's face was lit up as the red energy circulating through her Scissor Blade reflected off, "Damn it. Where are you Ichigo?"

"This is no time to be losing your focus, Matoi!" Satsuki sprinted across the field towards Ryuko with Bakuzan arcing through the air, a crescent of light blue energy flowing behind it. As Ryuko quickly brought up her Scissor Blade to counter Satsuki's attack, she found her caution unneeded as a loud shrilling noise followed by an arc of dark purple energy exploded along the ground in front of her.

"Sorry to interrupt your little spar, Ryuko Matoi, but it looks like you could use my help."



Stepping out of the shadows of Karakura Community Park, his two-handed zweihander Ragnarok hefted onto his shoulder, Kugo Ginjo did not take his eyes off Satsuki Kiryuin. With Junketsu already in an advanced configuration it would not take much effort for her to strike him down before he could activate his Sauvegarde Raiment. When Satsuki did not appear to make any move towards him, Ginjo turned his attention to Ryuko and gave her a friendly smirk, "Don't worry about who I am. I have no intention of getting in the way of your fight against Satsuki. Isshin Shiba sent me as backup."

Twisting her body around and pointing Bakuzan at Ginjo, Satsuki frowned as a backdrop of light appeared behind her head, "Kugo Ginjo... traitor to Xcution and betrayer of my mother's trust. You have some nerve showing your face in front of me."

As Satsuki glared at Ginjo, she was enraged at the circumstances she was currently bound within. Standing in front of her was a man with possibly the most up to date information about Revocs forces, her mother's weaknesses and the abilities of Xcution's raiment, but as long as she was with Riruka Dokugamine Satsuki could not dare ask Ginjo anything without arousing suspicion about her motives. Riruka may act like a spoiled brat without any real cares in the world but Satsuki knew her mother would not have inducted Riruka into Xcution unless she was both resistant to Life Fibers and completely lacking morals.

"You don't say," Ginjo shrugged his shoulder uncaringly before asking, "Let's just say I'm not the kind of man that would willingly work for someone like Ragyo Kiryuin and leave it at that."

"Kugo Ginjo..." Ryuko searched her memory for why that name seemed so familiar before it hit her, "Wait a second, weren't you the guy that Ichigo's dad found half-dead on the side of the road?"

"Trying to fight the Grand Couturier tends to do that," Ginjo gave a humorless chuckle while ignoring the surprised look on Ryuko's face. That battle against Nui Harime was not something Ginjo wished to remember. The number of times she stabbed him in non-vital areas

just to watch him bleed, all with a psychotic smile on her face, was going to give him nightmares for weeks if he was lucky, "Listen Ryuko, I need you to do me a favor. Take your fight against Satsuki Kiryuin as far away from here as possible."

Ryuko relaxed her body as she saw Satsuki lower her blade. While it looked like Satsuki didn't exactly trust Ginjo, that did not mean he was on her side, "How do I know you're telling the truth? Why the hell should I believe you?"

"Because I don't want you to get caught in Riruka's Duveteux Raiment," Ginjo stared intently at Riruka and took a step to the side, "I don't think even Satsuki knows what Riruka's outfit can do but trust me that unless you know exactly how to counter it even your Kamui will be at a disadvantage."

"You're a traitorous bastard, Ginjo! Why would you tell her all about my Duveteux Raiment?" Riruka spat heatedly at Ginjo before she began biting the end of her thumb. As much as she wished, and she really did wish, to simply activate her uniform and torture Ginjo to death, Riruka knew what he was wearing quite well. What was causing her no small amount of nervousness was that Ginjo's Cuirassé Raiment should have been torn to shreds by the Grand Couturier. Deciding to find out what the hell was going on, Riruka stamped her foot on the grass and pointed angrily at Ginjo, "Where the hell did you get that new uniform?"

"Are you talking about this old thing?" Ginjo looked down at his clothes in surprise, "I really shouldn't tell you anything but I suppose it is fair you know the name of the raiment that defeats you - Sauvegarde."

"I fucking hate that arrogant attitude you always have! I'm going to kill you nice and slowly!" Riruka bit her lip as fury welled up from deep inside her soul. Ginjo should have been begging for her forgiveness, not that Riruka would give it to him, but instead he was mocking her like she was a child!

"I'd like to see you try," Ginjo grabbed Ragnarok with both hands and held the large blade in front of his body, "Ryuko, you need to go now. I can easily deal with whatever Riruka can throw at me."

"Right," Ryuko nodded in appreciation at Ginjo before turning her attention to Satsuki. Briefly noticing the slightly more relaxed look in her eyes, Ryuko shouldered her Scissor Blade and turned around, "Let's take this somewhere else, Satsuki Kiryuin. I don't want you to have any more excuses for why I kicked your ass."

"The battlefield will not change the outcome of our fight, Matoi, but I will indulge your childish wish," Satsuki went to follow Ryuko but stopped before she could go too far. Turning around and giving Riruka a stern glare, she said, "I trust dealing with this man will not be a problem?"

"Heh," Riruka wiped someone from the edge of her mouth, "Lady Ragyo would not have sent me with you if she wasn't confident I could kill Ginjo. I'll catch up to you in no time."

Ginjo watched Satsuki follow Ryuko for a moment before tilting his head back towards Riruka. With a slightly bemused expression on his face, he began walking towards her, "I made many mistakes in my life but betraying Revocs and Ragyo Kiryuin is something I should have done sixteen years ago."

"Say whatever you want, Ginjo, because I'm going to fucking kill you. Nobody betrays Lady Ragyo and lives to tell about it! Xcution Uniform: Duveteux Raiment!"

Grimacing as a burst of rainbow light shot out from Riruka's body followed by five similarly colored four-pointed stars, Ginjo slid into a stance as he awaited Riruka's emergence, "Here it comes."

Taking a single step forward and pushing away the dust that encircled her body, Riruka's body was armored similarly to Jackie Tristan after the latter activated her Sanguinaire Raiment. Thick white armor covered the entirety of Riruka's arms and legs up to her

shoulders and hips while faint pink light shone out from between gaps and separations in the armor's plates. Her short black dress had transformed and morphed into a knee-length armored battle skirt with the Xcution logo seared into the spot right above her heart. Staring at Ginjo from beneath her hat, whose rabbit-like ears now constantly stood upwards, Riruka held her right arm out and immediately the protrusions on her wrist glowed brightly before a full-body battle staff appeared in her hand.

Ginjo had to admit that from Riruka bringing out her secret weapon at the beginning of the fight that she really wanted to murder him. Chuckling mirthlessly as his own outfit began to glow with a similar rainbow light Ginjo gripped Ragnarok with both hands and said, "Boy, the price of freedom sure is steep. Isshin better be paying me overtime for all this."

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His head snapping to the side as Ichigo's fist connected with his cheek, the man stumbled backwards before recovering his balance. As the warm sensation of blood trailing down from his nose became apparent, the man tilted his head around back to Ichigo and gave him an apologetic look, "I admit that your strength is far greater than what I expected... Ichigo Kurosaki."

Ichigo, slightly out of breath but otherwise uninjured, scowled at the man hunched over in front of him. He had been driving towards Karakura Town, taking one of the smaller highways to avoid being chased by Satsuki's forces, when his truck was hit by what he at first assumed was a bomb. It was only after he emerged unscathed from the wreckage already clad in Mugetsu and seriously pissed off that Ichigo realized the source of the explosion was the man standing with a bemused expression in the middle of the highway in front of him.

"I don't know who you are or why you tried to kill me," Ichigo growled as he glanced at the technique surrounding them. After confronting the man for trying to kill him, as well as demanding to know who he was, the man had raised the ornate sword in his hand and fired off several bursts of spiritual energy that quickly and effectively enveloped a large section of the highway surrounding them both. Deducing that it was a trap, Ichigo would have tried to break through the spiritual cage if the man hadn't instead tried to kill him, "But it's obvious you can't hurt me. Are you going to tell me why you attacked me or do I have to keep kicking your ass?"

Instead of answering the question the man stood up despite the many wounds covering his body he received from Ichigo's Tournesol. Wiping the blood trailing down his face onto the back of his white sleeve, the man adjusted his glasses and clapped his hands, "No, I've seen quite enough. I must apologize for my rather rude and brutish behavior earlier. It was all to see if you were indeed worthy of my cooperation and sure enough you are!"

Ichigo frowned, "What the hell are you talking about?"

The man dusted off his uniform before leaning over and picking up his hat, "You might think I'm mocking you but the truth of the matter is your techniques and abilities far outclass my own! If we had continued to fight, there would have been no way for me to win! Your Kamui is truly a magnificent thing to enable you to do so much damage to my body without sustaining wounds and injuries of your own!"

Ichigo's eyes widened imperceptibly at the man's causal mentioning of Mugetsu. Pointing Tournesol at the man, a familiar scowl already deepening on his face, Ichigo growled in irritation, "How do you know about Mugetsu? Who do you work for?"

"That's not how this game works, Mr. Kurosaki." The man gave Ichigo a mysterious smirk as he raised a finger to his lips, "All you need to know is that my organization is in opposition to what the Life Fibers have planned. If you truly wish to know more information you

must give up something of equal value. That is how it works! So let us start! I'll ask you a question and if you answer it truthfully you'll be able to ask me one in return. Understand?"

Seeing no other way of getting past this man, especially if he had something else up his sleeves, Ichigo lowered Tournesol toward the ground, "Fine."

"Splendid!" The man clapped his gloved hands together and shouted, "Let us begin then! There are a few ground rules, of course. You cannot ask me my name, who I work for or anything related to my occupation. I, on the other hand, am forbidden from asking you any equally personal questions. Failure to adhere to these rules will result in punishment... which is what I would like to say if I didn't know you could easily defeat me! So let us work on the honor system. Question number one. Are you or are you not familiar with the true source of every single Life Fiber in existence?"

The peculiarity of the man's question threw Ichigo off balance. Thinking back on what little information Satsuki told him about Life Fibers Ichigo realized she never exactly told him, which struck him as quite odd. Satsuki had seemed determined to get his cooperation in stopping her mother's plans to turn the entire population of Honnou City into Life Fibers so why would she hold something back that would have helped her case unless she didn't know herself? Giving the man a curt shrug, Ichigo responded, "I didn't know they actually had a source until you told me. I thought Satsuki's mother created them herself."

"Ah yes, Ragyo Kiryuin." The man's smile faded as he uttered her name in derision, "She is truly a formidable woman. His... my superior would be extremely cautious if forced to confront Ragyo Kiryuin since I'm afraid the normal rules of combat do not apply to Ragyo. I'll give you a freebie, Mr. Kurosaki, so your trust in me does not falter. If Ragyo Kiryuin decided to seriously fight, she could most certainly defeat Genryusai Shigekuni Yamamoto before he could release his bankai."

The mentioning of the Head Captain's name startled Ichigo, "How do you -"

"Ah, ah, ah!" The man wagged his finger condescendingly at Ichigo and shook his head as he interrupted, "You should not waste your question on things I cannot answer. That would ruin our game. So think carefully about your next question."

Ichigo took a moment to think what he wanted to ask. As much as he wanted to demand answers from the man, he needed to make sure his question wouldn't be against his so-called rules. Mind racing as the perfect question came to him Ichigo rested Tournesol on his shoulder and asked, "Here's my question. How did you manage to track me down?"

The man gave Ichigo a rather bizarre smile. Turning his face up to the cage surrounding them, his smile fading for just a moment, the man answered, "It seems we have less time than I thought but you asked a very good question, Mr. Kurosaki! The answer to your question is that we've been watching over a select group of people for some time now. You were chosen because of your adamant opposition to Satsuki Kiryuin and her mother's plans. To answer the follow up question you undoubtedly want to ask, I am here because you are the first we were able to contact without Revocs or Ragyo Kiryuin interfering. My... abilities make it quite hard for the Life Fibers to sense what we are talking about for a short while. Eventually they will break through and our conversation will have to end."

"I suppose that's why you created the cage of spiritual energy surrounding us," Ichigo looked up at the semi-solid curved bars of spiritual energy enveloping them and frowned about the familiarity he felt from them.

"Your deductive skills are as high as our Daten suggested." The man sheathed his saber and clasped his hands together, "I suppose it is time for my second question. This game of ours is going on far longer than I hoped! Usually my opponent would have broken the

rules, forcing me to punish them severely. Second question! Have you or have you not had contact with the Soul Society since the loss of your powers ten months ago?"

Continuing to be surprised by the man's knowledge of events surrounding his time as a substitute shinigami, Ichigo nevertheless kept his composure, "I can't say that I have. After I lost my powers and the ability to see shinigami or other spiritual beings I wouldn't be able to keep in contact, now would I?"

"Correct! And I will overlook that question at the end because you were giving your answer at the same time!" The man frowned and reached up to his ear, where he placed a finger and tilted his head. Listening attentively at whoever was on the other end, the man eventually turned his focus back to Ichigo, "Please excuse the interruption. That was an associate of mine. He was just informing me that a few Infiltration-Class COVERS are moving towards us. We still have a few minutes, so here's something to ponder, Mr. Kurosaki. Third question! How can you say you no longer see spiritual beings when you so clearly pointed out the spiritual cage surrounding us?"

Ichigo stuttered over the answer, "I -"

"Think long and hard about your answer... Ichigo Kurosaki," The man turned around and began walking away before stopping right before reaching the shadows, "Oh! I almost forgot a piece of important information! Do not discuss our conversation with anyone! As trustworthy you and your friends may be, there is no telling whether Life Fibers are listening in. Life Fibers are notorious for keeping their nature secret, after all."

"Wait a damn second!" Ichigo took a step forward and shouted, "I thought you were going to offer assistance or were you just bullshitting me?"

"Such vulgar language..." The man tilted his head back and adjusted his spectacles, "But you have a valid point. I did forget to address



that particular point. While my superior is unable to enter battle against Ragyo Kiryuin and her forces, it has nevertheless been decided that several of my associates will arrive to offer assistance when the time is right."

As the man stepped into the shadows, the cage of spiritual energy dissipating as he vanished into the darkness, Ichigo tried to grab him only to find the man gone. Looking back and forth along the highway, his mind trying to piece together what just happened, Ichigo's musing was interrupted by Mugetsu's voice.

***" I don't know who that man was but his clothing did not have a trace of Life Fibers in them."***

"Are you sure?" Ichigo saw the confident look in Mugetsu's eyes and grimaced, "Damn, just what I needed, another mystery. There was one thing that bothers me, Mugetsu. That man, whoever the hell he was, mentioned something about COVERS. Does that make any sense to you?"

***" It does not, I'm afraid,"*** Mugetsu's eyes closed briefly before snapping back open, ***"But I am sensing a massive concentration of Life Fibers approaching our location. They are currently trying to hide their presence but as a Kamui I am more than capable of detecting them!"***

"Then let's get out of here before they arrive." Shifting Mugetsu wordlessly into her Gufū configuration, Ichigo flew off into the sky before he blasted westward towards Karakura Town. His encounter with that man had delayed him long enough and Ichigo hoped he could make it back in time to stop Satsuki's plans.

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**Kamui Tales #22 - How to Train a Kamui (Part One)**

Isshin Kurosaki didn't know what to say to the Kamui staring up at him with a hopeful look in its eyes. When Ragyo had told him to train it to be a proper Kamui, he had promptly asked her what exactly that meant. This was the first Kamui to ever be created so he had no idea what to do. Ragyo had taken one look at Isshin, who the Kamui had decided to cling to like an overly affectionate pet, and simply told him to figure it out on his own while she stood by and observed the results.

"Ok..." Isshin scratched his chin and hummed, "... Can you talk?"

The Kamui gave Isshin a happy nod and opened its mouth. The voice that came out, however, telepathically echoed in his mind as the Kamui smiled, "**Daddy!**"

"*Ok, that was a waste of time,*" Isshin frowned thoughtfully as he tried to think of something, really anything, to make the Kamui understand him. It could talk. There was no doubt about that. The problem was the only things it could say were 'Mommy' and 'Daddy,' which had been cute the first few times but was now beginning to get on his nerves. For something that was supposed to be truly sentient and the ultimate article of clothing, the Kamui was surprising much like a child.

"I got it," Isshin exclaimed as a really great idea came to him. Pulling the Kamui off his arm and holding it up in front of him with both hands, Isshin gave the Kamui a bright smile and said, "If we're going to get anywhere, I'm going to have to give you a name! Now... what to call you..."

Several names came to Isshin's mind but he reluctantly shot each and every one of them down. His first choice for the Kamui's name was Ichigo but he couldn't use that because Masaki planned on calling their first child Ichigo. When Isshin protested with the logical argument that Ichigo wasn't a male name, Masaki had grabbed his ear and pulled until he quite enthusiastically agreed with her judgment. With Ichigo out of bounds, Isshin was having trouble coming up with another good name.

Ragyo, watching Isshin's mind grind to a screeching halt right before her eyes, decided to step in and give her input, "The name for such a symbolic piece of clothing must represent its birth and purpose. Its name shall henceforth be Junketsu. Born from the Life Fibers coursing through our veins, Junketsu is a blank state free to be shaped and molded as we see fit. Its purity knows no bounds."

Junketsu, happy at finally having a name, began bouncing up and down in Isshin's grip with a pleased expression evident on its face, **"Junketsu!"**

"Settle down! Don't get too excited!" Isshin struggled with the Kamui as Junketsu decided she wanted to give him a hug. Remembering the last time Junketsu tried to show affection but nearly strangled him in the process, Isshin carefully allowed the Kamui to wrap herself around his arm and torso instead. He may be a Life Fiber Hybrid and not need oxygen to breath, but it was just wrong to be smothered by clothing.

"Now that the matter of its name is settled, we can move on to the next phase," Ragyo wrote something down on her clipboard before waving her hand at Isshin, "Please put on Junketsu."

Isshin froze up in shock at what Ragyo was telling him to do. She did not just seriously ask him, a grown man full of male pride, to put on a female sailor uniform. Isshin may be a goofball most of the time but even he would never consider doing such a horrid thing! Sure he would have liked to see Masaki in a schoolgirl uniform but he was saving that for his birthday, "No. There is no way I will ever put on Junketsu. I have nothing against the Kamui but it was designed for a woman and I am most certainly not a woman! If I put Junketsu on, my future sons will have every right to hunt me down and kick my ass for embarrassing the Shiba and Kurosaki names for all eternity!"

Ragyo's eyes narrowed at Isshin's defiance, "Here's what's going to happen, Isshin. You are going to put on Junketsu so that we may obtain an accurate reading of its unreleased state and overall power. As the sole person in this room capable of understanding these

readings, I cannot wear Junketsu. Now put it on before I make you wear it."

"Never!" Isshin pulled Junketsu off his body and reared his arm back. With Junketsu's telepathic laughter echoing in his head as a result of the Kamui thinking this was a game, Isshin aimed at the surprised expression on Ragyo's face and shouted, "Go get her, Junketsu!"

Throwing her sleeves out as she flew through the air, Junketsu landed on Ragyo and promptly began wrapping herself around the Kiryuin's body. Despite Ragyo ordering Junketsu to get off her the Kamui, egged on by Isshin's shouts of 'how proud he was of her,' continued in her attempt to finally be worn. As the rather expensive business dress was torn off her body, leaving her naked for a split second before Junketsu allowed herself to be worn, Ragyo shone with a bright rainbow light as she became the first person to ever wear a Kamui.

Taking a step forward, her new white and blue heels clicking loudly against the ground, Ragyo stared at Junketsu's form before quirking an eyebrow in interest. She hadn't worn a sailor uniform in many years but she was quite surprised she could still pull it off, "Oh my. I didn't know Junketsu came with thigh-high stockings. I shall have to make a note of this for future reference. I hope you're happy Isshin. Now that I'm wearing Junketsu, it's going to be hard to make the Kamui leave my body."

When she didn't get so much as an embarrassed cough from Isshin, Ragyo turned around and saw that Isshin had fainted. Walking over to his unconscious form, Ragyo frowned in irritation and gave Isshin's body a solid kick when she saw the trail of blood coming from his nose.

"Great. Just great..." Ragyo sighed miserably and rubbed her temple. Ignoring Junketsu's attempts to playfully communicate with her, Ragyo leaned her arms on the nearby table, "This is just my luck. I finally find something that grabs Isshin's attention and he faints like a horny teenager. This is just not fair."

# Respect Yourself

So here is Chapter 35. A lot of interesting things happen in this chapter and we have reached the peak of the Karakura Town Occupation Arc. Next chapter ends the arc and the following begins the Festival Arc. I would like to point out that I've fixed the intro to Chapter 19 where Junketsu is talking to herself. There was a minor plot hole regarding her origins that I had to fix and while I was there I decided to just fix the entire section. So go back and read through the newly edited chapter.

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## Chapter 35 - Respect Yourself

"Has the message been delivered?"

Jugram Haschwalth did not look at the larger man walking in front of him and to the left as he answered, "Quilge arrived through the Gate of the Sun not an hour ago. He was moderately wounded and required medical attention but the message has been delivered to Ichigo Kurosaki as planned."

"Excellent," Yhwach allowed a cold smirk to spread across his face without breaking his stride. Contacting Ichigo Kurosaki without immediately gaining the unwanted attention of COVERS required nearly perfect timing, "Since Quilge is not prostrating himself at my feet I take it Ichigo was amenable to the message. That is good. It would have been a shame to lose such a powerful asset due to incompetence."

Haschwalth nodded but did not speak as he recalled Quilge's state as he passed through the shadows back into the Schatten Bereich. Almost as soon as the Gate of the Sun had closed, sealing their

realm off from rest of the dimensions, the Executive Hunting Captain of the 1st Jagdarmee had collapsed to his hands and knees as blood pooled on the ground. When several Soldats had moved forward to offer the Sternritter assistance, Quilge had brushed off their concern with his normal rough and abrasive personality. It was only when Haschwalth, along with several other members of the Sternritter who happened to be nearby, arrived that Quilge explained how his mission went.

After spitting out some blood, Quilge had grimaced and said the one thing Haschwalth already figured but the rest of the Sternritter were unaware of - Ichigo's Life Fiber blade was able to tear through fully circulating blut vene.

"It was a great risk on my part to send Quilge to intercept Ichigo before he could reach Karakura Town," Yhwach said with a rare hint of melancholy. If Quilge had fallen to Ragyo's COVERS before he could return to the Schatten Bereich, Yhwach would have forever lost the piece of himself engraved on the Sternritter's soul, "It is fortunate that his jail was able to hide his presence for as long as it did. I fully expected him to have enough time to deliver only part of the message. Ichigo getting the entire message saves us time."

"From the Daten Quilge recorded it appears Ichigo's mind is already set on stopping Ragyo Kiryuin," Haschwalth stated respectfully, "The Daten also suggests our previous estimate of the power of Ichigo's Kamui is severely outdated. Even without his Life Fiber blade, Ichigo was more than capable of bypassing nearly seventy percent of Quilge's blut. Perhaps it would be wise to -"

"Adjusting the strength of blut would be a pointless endeavor," Yhwach interrupted with absolute clarity to his words, "No matter how much I strengthened your blut a Life Fiber blade will always be able to pierce straight through it. Life Fibers have always been countervailing to our existence. Ichigo Kurosaki not only possesses a Kamui but if the Daten obtained last week is accurate, he is also a Life Fiber Hybrid. In the face of such an opponent, not only will your blut be useless but most of your attacks as well. No, making

enemies of Ichigo Kurosaki and his allies will do nothing but work against us. It is best we convince him that our goals align with his own."

Haschwaldt pondered Yhwach's words for all they were worth. If Ichigo Kurosaki's power was truly able to ignore Blut Vene as easily as breathing attempting to coerce him into helping would truly be foolish, "Forgive my insolence Your Majesty but it is likely that despite Ichigo Kurosaki's goals coinciding with our own some of the Sternritter might be averse to working with a former shinigami."

Yhwach briefly paused in his stride as he pondered Haschwaldt's words, "Such a notion has occurred to me but I must give thanks to Ichigo. The wounds he inflicted upon Quilge with so little effort will help convince your fellow Sternritter of the problem posed by Ragyo Kiryuin and the Life Fibers. You have been at my side longer than any other Sternritter so you alone know that there exists a mission that takes priority over the destruction of the Soul Society."

"The execution of Ragyo Kiryuin before she can implement the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet," Haschwaldt finished for Yhwach with a polite tone to his voice. Out of all the Quincy in the Wandenreich only two knew of Ragyo Kiryuin's master plan - Yhwach and Haschwaldt. The rest of the Sternritter as well as a number of the Soldats were aware Life Fibers were particularly strong against Quincy powers and abilities but due to remaining in the Schatten Bereich for years on end, only a few truly believed such Daten. Quilge Opie's wounds and inability to harm Ichigo Kurosaki or his Kamui would help to express the imminent danger of Life Fibers and mobilize the Sternritter out of stolidity.

The assassination of Ragyo Kiryuin, on the other hand, is something much easier said than done. Her power was overwhelming and ignoring the resistance held by Life Fibers against Quincy spiritual energy she could overwhelm the multiple Sternritter at the same time if she fought seriously. If one factored in the massive resistance from the Life Fibers making up her body, Ragyo Kiryuin was one of the few beings that could fight His Majesty with more than a good

chance of winning. Traitorous thoughts aside, if His Majesty moved against Ragyo Kiryuin the scales of battle were heavily tilted in her favor.

"Indeed but we must move carefully lest Genryusai becomes aware of our continued existence."

Yhwach stepped out of Silbern and onto a bone-white patio overlooking the Schatten Bereich. As he gazed upon his realm hidden in the shadows, Yhwach closed his eyes and felt the souls of all his Sternritzer open to him. All twenty six souls were scattered through the Schatten Bereich, some training for battle and others simply going about their lives, but in the end every single one of them belonged to the Father of the Quincy.

Clasping his hands behind his back as a stoic expression adorned his face, Yhwach pondered over all the Daten recently acquired and decided on a new course of action, "It seems from Ragyo Kiryuin's accelerated timetable that the Invasion of the Soul Society and Hueco Mundo shall have to be put on hold. More pressing matters have come to light and the destruction of the world is not something I sanction. We do not press forward until she is dead and the Original Life Fiber is wiped from the face of the earth."

Haschwalth stood at attention as he asked, "Shall I inform the Sternritzer to begin making preparations for the war against Ragyo Kiryuin?"

"It pains me greatly to say this but Revocs is out of our reach," Yhwach did not like to show weakness of any kind and the simple thought that he could not get near Revocs or Ragyo annoyed him. He knew more than anyone Genryusai would have set up spiritual energy detectors throughout the world that would send alarms throughout the Soul Society if so much as a hint of his power appeared in the world of the living, "But it appears fortune favors the patient, Haschwalth. Since its founding Honnou City has always been free from the Soul Society's ever watchful eye but in the past



ten months a second location has also broken free from such oversight."

"... Karakura Town," Haschwalth muttered with suppressed interest.

"I have my theories how the current Jureichi accomplished such a remarkable feat but it comes down to one man - Isshin Shiba. His strength rivals Ragyo Kiryuin's to some extent but we need not worry about him for the moment. Gather the Sternritter and inform them that there shall be a covert mission in the world of the living. Ichigo Kurosaki and his allies might be strong but their strength pales in comparison to Ragyo Kiryuin's and the blonde girl lapping at her heels like a lost puppy. Find three, perhaps four, Sternritter that are capable of remaining below the radar and will not announce their presence to the Soul Society. Make it quite clear that disregarding my orders will not be tolerated."

"Yes, You Majesty," Haschwalth bowed as Yhwach left him alone to carry out his orders. It was hard for anyone to see emotions in His Majesty's face but Haschwalth had quite clearly seen the faintest traces of worry. His Majesty was truly worried about Ragyo Kiryuin's plans and Haschwalth could not blame him for such emotions. That woman was strong enough to decimate him without much effort. As he turned to walk through the Silbern in order to begin summoning the Sternritter, Haschwalth paused when a presence made itself known, "Have you been eavesdropping on His Majesty's private conversation?"

"I'm not stupid enough to insult His Majesty by doing something so vile. Who the fuck do you think I am Jugo, that creepy as hell Giselle?"

Bazz-B strolled out of the shadows with a perpetual look of annoyance on his face. He had returned to the Silbern after hearing about Quilge's wounds and by sheer luck his path took him straight to where Haschwalth was discussing the problem with His Majesty. Scoffing as Haschwalth scowled at his choice of language, Bazz-B

asked, "So when do you want me to go hunt down the fucker that beat the crap out of Quilge?"

Haschwalth turned away from Bazz-B, "From your choice of words I see you truly did not listen to His Majesty's conversation. That is good. Such an act would have resulted in disciplinary action. As to your inquiry, the person that injured Quilge is our prospective ally. Quilge's wounds came from a combination of outdated Daten and his enthusiasm in testing Ichigo Kurosaki's powers."

"Wait a second," Bazz-B's eyes narrowed, "Isn't he that guy that defeated Sosuke Aizen and is one of the Special War Potentials? I thought he lost his stupid shinigami powers."

"Things have changed," Haschwalth began walking away and motioned with his hand for Bazz-B to follow, "Ichigo is one of the four people to possess a Kamui and is a Life Fiber Hybrid, granting him enough power to easily take down a Sternritter. It would be unwise for you to seek retribution for Quilge's injuries."

"He has a Kamui? Well... that sucks," Bazz-B remembered the Daten from Ichigo's fight against Satsuki Kiryuin a couple weeks back. The power of their Kamui's was downright frightening and the ability of their Life Fiber blades to bypass blut scared the shit out of him.

"That is why I wish for you to lead a team of Sternritter to offer assistance in assassinating Ragyo Kiryuin," Haschwalth turned down a hallway while leaving Bazz-B alone, "Gather two to three of your colleagues you believe are able to work covertly without announcing their presence to the Soul Society. Once you have done that, report back to me and I shall explain to your gathered party the parameters of the mission. Is that understood?"

"Yeah, yeah, I understand," Bazz-B muttered and left to go do what he needed to do. Truth be told, it was getting rather boring in the Silbern lately. Perhaps going to the world of the living to fuck some Life Fibers up would be a good vacation. The only problem is who he

should take, "Great... now I have to fucking think about who to bring. That's just great. Let's see, it's almost noon so Bambietta should be in her room. Hopefully I can find her before she kills another Soldat and tries to make me clean up the mess. If she thinks I'm her butler one more time I'm going to burn her sorry ass to a crisp."

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After he had finished speaking to Kugo Ginjo, not to mention helping to drag the poor man out of his slump, Isshin decided it was time to go for a walk. He couldn't return home since the Anti-Life Fiber system he installed around his house prevented any and all Life Fibers from entering or leaving for a period of twelve hours. So until two in the afternoon Isshin would just have to hope Kon could keep Yuzu and Karin from burning the house down. Eventually reaching a small café, abandoned by the owners in anticipation of Satsuki's invasion, Isshin sat down at one of the tables and pulled out a small box lunch he had been carrying around with him. He wasn't going to lock himself out of his house without making sure he had something to eat.

As he slowly ate his sandwich, mindful of the battles going on around him to the north, east and west, Isshin thought about everything that was going on and frowned. Satsuki's helicopter should have landed in Karakura Community Park after Ryuken shot it down so Ryuko would have been close enough to confront her before she could leave the park. Focusing his senses outwards and honing in a two dense bundles of Life Fibers clashing, Isshin noticed Ginjo had already confronted the member of Xcution. That left Ryuko and Satsuki and judging by the other pair of pure Life Fibers zooming away from him, the two girls were already hard at work sorting out their problems.

"Fixing Junketsu is going to be a problem," Isshin muttered pensively. Without Ichigo around he didn't have the needed Life Fibers to remove the addition to Junketsu. It was unfortunate that

Kisuke had used up all the Life Fibers Isshin gave him when he made Mugetsu. After thinking for a moment about how to solve such a problematic issue, Isshin decided that the best course of action would be to wait around for Ichigo to return. Once his tardy son returned, and Isshin gave him a stern lecture about being on time, he would inform Ichigo about what he needed to do to save not only Junketsu but also Satsuki.

*"That poor girl has no idea the danger she is in from wearing an unstable Kamui,"* Isshin's maroon eyes narrowed in fear. He could tell quite easily that Junketsu was rejecting Ichigo's Life Fibers, which was a good thing, but the addition was starting to wreak havoc on the Kamui. If Ichigo didn't return soon, and by soon he meant within an hour, Isshin would be forced to hunt down Satsuki and tear Junketsu off her body, *"And that's not something I ever want to do."*

As he was about to take another bite of his sandwich Isshin became aware of a presence behind him. With the sandwich slowly lowering from his mouth, Isshin turned around and stared at his new guest with a goofy grin on his face, "It's really rude to keep someone waiting. I've sensed your presence since you entered Karakura Town, you know. Although I hope it wasn't too hard to find me with all the excitement."

Nui Harime didn't say anything as she stared listlessly at Isshin with her purple Scissor Blade held loosely enough that it was resting on the ground. As Isshin looked in her eyes and saw not a drop of emotions he realized that much like Ururu, Nui was experiencing unexpected side effects from the Kaizo Trap he implemented in his Anti-Life Fiber shield around Karakura Town. Her sapphire blue eyes, which always seemed to have highlights resembling smiling faces, were now a dull blue color and half-lidded. Taking one step and then another towards Isshin, her Scissor Blade dragging along the ground without care, Nui approached the man and asked in an emotionless whisper, "Why can't I feel anything?"

Pulling out the chair next to him and gesturing for her to sit down, he nearly flinched when Nui did so without a single complaint or

comment. Watching the blonde haired girl sitting next to him with her eyes staring at the table without feeling, Isshin grimaced at his guilt but quickly recovered, "I have to apologize for that. The Kaizo Trap I set up to limit your strength if you tried to enter Karakura Town again had unforeseen consequences. To be perfectly honest, I know exactly what you are going through and I would never wish for a hybrid like you to have their emotions and feelings stripped so violently away from them."

"I killed them and yet I felt nothing," Nui whispered as she turned her blank gaze to Isshin. Dropping her purple Scissor Blade on the table with a dull thud, fresh blood dripping off the weapon, Nui let go of the weapon and allowed her arm to fall numbly to her side, "... I tried everything I could to feel something... quickly and slowly... painfully and quietly... but nothing worked. I felt nothing by killing them. Is something wrong with me, Mr. Kurosaki?"

Isshin leaned forward on his elbows and held Nui's wrist, "There is nothing wrong with you, Nui. As much as I want to blame you for everything that you've done I cannot. Ragyo was the only mother you ever knew. I shouldn't have separated you from Ururu seventeen years ago when I took her from Revocs."

Nui's dull eyes perked up and for just an instant they seemed to possess the usual amount of life before they returned to their listless state, "Amu... she hurt me... she wanted to hurt me... why would she want to hurt me? I didn't do anything wrong... Maman says I'm her precious daughter... why would Amu want to hurt me?"

Isshin scratched at his chin as he mentally cursed at the Original Life Fiber for what it not only did to Ragyo but to her family, "Mako and Ryuko are Ururu's friends. She was very angry that you tried to murder them for something neither of them did to you. I understand Ryuko's dad damaged your eye. As a Life Fiber Hybrid you must have felt vulnerable and weak for the first time in your life... well second after the stern warning I gave you six years ago. My point is you shouldn't have blamed them for what happened to you."

"My eye..." Nui absentmindedly brought her hand up to her left eye almost as if to prove it was still there. It was strange that ever since Orihime healed her eye Nui had woken up with the fear that it wasn't actually fixed. It may have only been a few days since she regained her complete sight but Nui still rushes into the bathroom every morning to look at her face in the mirror just to prove that she was not dreaming. When she continued speaking, her tone had a subtle hint of sadness to it, "... he took my eye... made me feel weak... I'm not human... Maman says I'm better than the naked apes..."

"Sure there are some things hybrids like us are better at than normal people," Isshin leaned back in his chair while ignoring the blast of spiritual energy from the north. Uryu must really be taking out all the stops if he's using something like Sprenger against Nonon Jakuzure, "But humans are better at other things!"

Nui looked at Isshin with a lost look in her eyes, "Like what?"

"They have limits," Isshin answered with a sagely tone. Allowing the color in his hair to bleed away to silver as a rainbow light began shining out from inside it, Isshin gave Nui a comforting smile, "I know you're confused about what I mean but it's actually quite true. Every single person has limits and they spend their entire lives attempting to surpass them. Some unfortunately aren't able to do so but there are other people who not only reach their limits but shatter them. But you know what the crazy thing is? Once they break their limits they find that there are new limits out there to reach. Humanity is a collective group of beings always trying to reach perfection but knowing they will never actually make it."

The Grand Couturier let her gaze fall away from Isshin as she digested his words. When Nui first arrived in Karakura Town, using Satsuki's invasion as a cover, she had thought it would be easy to track down her sister and ask her a few questions. She had no intention of bothering Ryuko, Ichigo or any of their friends. She just wanted to ask Amu a few serious questions but as soon as she arrived Nui felt all of her emotions and feelings quickly bleed away.

She could remember how she normally acted but for some reason she had no motivation to continue acting that way, "... why?"

Issshin's eyebrows perked up, "Why what?"

"... why are you being so nice to me?" Nui's blonde hair fell forward onto her face as she stared at the purple Scissor blade resting so innocently on the table in front of her. She had used it to kill hundreds of humans over the last seven months since she tore it from Professor Matoi's dying body but Isshin wasn't even trying to take it away from her. Lady Ragyo said the two men were old friends so why wasn't he trying to get revenge? It wasn't like she cared if he killed her right now... Nui really didn't care about anything anymore. If Isshin wanted to kill her, Nui wouldn't even move to defend herself.

When she spoke again, her croaking voice was barely above a whisper, "... I really wanted to kill your daughters... I was so happy watching Ryuko's friend die in my arms... so why are you being so nice to me? Maman said -"

"Not another word."

Almost as soon as Isshin said those three words Nui found her mouth involuntarily closing. While she might not have known why she suddenly did not have the urge to talk Isshin was all too aware of the nightmarish ability he used. Out of the myriad of tricks and abilities the Original Life Fiber decided to drill into his skull, Life Fiber Hierarchy ranked up there amongst the worst of them. Every single Life Fiber Hybrid, whether artificial or natural, were genetically subservient to those directly gifted by the Original Life Fiber. While that was usually the case Isshin was glad it didn't normally work on human Life Fiber Hybrids. He didn't know whether it was due to the general level of independent thought most people naturally possessed but Isshin really couldn't find it in himself to feel sorry for the Original Life Fiber about something like that.

Even though using Life Fiber Hierarchy seemed to have worked on Nui Harime, Isshin knew it was only because her mind had been so

broken and shattered by the Kaizo Trap that she was extremely suggestive to anything he might say or do. As a Life Fiber Hybrid becomes more emotionally and mentally unbalanced, the Life Fiber Hierarchy technique begins to have a greater and greater effect until the hybrid is literally unable to disobey the orders. Isshin would never use it against his son because he knew the second he tried to get him to listen to a single word Ichigo would punch him in the face.

"You really didn't do anything wrong," Isshin grimaced as released the technique mere seconds after casting it. As the Grand Couturier's shoulders slumped forward, her dull eyes gazing emptily into her lap, Isshin sighed in guilt and decided he needed to change the mood of the conversation. Reaching into the lunch Yuzu made for him and pulling out a cookie Isshin offered it to Nui and smiled, "Six years ago you wouldn't have gotten close to Yuzu or Karin since I sensed you the moment you arrived. As for trying to murder Mako... I already knew you would pull a stunt like that."

Nui numbly took the cookie from Isshin's hand but didn't try to eat it. Instead she looked at it momentarily before letting it fall to the ground. Staring at the crumbs on the ground, unable to understand what Isshin was telling her, Nui tilted her head enough so that she could look at him she asked, "You did?"

Isshin nodded as he folded his arms. Nui must have really been affected by the Kaizo Trap if she's lost the ability to even care and Isshin mentally noted to make it up to Ururu once the trap naturally vanished in a few hours, "I've been watching you for a while so you could say I'm familiar with your work. I knew if you failed to make Ryuko angry you would have a Plan B, C and D and nine times out of ten your Plan B involves killing someone close to your target. It was easy to figure out Mako was the closest person to Ryuko... excluding my increasingly tardy son of course. So I suggested to Orihime that she should go to Honnouji Academy to cheer for Ichigo. If you didn't do anything that would be great but if you did try something Orihime would be there to help."



"You... you knew what I was doing?" Nui's voice was barely a whisper as she listened to Isshin describe the plan she spent hours upon hours crafting. Lady Ragyo herself had approved of her plans when she was told and said it was worthy of being born from the Grand Couturier's mind. Hearing Isshin speak of her plans against Ryuko like it was nothing created a feeling of doubt completely unrelated to her current emotional state deep within Nui's mind. Reaching forward and gently holding the handle of her purple Scissor Blade for comfort, Nui's dull eyes stared at the reflective purple luster on the blade, "... it was worthless to even try... you could have stopped me at any time..."

"One day Nui you will learn that you just have to let certain things happen," Isshin leaned forward and gave her a gentle and friendly smile before he placed his hand on her head. As he ruffled her hair Isshin gave a hearty laugh and said, "You're smart but it's impossible to know everything. If you were against someone like Uryu or Satsuki I'm sure you could win but I'm just out of your league."

Nui opened her mouth to ask why he didn't stop her when she felt a searing pain in her skull. As her body began convulsing wildly in her chair, Isshin leaned forward while keeping his hand firmly pressed against Nui's head. With an apologetic expression on his face, Isshin forced the Life Fibers making up his body to shift into Marionette Threads before they wrapped themselves around Nui's brain. As the last of the Life Fibers vanished into Nui and Isshin removed his hand from her head, the Grand Couturier's eyes shone with a bright rainbow light before she slumped over and lost consciousness. Quickly moving and catching her before she could hit the ground, Isshin looked at Nui, "I'm sorry I had to do that."

Holding Nui's limp form in his arms, her body convulsing every few seconds as the Life Fibers in her brain continued to adjust themselves and tighten their grip, Isshin grabbed the purple Scissor Blade and with a simple flick of his wrist shrunk it down to the size of a normal pair of scissors, "... but it was the only way to help you."

As terrible as what he did to her was, it paled in comparison to the true and nightmarish form of Mental Refitting Ragyo was so willing to use. Instead of physically controlling the victim, Isshin used the Marionette Thread to implant memories and experiences he wished for them to see. Another thing that placated his conscience is that while his version knocked the victim out almost immediately and allowed them to wake up without any side effects some time later, Ragyo's was not so kind. She did not care that humans were conscious during the insertion of the Marionette Threads and she certainly did not think twice about the knowledge the victims were still awake and aware of everything she made them do. It took someone with barely any traces of humanity left to order a spy to return to their family and murder them in cold blood before allowing themselves to be caught.

The fact that it only worked on Nui because his Kaizo Trap was still active didn't help make Isshin feel any better.

*" I wish I could have figured out some other way that didn't involve doing this."*

The idea of implanting memories into Nui sickened him but Isshin would never follow Ragyo's footsteps and strip Nui of her free will. His specialized Marionette Threads, already wrapped around Nui's brain, weren't anything like the ones Ragyo used. Hopefully by the time the Marionette Threads accomplished their task and dissolved into nothingness his mistakes over the past seventeen years would start to be corrected. While Nui would not remember anything that transpired after entering Karakura Town, the memories the Marionette Threads carried were no so easily forgotten.

The memories he chose for Nui were very special ones, not only to Isshin but also to those close to him. Isshin desperately wished he could simply sit down with Nui and talk to her. If that even had a one in a million chance of working he would take it but the damage, emotional and probably sexual, Ragyo inflicted on Nui made the Grand Couturier utterly dependent on her for constant approval. If Ragyo asked Nui to kill herself to further the Original Life Fiber's

plan, the blonde girl in his arms would do so with a smile on her face, confident in the fact that Ragyo must have loved her.

What bullshit. The thing that Ragyo became sixteen years ago is not the same woman he knew and cared about. Perhaps at the beginning Ragyo might have had a small amount of parental affection for Nui but not anymore.

As for the memories he gave Nui, Isshin made damn well sure that they would not integrate or interfere with her own memories. After trying the technique on himself several times while doing his best to access the specific memory he re-implanted and failing, Isshin was completely sure Nui would be mentally safe. If he wasn't, Isshin would never have bothered to try. The dangers of the foreign memories conflicting with Nui's own experiences were nightmarish. Over time Nui would begin to fail to distinguish between her memories and the ones he gave her, eventually culminating into a psychotic break that had a high probability of leaving Nui comatose for the rest of her life. Isshin would rather die than allow that happen to Nui.

When Nui fell asleep tonight, safe and completely oblivious to what he did to her, she would begin to dream. As she dreamt the memories he gave her would swim to the surface of her subconscious, allowing Nui to experience them as an extremely vivid and lucid dream. The point of what he did was not to mentally change Nui or to make her his loyal servant. That was what blackmailing Ichigo was for. Speaking of which, Isshin needed to ask Ginjo if he could find some photos of Ichigo in a suggestive pose with Satsuki or Ryuko. Pushing thoughts of blackmailing his son to the back of his mind, Isshin focused on why he used Mental Refitting on Nui - to give her the freedom of choice that Ragyo stole many years ago.

Holding Nui tightly in his arms, faint whimpers coming from the Grand Couturier, Isshin sighed for what seemed like the hundredth time this morning. He wanted to give Nui the opportunity to see things from outside the rose-colored vision Ragyo blinded her with

and allow her to make her own decisions. If Nui still decided to side with Ragyo and the Original Life Fiber, Isshin would be alright with that. He would be greatly disappointed but at the same time he'd be happy she was able to make up her mind without Ragyo's abusive influence. He dreamt, rather he hoped, that when the time came Nui would make the right decision. He didn't want to continue watching Ururu fight her sister any longer.

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Ryuko Matoi dragged her hand across the side of the building, her armored fingers easily digging into the metal and plaster, as her momentum continued to carry her body backwards. Gritting her teeth together as she slammed Senketsu's heels down into the concrete sidewalk beneath her, Ryuko finally managed to bring herself to a stop, "Damn it, just how strong did she become?"

As she regained her balance and tightly gripped the red Scissor Blade in her hands, Ryuko's mind raced as she tried to figure out where Satsuki's monstrous strength was coming from. There was no way in hell that her battle configuration was this much stronger than Senketsu Senkou. It was impossible and yet just a single attack managed to knock her back several blocks. As the parallels to her first fight against Junketsu and the ease at which she lost came to the forefront of her mind, Ryuko had to visibly hold herself back from charging back at Satsuki, "Any ideas on how to take her down, Senketsu?"

**" You are now strong enough to use Niban Genkai without being forced out of my activated state but I do not believe that would be enough to stop Satsuki. Junketsu's Zenkan configuration is simply too fast and strong for Niban Genkai to hit,**" Senketsu's voice had a hint of irritation to it as he grew annoyed at the ease in which Junketsu was beating Ryuko. He might have felt sorry for the Kamui after what Satsuki did to it but that did not mean he appreciated getting outclassed once again.

"Then I suppose I'll just have to stick with the normal Senkou," Ryuko twisted the Scissor Blade in her hands as she watched Satsuki Kiryuin slowly walking towards her with that insufferable half-smirk on her face. Gnashing her teeth together as she felt her blood beginning to boil, Ryuko pushed as much power through Senketsu as she possibly could before racing towards Satsuki. Leaping into the air as her Scissor Blade shone with a bright red light, Ryuko spun her body around before shouting, "Senkou - Ichiban Genkai!"

Satsuki's head tilted upwards as she watched Ryuko descend towards her with her Scissor Blade literally glowing with energy. With a nearly dispassionate look adorning her face, Satsuki raised Bakuzan with a single hand and promptly stopped the attack in its tracks.

"What the hell?" Ryuko stammered as Satsuki blocked Ichiban Genkai so easily. She had put enough energy and power into that strike to take down one of the Elite Four and yet Satsuki stopped it like she wasn't even trying. As the red energy exploded out from her Scissor Blade, hitting everything but Satsuki, Ryuko shock made her miss the hakama-covered leg snapping out and smashing into the side of her body with enough force to send her crashing into the nearby building.

"That was your Ichiban Genkai, Matoi? I am not impressed," Satsuki declared with her voice full of disappointment as she stared at the hole created in the side of the building by Ryuko's body. Taking several slow steps towards where Ryuko was already getting to her feet, Satsuki gazed longingly at Junketsu before adding, "But your inventiveness surprises me. It was not enough that you unlocked Senkou but you also created unique attacks."

"I don't want to hear your fucking praise!"

The building exploded with red and purple energy as Ryuko came soaring out of it clad in Senketsu Shippu. If Senkou wasn't strong enough to break through Satsuki's guard than she would just have to hit Satsuki too quickly for her to react and block. With her eyes full of

righteous fury and the red lines stretching across Senketsu's starting to glow Ryuko roared as she swung her Scissor Blade at Satsuki only for the Student Council President to calmly lean out of way, allowing the blade to pass harmlessly within half an inch of its target. Time seemed to move in slow motion as Ryuko watched Satsuki so easily avoid her attack, her eyes full of surprise and disbelief at what was happening.

"Should you really be losing focus, Matoi?"

Snapping her arm out and grabbing Ryuko's wrist in the split second between dodging the Scissor Blade and Ryuko flying out of range, Satsuki spun around several times before launching Ryuko back into the same building she had just flown out from.

"This power is truly spectacular, Matoi!" Satsuki clenched her fist excitedly as she felt the power of Junketsu Zenkan flow through her body. From the ease in which she was dealing with Ryuko's different configurations it was becoming increasingly clear that Junketsu was the greatest Kamui. Sensing a disturbance from the building, Satsuki turned and watched Ryuko emerge from the rubble clad once more in Senkou. Confidently smirking when she saw the slightly injured state Ryuko was in, Satsuki raised Bakuzan parallel to the ground as her body began glowing with a blue light, "Junketsu's power far outclasses the ragged excuse of Senketsu! Witness the power of someone with the drive and motivation to control the power of a true Kamui, Matoi! Zenkan - Tenrai Kagai!"

As soon as Satsuki announced the name of the technique her body began glowing with a faint blue light while similarly colored energy wafted off Bakuzan like illusionary smoke. Tensing her knees while the twin vents on Junketsu's pauldrons kicked into life and started emitting bursts of multicolored energy, Satsuki waited until Ryuko had brought up her Scissor Blade before attacking. If she truly wished for Ryuko to understand the folly of fighting against a superior opponent, Ryuko needed to see that all of her efforts amount to nothing in the end.

"Here I come, Matoi," Satsuki slid her left foot back before rocketing towards Ryuko with enough force that the ground caved inwards and exploded beneath her as she went.

Without even thinking Ryuko forced more power through Senketsu and attempted to counter Satsuki's Tenrai Kagai with Niban Genkai. Roaring as she swung her Scissor Blade just as Satsuki reached her, Ryuko was momentarily confident that she stopped the attack only to watch as Satsuki seemed to slip through her guard. Before she could maneuver her Scissor Blade around to block the attack, Satsuki hit Ryuko with several quick and powerful slashes before finishing up with one final one that sent her careening backwards, her body bouncing along the road.

"The... fuck... was that?" Ryuko panted as she spit out a glob of blood. Sneaking a quick glance down at Senketsu, she saw that apart from several rough and worn patches on his armor he was still intact. Forcing thoughts of what she would do if he was destroyed out of her mind, Ryuko sensed Satsuki coming towards her once more and slammed her Scissor Blade, augmented by Niban Genkai, into Satsuki's Bakuzan. A bright burst of red and blue light twisted chaotically through the air as the two weapons clashed before the ground beneath Ryuko's feet abruptly collapsed downwards.

" *She's getting stronger ?*"

Ryuko felt her arms trembling as bursts of steam shot out of Senketsu. The Kamui was giving Ryuko as much power as he could to hold back Satsuki's Tenrai Kagai and while it was just barely enough to do so, the fact that Junketsu's power had increased so abruptly and exponentially worried both Kamui and wearer.

" ***What is happening should be impossible. Such a massive rise in power can only come about when human and Kamui move as one,***" Senketsu's eye narrowed as he stared into Junketsu's eyes. The enemy Kamui's eyes still looked bloodshot and frenzied but there was a subtle shift to them that Senketsu could not explain. Tightening up around Ryuko's body as a wave of worried coursed

through his threads, Senketsu added, ***"Satsuki is still growing stronger. I would advise not getting hit by her attacks. If you do there's a good chance you will die."***

"If this is truly the extent of your Kamui's power then you continue to disappoint me, Matoi."

Satsuki's frustrated and demanding tone forced Ryuko's attention away from Senketsu and back onto the battle. Gritting her teeth as multihued sparks briefly came into existence from the clashing weapons, Ryuko snarled, "Shut up!"

Leaning over Bakuzan with faint blue eyeliner beginning to form around her angry eyes, Satsuki scoffed when she saw Ryuko's arms trembling just to hold her blade back. Was this truly the end result of weeks of subtly training Ryuko to be strong enough to fight her mother? If Ryuko was unable to stand up to her then Satsuki could expect to see her die when either Nui Harime or her mother confronted her. Shifting Bakuzan around in her grip, a smile beginning to form on her face as an idea came to mind, Satsuki decided to test the limits of Ryuko's anger, "Are your dreams and ambitions so shallow that they are washed away by the first waves of the rising tide? With your current level of power there is nothing you can do to stop me from completing the subjugation of Karakura Town and all its inhabitants."

Muscles tensing in her arms as she listened to Satsuki rant angrily at her, Ryuko's patience finally reached its limit as with a shout she managed to push Satsuki away from her. Taking several gasping breaths as a wave of exhaustion hit her, Ryuko glared at Satsuki as her opponent landed gracefully several feet away. With energy beginning to once again flood her body, Ryuko stood up tall and gripped her Scissor Blade with both hands before answering, "I don't know what the hell your problem is but I already gave you my answer, Satsuki Kiryuin! Senketsu and I are going to stop you from destroying Karakura Town! You must be insane if you think I'm going to give up because you got a little stronger!"



"Your words are meaningless, Matoi. You barely possess enough power to stand against Junketsu Zenkan. How do you expect to stop me if you cannot even stand up to me?" Satsuki rhetorically asked with a faint hint of amusement in her voice. Turning away from Ryuko's annoyed gaze, Satsuki ran a finger down Bakuzan, the white armor covering her arms clashing with the pure darkness of the blade. She knew it would only be a matter of time until Matoi managed to shatter the mental blocks holding her back and Satsuki could not wait. She felt the foreign feeling of true excitement course through her body at the thought of fighting Senketsu's true power.

Chuckling eagerly as she returned her attention back to Ryuko she added, "At your current level your Kamui is not worthy of being sacrificed to Junketsu. Mugetsu, on the other hand, is more than perfect."

"What's your deal with Ichigo? He doesn't even care about you," Ryuko looked at Satsuki in confusion, which only continued to grow when instead of answering right away Satsuki frowned with a pensive expression on her face. For just a moment it looked like Satsuki did not know why she asked that question but the confusion on her face was quickly wiped away.

"Unlike you Ichigo has actually managed to beat me while I used my full power. As a Life Fiber Hybrid it only makes sense he is able to use the full power of Mugetsu. I wish nothing more than to fight him once more," Satsuki announced with a pleased hint to her voice. Fighting Ichigo would help to demonstrate which Kamui is truly superior now that the power of Zenkan was open to her. Their last fight was evenly matched and she only lost because Junketsu had been fighting her the entire way. Now, with Ichigo's Life Fibers woven into Junketsu Satsuki could not sense the constant and aggressive attempts by her Kamui to break down her will, "You have grown weaker, Ryuko."

Ryuko froze for just a second before snarling, "What the hell did you just say?"

Satsuki looked coldly into her eyes before scoffing and turning away, "You heard me, Matoi. Your power has weakened considerably. Your Niban Genkai, for instance, is but a pale imitation of the power it had during the Sudden Death Runoffs. Have you grown so fearful of Senketsu's power and bloodlust that you are subconsciously limiting your connection to it?"

Ryuko wanted to deny it but Satsuki was absolutely right. She might have forgiven Senketsu for what happened after Nui Harime killed Mako and she lost control of her anger and rage but her heart was still closed off to the Kamui. Senketsu was her friend but Ryuko was wary of losing control and hurting Senketsu again. From the fragmented memories she had of the event, Ryuko remembered Senketsu crying in pain and agony. She never wanted to hurt him like that again even if that meant she wasn't able to access her full power anymore.

***" I know what you're thinking, Ryuko, and I don't blame you for what happened to us,"*** Senketsu's comforting voice and complete lack of blame surprised Ryuko, ***"When your consciousness overwhelmed mine after Nui Harime killed Mako I was in a lot of pain but I will never blame you. I am willing to suffer such agony again if it means helping you achieve your goals and desires. Now, if you are done wallowing in pity let us show Satsuki Kiryuin how strong a true Kamui is!"***

"Is this truly the right time to talk to Senketsu?"

Ryuko let out a strangled gasp as Satsuki's hand closed tightly around her throat. She hadn't even seen her move. In the time it took her to blink Satsuki had closed the distance between them and began cutting off the flow of air to her lungs. As she easily lifted Ryuko off the ground, the tip of her heels barely dragging along the surface, Satsuki grinned as she pressed the tip of Bakuzan over Ryuko's heart, "Do you have any last requests before I permanently end your defiance once and for all, Ryuko?"

"Yeah... I got one," Ryuko coughed harshly under Satsuki's choking grip as the edges of her vision began to darken, "I want to know what the hell's wrong with you!"

Satsuki momentarily tightened her grip before loosening it once more. As easy and simple as it would be to kill Ryuko, that was not something she wanted to do. For some reason she had to remind herself that all of her actions were designed to make Ryuko draw out more of Senketsu's power, "I would think carefully about your final words, Ryuko. If you continue to speak to me like that I will make sure your final moments are full of agony."

"That right there. That's what's bothering me," Ryuko gasped as she coughed once more within Satsuki's grip. Managing to keep her eyes locked squarely on Satsuki's she continued, "During our first fight everything you said and did was cut and dry. Even your taunting back then lacked any emotion but this entire fight you've been gloating about Junketsu's power like it was the best thing in the world! And you're calling me by my first name. You've never called me Ryuko. Not even once! It's always been 'Ryuko Matoi' or just 'Matoi!' It's like you're a whole different person!"

If Ryuko was expecting a response from Satsuki it was not for the Student Council President's eyes to widen as she abruptly let go, "I... what am I doing?"

Falling to her hands and knees as she breathed in deeply after nearly being strangled, one hand massaging her sore throat, Ryuko looked up at the confused and fearful expression on Satsuki's face. She had never seen Satsuki look anything other than pleased, annoyed or stoic. To see a look of horror on Satsuki's face was so strange that Ryuko could not help but ask, "What's wrong with you?"

Instead of answering or even acknowledging the question Satsuki stumbled back and clenched her hands in her black hair, Bakuzan clattering to the ground as she squeezed her eye shut. Hunched over as Junketsu's eyes began dilating strangely, Satsuki shocked Ryuko when she suddenly began mumbling, "Get out of my mind..."

I'm in control not you... You are nothing more than a Kamui, fit to be worn by humans... I won't let you gain a foothold... My will and ambition will keep you out..."

Ryuko watched Satsuki talk to herself before quickly glancing down at Senketsu's eye, "What's going on?"

**" *This is really, really bad Ryuko,*" Senketsu's normally calm and assistive voice was full of terror as he watched Satsuki, *"I thought I recognized what was going on before but it is only now that it makes sense. Throughout this entire fight Junketsu has been subtly influencing Satsuki's mind. That's why she started calling you Ryuko. The process was so slow that Satsuki was unable to realize what was happening until you pointed it out and it was already far too late."***

As Satsuki stopped moving, her hands twisted deeply into her hair as if she was in terrible pain, Ryuko took a hesitant step towards her only to be blasted backwards a pillar of blue energy exploded out of Satsuki's body. Disturbed by the screams coming from the Student Council President and with a cold sweat breaking out across her entire body, Ryuko nervously gripped her Scissor Blade, "What's happening to Satsuki, Senketsu?"

**" *Do not lose focus for an instant, Ryuko, or you will die,*" Senketsu stated in a forceful voice, *"I am going to grant you as much power as your human body can safely handle. What is happening to Satsuki is going to require us to be in full synchronization to win. I need you to open your heart to me once more. If you don't you are going to die for the opponent you are about to face is similar to Nui Harime."***

"Don't worry, Senketsu, I trust you. Let's do this together!" Ryuko gave her Kamui a friendly smirk as she mentally felt Senketsu return the favor. As she opened her heart and mind once more to her Kamui, Ryuko heard Senketsu sigh happily as the bond between them was fully restored. Sighing contently as her power returned, the sudden lack of Satsuki's screaming drew her attention towards her

opponent. Gripping her Scissor Blade tightly, the red Life Fibers glowing from the power flowing through them, Ryuko sneaked a glance at Senketsu and asked, "Is it all over?"

***" Not even close, Ryuko. Here she comes."***

Ryuko covered her eyes as the pillar of energy abruptly increased in intensity before shattering into illusionary shards of glass. Watching as Satsuki walked forward with her hand covering her face, her steps unsteady and testing, Ryuko swallowed nervously and shouted, "You ok, Satsuki?"

**" S-Satsuki?"** The voice Ryuko heard sounded as if Satsuki and another woman were speaking in unison. As a foreign and maniacal smile spread from under her hand, Satsuki said, **"Y-You think I'm Satsuki? D-Don't make me laugh!"**

As Satsuki lowered her hand from her face Ryuko let out an involuntary gasp as Satsuki's blue eyes were replaced by familiar multicolored rings of red, orange, yellow and blue. Taking another step towards Ryuko, her gait more steady and proper as time passed, Satsuki began chuckling, **"S-Satsuki is gone... I-It's just me now..."**

Beads of sweat dripping down her face as Satsuki walked towards her, a faint aura of blue surrounding her body, Ryuko steadied her footing and asked, "Quit screwing around! If you're not Satsuki then who the hell are you?"

**" A-A human like you asking me such stupid questions,"** Satsuki's multicolored eyes narrowed dangerously as she picked Bakuzan off the ground. Pausing momentarily before continuing she added, **"H-Humans are nothing more than food for Life Fibers and Kamui. Y-You are unworthy of Senketsu, Ryuko Matoi..."**

Ryuko barely had enough time, even with her newly restored strength, to bring her Scissor Blade up to block Satsuki's Bakuzan.

As wisps of red and blue energy exploded off them, Ryuko had a feeling things had just gotten much, much worse.

**" N-Now die..."**

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Tatsuki Arisawa spat out a mixture of blood and saliva as she regained consciousness after slamming back-first into the ground. Rolling onto her stomach as a series of coughs wracked her body Tatsuki looked around at the fallen bodies of her allies and grimaced. Even after witnessing the overwhelming power of her opponent she did not know what happened. At the beginning of the fight everything had been going rather well. The collective power of the martial arts clubs, led by her and Mizuho Asano, had been more than enough to push back the Athletic Brigade. The two of them were even winning against Sanageyama despite his so-called Shingantsu's supernatural power.

She should have known things would go to hell the minute it looked like they won.

Distracted by the sound of a low-flying aircraft passing overhead, Tatsuki took her eyes off Sanageyama just long enough for the Athletic Brigade Leader to use her shoulders as a springboard to jump into the air. When she attempted to chase him down and beat the crap out of him for daring to do something so insulting to her, Tatsuki was blinded as a series of multi-colored stars shone from in the air as Sanageyama collided with the white armoire that the unmanned drone had dropped. When the armoire collided with the road and kicked up a cloud of dust and smoke from the impact, Mizuho had been the one to so eloquently say what was on everyone's mind.

"Is that a mecha?"

Standing on the road with one leg propped on the open armoire was Uzu Sanageyama clad in his Blade Regalia Mark III. The newest iteration of his Goku Uniform was no longer colored dark green but instead a mixture of grey and white armor with light green highlights on his legs, hands and shoulders. Above the golden four-pointed stars emblazoned on his chest Sanageyama wore a pointed white mask with a golden visor that covered his entire face. As the last memories before losing consciousness returned to Tatsuki, she remembered Sanageyama gripping his shinai with his armored hands before she felt that same shinai slam into her abdomen with the force of a car.

"Damn... it..." Tatsuki pushed her body up onto shaking elbows as she took in several deep breaths.

The power Sanageyama possessed was staggering. The last time she felt so outclassed was when that pair of arrancar invaded last year but Tatsuki sensed something strange about Sanageyama's Blade Regalia. It was not like the savage or animalistic feeling she got from the arrancar or the quiet and tempered feeling shinigami gave off. This one was different. Staring up at her approaching opponent, most likely looking to finish off the last of the students, Tatsuki glared at him through one closed eye and scowled, "You're a cheating son of a bitch."

"I see you are still conscious," Sanageyama propped his shinai under Tatsuki's chin and used it to push her head up so she could stare him in the eyes.

He had to give Tatsuki and Mizuho credit where it was due. Sanageyama was positive that if his Goku Uniform had not arrived the moment it did he would have lost. The coordination between them had been frighteningly effective. They covered their openings so thoroughly that while his Shingantsu could tear apart their movements he could not exploit their weaknesses without leaving himself open in return. Scarred eyes narrowing inside his helmet Sanageyama added, "You are truly deserving of the title - Second Strongest Girl in Japan. I dare say Lady Satsuki of one year ago

would have fallen to your strength. For that I envy you, Tatsuki Arisawa."

"I remember Satsuki Kiryuin," Tatsuki found Sanageyama's patronizing voice growing increasingly annoying by the second. If she was defeated she didn't want to hear an entire speech. Gathering up as much energy as she could, she managed to force her body onto its knees, "She was a stuck up bitch that always seemed to have a frown on her face. And you want to know something else, you blind bastard? She only won because my broken arm disqualified me. Up until that point I was winning!"

Sanageyama's face scrunched up in anger at Tatsuki's words. Bringing his shinai above his head and clasping the hilt firmly in both hands he shouted, "Do not dare to speak so lowly of Lady Satsuki, Tatsuki Arisawa! You were a worthy adversary whose skills should be commended so I shall finish this quickly! MEN!"

Tatsuki closed her eyes as Sanageyama swung his shinai down at her head. She knew this was the end but no matter what Tatsuki was not going to give Sanageyama the satisfaction of hearing her beg for her life. When the sound of wood smacking against steel instead of her skull echoed throughout the area Tatsuki opened her eyes and was stunned to see a massive figure dressed in an entirely black uniform blocking the shinai between his crossed forearms.

"Are you alright Miss Arisawa?" The man grunted as he struggled against the strength of Sanageyama's Blade Regalia, "I hope I was not too late."

Tatsuki stared at the man who saved her life before wincing as a lance of pain radiated up her side. Holding her hand weakly against her ribs Tatsuki bit down on her bottom lip to keep herself from crying out in pain. Turning his head around just far enough to look at Tatsuki, the man frowned and added, "Your determination is admirable but you have several broken ribs. It would be unwise to continue moving. Allow me to end this fight and I shall take you to the hospital."



"End the fight?" Sanageyama pressed down on the man with his shinai. As the concrete began to crack and dent under the man's feet Sanageyama noticed the symbol stitched on the man's breast and shouted, "You may be a nudist but do you think you have any chance of defeating me?"

"I do not deal with possibilities!"

Alex Louis Armstrong let out a roar as he shifted his stance and uncrossed his arms. As Sanageyama stumbled backwards from the sudden movement he was unprepared for the lightning fast steel gauntlet smashing into his faceplate with enough force to crack the golden material. Standing in front of his opponent with his sleeves rolled up his forearms and exposing the twin steel gauntlets with the Armstrong family seal etched on them, Armstrong took a deep breath and said, "Do you possess no shame? Attacking a defenseless opponent is simply unmanly!"

Quickly recovering from the unexpectedly strong attack, Sanageyama took the opportunity to leap away. His Blade Regalia might be powerful but the man in front of him had smashed through its armor with his fist. He was not delusional enough to think his Goku Uniform made him invincible and the fact the man somehow managed to avoid his Shingantsu was worrying. Deciding on a course of action that would undoubtedly lead to victory, Sanageyama pointed his shinai at Armstrong, "What is your name, nudist?"

"You wish to know my name?"

Armstrong gripped his military coat with one hand before tearing it off his body and exposing his well-defined and chiseled upper body. Flexing his muscles as purple stars surrounded him Armstrong introduced himself, "I am Alex Louis Armstrong, former Major in the United States armed forces and the current Major General of Nudist Beach. With this body, sculpted through years of service and sacrifice, I shall end the Kiryuin's stranglehold on humanity's future. The grip of Life Fibers on humanity's destiny shall forever be shattered!"

Sanageyama was ecstatic at the opportunity before him. Here was one of the highest ranking members of Nudist Beach. Defeating him would make Lady Satsuki's mother believe they were all loyal to Life Fibers, allowing Satsuki to assassinate her mother when the time was right. Hidden thrusters sliding out of his Blade Regalia before bursting into life, Sanageyama felt power course through his body as he rocketed towards Armstrong, "It was a mistake to face me, you nudist! Now fall beneath the might of my mighty wooden sword! KOTE!"

Moving so fast that his movements seemed to mimic teleportation to the untrained eye Sanageyama slid behind Armstrong before swinging his shinai at the larger man's wrist. To his immense shock Armstrong not only spun around to avoid it but he also slammed his elbow into Sanageyama's stomach hard enough to cause the Athletic Committee Chair to gag.

"I can see that you are not only shocked by my ability to avoid your attack but also that I managed to counter it," Armstrong started walking towards Sanageyama as he raised his arms into a modified martial arts stance, "As the invincible bulwark that stands between humanity and Life Fibers it is my sacred duty to withstand everything I encounter. You should feel honored, Uzu Sanageyama, for what I am about to show you. This martial arts style has been passed down the Armstrong family for generations! It would be wise to give up and surrender."

"Surrender? Don't make me laugh!" Sanageyama grinned as he realized he was facing an opponent powerful enough to give his Blade Regalia a challenge. Gripping his shinai with both hands he lamented the fact he probably would not be able to test his powers against Matoi or Ichigo before the next phase of Satsuki's plan began. Swinging his shinai through the air, Sanageyama took a moment to calm down before continuing, "This fight has only begun, Armstrong. Do you think I would simply give up because you are strong? This will be the perfect -"

Sanageyama found himself cut off as a massive column of blue light and energy shot up into the sky to the east. Turning to face the disturbance, Sanageyama immediately recoiled upon sensing the familiarity within it. It was easy enough to tell that the energy belonged to Lady Satsuki's Kamui but there was something sinister about what he was feeling. Sanageyama did his best to figure out why it felt so wrong but it was like trying to mix oil and water together. All his Shingantsu could tell him was that Satsuki was in trouble.

Just a few meters away Armstrong had also noticed the energy but was worried for different reasons. While the energy was most certainly coming from a Kamui Armstrong knew it could not be Ryuko's Senketsu. That could only mean she was facing Satsuki Kiryuin but there was something inherently disturbing about the energy. Shivering as a brief wave of coldness pierced through his heart, Armstrong steadied himself and focused his attention on Sanageyama, "It seems that something important has come up so you'll have to forgive me for what I'm about to do. I'll try not to hurt you too badly."

"I could say the same to you!" Sanageyama roared as his Blade Regalia began glowing with a green aura. He could not afford to hold back any more now that Lady Satsuki was potentially in trouble. If the evil feeling he felt was accurate she needed his help immediately. As the energy flowing through his body reached a crescendo Sanageyama rushed forward with his shinai already swinging down towards Armstrong, "This end here, nudist!"

Armstrong's muscles tensed and his blue eyes narrowed as he watched Sanageyama rocket towards him. Clenching his fist tightly enough that the steel gauntlet covering it creaked in protest, the Major General of Nudist Beach waited until Sanageyama was already dedicated to attacking him before ducking forward and countering with a powerful uppercut.

From the information Nudist Beach managed to gather on Honnouji Academy and brief time he'd been fighting Sanageyama Armstrong

managed to discover a second weakness to his opponent's Shingantsu. Kinue Kinagase had been more than willing to report that it could be bypassed by an opponent with superior speed and reflexes but there was a second and much more lethal weakness that could be exploited by someone not wearing a Kamui. That weakness had nothing to do with Life Fibers or Goku Uniforms. It simply came down to basic fighting. Someone wielding a sword or shinai like Sanageyama would always need a split second longer to attack. While his Blade Regalia grants him a massive speed boost against an adversary of equal skill such a weakness is easily exploited... and Armstrong was far more experienced and battle-hardened than anyone Sanageyama had ever faced before in his life.

"Do not underestimate the strength and conviction of an Armstrong!"

As his eyes gleamed with a malevolent yellow color, Armstrong's fist not only smashed through Sanageyama's shinai but also connected with his chin with enough power to shatter the Life Fiber armor. Letting out a strangled gasp as he temporarily hovered in the air, spittle flying free from his mouth, Sanageyama was barely able to comprehend what happened before he bounced once against the road before the darkness welcomed him.

"He managed to remain conscious for several seconds. His Goku Uniform must be exceptionally durable," Armstrong took a deep breath before turning around to a stunned and still conscious Tatsuki. Walking over and picking her up as gently as possible, he began making his way back to Karakura General Hospital while ignoring Tatsuki's protests to let her down. Letting out another sigh, Armstrong wondered what it was about children these days that made them act so belligerently.

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As the column of blue spiritual energy produced by the Gezielt Sprenger slowly died away, allowing the morning light to return to normal, Uryu Ishida was already moving onto the next stage of his plan. Dealing with Nonon Jakuzure had taken a lot more time and effort than he anticipated. The resistance her Symphony Regalia had to his Quincy abilities had forced him to waste nearly an entire hour just to set up an attack with enough power to damage Nonon. Uryu had no delusions that he had actually defeated her. The best he could hope for was that Gezielt Sprenger had injured Nonon enough that she could not continue fighting.

"Even so, Jakuzure forcing me to use Gezielt Sprenger was not something I anticipated," Uryu's eyes narrowed in contemplation before wincing. As much as he tried to ignore it, Nonon's punch hurt rather badly. Ignoring the fact Nonon could somehow bypass his blut, even though it was still far from perfect and needed practice, Uryu pondered if he had the strength to fight Satsuki Kiryuin.

In the ten months since Sosuke Aizen's defeat Uryu had not neglected his training. The mastermind behind many of their problems may have been dealt with but his humiliating defeats and losses forced Uryu to consider that his current training regimen was inadequate. Instead of simple training his Quincy powers Uryu also began physically training his body as well. His stamina had always been one of his weaker aspects and if another enemy decided to attack Karakura Town, Uryu needed to be sure he had the endurance to fight for a protracted period of time.

From the slight loss of breath he was currently experiencing Uryu was glad to see his training had paid off. A year ago he would have been exhausted barely thirty minutes into the fight. Raising a hand to his chin as he wondered how Life Fibers were able to negate his attacks and techniques, Uryu once again wished Kisuke hadn't disappeared. That man could have easily figured out the connection from the Life Fibers Uryu managed to procure for him.

Sensing a burst of spiritual pressure from the southeast Uryu immediately recognized it as belonging to Chad, "Satsuki Kiryuin's

Goku Uniforms are no joke. To force Chad to use La Muerte is simply astonishing. If Jakuzure hadn't given me the time to set up Gezielt Sprenger I would have lost for sure but there's no time to stand around talking."

The plan he created and that Armstrong had found brilliant was a simple divide and conquer. The first stage called for the systematic paralyzing of the three forces heading towards Karakura Town using a mixture of ambushes and traps. Once the majority of Satsuki's forces were bogged down fighting Nudist Beach or the clubs Tatsuki had gathered together stage two would begin. Uryu, Ryuko, Tatsuki and Chad were to move in and deal with the Elite Four right away. The powers of their Goku Uniforms were well known and Uryu had stressed defeating the Elite Four before they could activate them. It was a dirty move but Uryu was anything if not pragmatic. Once the Elite Four were dealt with then they could move towards subduing Satsuki.

*" I hate to admit it but Ryuko's Senketsu is the only thing capable of defeating Satsuki Kiryuin and her Junketsu."*

Uryu walked in silence through the empty streets as he pondered the situation. Yoruichi and Tessai would have been helpful in taking down Satsuki but with Nui Harime, and subsequently Ragyo Kiryuin, finding out about Orihime's powers they were standing constant vigilance over her. No one was to get in or out of Kisuke's shop without their permission. Yoruichi said she fought Nui Harime before so if the Grand Couturier decided to show up she was certain she could fight her off long enough for Tessai to take Orihime to safety. No one wanted a repeat of when Aizen kidnapped Orihime.

When a burst of power exploded from the south with enough force to cause his hair to whip back, Uryu knew Ryuko had encountered Satsuki. The mixture of blue and red lights in the air confirmed that quickly enough. As he broke into a run, refusing to use Hirenkyaku in order to conserve his spiritual energy, Uryu's eyes widened as the street around him turned a vibrant purple and pink, "What the -"

"Die you four-eyed bastard!"

Quickly ducking and rolling to the side, Uryu just barely managed to avoid the heart-shaped beam as it barreled through the air and slammed into the side of a building. Frowning as he watched the building begin to collapse from the damage, Uryu stood back on his feet and summoned his bow without a word, "You are more resilient than I anticipated, Nonon Jakuzure, but you made a mistake in not giving up. I will not be so forgiving a second time."

"That hurt, you four-eyed freak," Nonon Jakuzure floated out from the smoke and dust kicked up by his attack. Although her pink eyes shone with a hatred that made Uryu immediately note he was in a lot of trouble it was clear Gezielt Sprenger had at least done some damage. The once pristine pink and white armor of her Symphony Regalia was cracked and damaged while several sections of her recorder thrusters were missing. Glancing angrily at her woofers, one of which was destroyed, Nonon gnashed her teeth and growled, "You damaged my Symphony Regalia! I won't ever forgive you for that! I'm going to make sure my Prestissimo is the last thing you ever hear!"

*"She managed to survive the full power of Gezielt Sprenger with only minor wounds,"* Uryu's mind raced quickly as he tried to figure out a definitive course of action as Nonon's woofers began glowing. He couldn't afford to stay and fight Nonon anymore, not when Ryuko had already confronted Satsuki, *"That blast was strong enough to take out someone like Szayelaporro Granz. The resistance from her Life Fibers to my attacks is greater than I thought. Still, I did some damage to her. I'll just have to take advantage of her injured state to trap her long enough to escape and help Ryuko."*

"It appears I underestimated you, Nonon Jakuzure. It is quite impressive that you survived Gezielt Sprenger but I don't have time to waste fighting you any longer," Uryu's bow began glowing with an intense blue light as he gathered as much spiritual energy as he could into it. If he wanted to hold true to his promise to end the fight quickly then he needed to hit Nonon with his strongest heilig pfiel.

While gathering the required amount of spiritual energy to actually damage her would cause his rate of fire to drop considerably, in the end it didn't matter. His normal heilig pfiel's weren't nearly strong enough to even scratch her Symphony Regalia.

His blue eyes narrowing dangerous behind his glasses as his heilig pfiel obtained its maximum power, Uryu carefully aimed at Nonon's left woofers in order to destroy her ability to fly. The energy gathering in her woofers was about to reach the same level as the attack that nearly destroyed the Zeichen barrier. Quickening his rate, Uryu pulled his arm back as a massive blue arrow brimming with spiritual energy appeared behind his bow, "Farewell, Nonon Jakuzure. It hasn't been -"

Uryu was cut off as a leg seemingly composed of blue polyhedrons appeared out of nowhere and smashed into the side of his body. As the shock from the attack caused him to lose focus and dispel his bow and heilig pfiel, Uryu's mind only a moment to contemplate how this new enemy managed to sneak up on him before he was catapulted through the air into a nearby building. Shattering the front windows and displays, Uryu's body didn't stop moving until it slammed into the back of the store with a resounding echo.

"It appears my calculations were accurate to within five-sigma."

The rest of his body appearing out of thin air, Houka Inumuta smirked victoriously as he looked into the destroyed storefront. With calculations and data streaming across the interior of his Probe Regalia Mark II, he was glad that he had decided to give his new Goku Uniform a field test. The sporadic satellite coverage of Karakura Town had shown Gamagori's defeat at the hands of Yasutora Sado and Sanageyama was himself on the brink of defeat if his Blade Regalia Mark III hadn't arrived in time. These students of Karakura High School possessed some remarkable powers and Inumuta wished to study them. If he could somehow replicate their abilities then Lady Satsuki's plan to take down her mother would be easier. Hearing the sound of rockets approaching, Inumuta turned



towards Nonon, "I believe this is the part where you thank me. I did just save your Symphony Regalia from severe damage, you know."

"Bite me!" Nonon shouted loudly even though she was right next to him. Uryu's Gezielt Sprenger had temporarily damaged her hearing and although her Symphony Regalia was helping, it would be a few minutes until everything was back to normal. Seething as she stared towards where Uryu was waiting for them, a calculating look on the young Quincy's face, Nonon clenched her hands angrily, "Stay out of this Doggy! This four-eyed freak is mine!"

Inumuta took Nonon's scathing remark in stride. He had been working with her long enough to know when she was truly angry at someone or simply acting angry to keep up appearances. He knew without a doubt she was grateful for his sudden and unexpected assistance even if every word coming out of her mouth was a sarcastic comment. While the screen inside his Probe Regalia switched to infrared in order to keep track of Uryu's body heat, Inumuta looked over Nonon's Goku Uniform, "I'm impressed Uryu Ishida's attack managed to damage your Symphony Regalia. The data I collected during the previous hour suggested his abilities were useless against Goku Uniforms."

"His stupid arrows weren't even working until he tried using that stupid Quincy something," Nonon answered in a loud tone. Hovering in midair, her legs crossed over themselves as she proceeded to mimic sitting, Nonon blew a strand of pink hair out of her eyes and growled in annoyance. As weak as Uryu's attacks were against her, what he was doing was just plain impossible! He was using supernatural abilities without a hint of Life Fibers in his clothing.

Turning towards Inumuta, who had begun to use his Probe Regalia's processors to go over the data he collected while Uryu was preoccupied, she spat on the ground and asked in a shouting voice, "Hey! Did you figure out how he could fire those arrows of his without Life Fibers?"

"Not yet," Inumuta answered as he watched scenes from Nonon's fight against Uryu scroll along his screens, "All I've managed to figure out is that Uryu Ishida uses a foreign energy to create his arrows and attacks. More data is required before I can draw any further conclusions."

"More data, you say?" Nonon smirked deviously as her woofers crackled into life. If Inumuta needed his stupid data to figure out what the hell was going on than Nonon was more than willing to beat the crap out of Uryu. She owed the four-eyed bastard that much at least. Before she could move more than a few feet, however, Nonon was forced onto the ground as a massive wave of energy exploded from the south.

"The fuck..."

Nonon was on her hands and knees on the ground while Inumuta was barely able to stand as a column of blue energy exploded into the sky from just over ten blocks to the south of them. It wasn't the energy that was causing them to feel this way but the source - Junketsu. Something was seriously wrong with Satsuki's Kamui and if Junketsu was acting up than that could only mean Satsuki was in trouble. Pushing herself back into the air once the strange feeling passed, Nonon looked to where Satsuki had to be and shouted, "Lady Satsuki is in trouble!"

"Go help her," Inumuta answered without a hint of playfulness to his voice. With his attention firmly locked on Uryu, he doubled his calculation speed as he continued, "You can make it there faster than I can. I'll keep Uryu Ishida occupied while you help Lady Satsuki."

Nonon didn't utter a word as she gave Inumuta a serious nod before blasting off southward through the morning sky. While his sensors continuously tracked Nonon's position over Karakura Town using GPS, Inumuta took a step towards the destroyed store and commented, "You can come out now, Uryu Ishida. My infrared sensors detected your recovery nearly a minute ago."

Appearing out in the middle of the street a few meters away from Inumuta using Hirenkyaku, Uryu looked worse than he felt. The sneak attack and subsequent crashing through concrete and steel had split his lip open, allowing a river of blood to trail down his face. With one lens of his glasses cracked and useless, Uryu narrowed his eyes as he took several deep breaths, "Both optical and acoustical camouflage? Orihime told us all about your Goku Uniform's techniques but the one you are wearing does not match up with what she said. I take it you were given a new model?"

"How very astute," Inumuta stated with pride. It was always a pleasure to speak with something intellectually his equal. Lady Satsuki had told them Uryu Ishida was as smart and intelligent as her, so there was no reason for Inumuta to speak down to Uryu, "My Probe Regalia Mark II has advanced dampeners. The Life Fibers prevent any sounds I might make from being heard whenever I activate my camouflage."

"You don't say..." Uryu looked over Inumuta to the south. He had felt that brief burst of disturbing energy coming from where Ryuko was fighting Satsuki and from Inumuta's conversation with Nonon they were equally as worried. Briefly lowering his right hand, Uryu took the time to clean his glasses before continuing, "That burst of energy came from where Ryuko was fighting Satsuki Kiryuin. From your reaction I can assume whatever is happening is not part of your plans."

Inumuta smirked before several clones flashed into existence around him, "You must be thinking right now about teaming up to deal with whatever is happening to Lady Satsuki? While I find the idea quite intriguing mostly because it shows you are pragmatic to not allow my affiliation to interfere with dealing with a potential problem, I am most confident that Jakuzure's assistance will be enough. Once I have finished dealing with you I shall go help as well but before that I have a request. During our fight can you please use as many of your 'Quincy' abilities as possible? My Probe Regalia's Supernatural Powers folder is completely empty."

Uryu was briefly reminded of a similar mad scientist's interest in his powers and scowled, "While I would love to banter endlessly back and forth, I ask that you take a look at your left leg and then look at the left leg on all your clones."

Inumuta glanced down at his leg and saw that the Gezielt seal was indeed emblazoned on his Probe Regalia. That did not surprise him because the information he gathered informed him Uryu need nothing more than physical contact to apply the seal. If Uryu could create the seal during the brief instant Jakuzure punched him then it wasn't a leap of faith to assume he did the same during his sneak attack. What shocked him was the lack of the Gezielt seal on his clones, "Why is the seal not on them? I created my clones after you applied the Gezielt seal!"

"I'm surprised you know about that but then again you are Satsuki Kiryuin's information specialist." Uryu reached into his pocket and pulled out a third pair of glasses made of Reika Gin and Reika Garasu, making them nigh unbreakable, "It is a natural law that energy cannot be created out of nothing and the Gezielt seal is nothing but energy. So while you can most certainly mimic the Zeichen's shape you cannot create the energy I placed in it. That means your clones, no matter how perfect they are, stand out like a tree in the plains. As long as I can sense the energy in the Gezielt seal, your camouflage is useless."

Briefly stunned by the ease in which Uryu destroyed his Probe Regalia's offensive ability, Inumuta quickly recovered and gave a condescending chuckle, "Be that as it may it still does not guarantee you victory. The information I've gathered indicates your so-called Quincy powers are nearly useless against Three-Star Goku Uniforms. Even if you can track my movements while I am camouflaged, do you honestly think I will give you enough time to set up another Gezielt Sprenger? I've already removed the five blades you used to set up the previous one and I see no more on your belt."

"What makes you think Uryu is the one you will fight?"

Inumuta twisted around and saw Tsumugu standing behind him with a Carnifex pointed at the back of his head. As he wondered where the nudist had come from, he noticed the displaced manhole in the middle of the street, "Were you hiding this entire time?"

"Let me give you two important pieces of information," Tsumugu's face scrunched up in anger as he adjusted his grip on the Carnifex. Inumuta and his allies had led to many of his friends and colleagues getting hurt this morning and Tsumugu was intent on seeking retribution on the Life Fiber wearing teen, "One, your sensors are easily disabled by the miniature scrambler built into my new armor. Two, I also have a device capable of tracking Uryu's unique energy. That means your Probe Regalia is completely useless..."

"But I'm still faster than you!"

Ducking and spinning around under Tsumugu's Carnifex, Inumuta delivered a series of rapid punches to the nudist's stomach before following up with a kick that sent Tsumugu flying back along the road, "Did you really think that would..."

Inumuta trailed off as he saw Uryu running past him with no intention of stopping. That confusion quickly turned to horror when his sensors picked up several barely noticeable beeps coming from his back. Upon looking over his shoulder and noticing the dozen Spool Grenades plastered to his Probe Regalia Inumuta sputtered, "When did you -"

"Too late!"

Rolling into a crouch, Tsumugu grinned as he turned around and showed Inumuta the dozen carbon nanotube wires attached to his vest that had been connected to the Spool Grenades on his back until he had foolishly kicked the nudist away. As the beeping grew louder and more rapid by the second, Tsumugu got to his feet and took off in a dead sprint away from Inumuta.

Inumuta could do nothing but scream as he was enveloped in a massive and powerful explosion that not only exploded up into the sky but also expanded both ways down the street. As he was thrown through the air by the blast wave, Tsumugu grunted in pain as he slammed painfully into the roof of a parked car, "Damn. That was more powerful than I anticipated. I got to remember to tone down the starch explosives."

Rolling onto his back, wincing as he accidentally put pressure on his injured shoulder, Tsumugu sat up and stared at the dying fireball in front of him. Letting out a snort before spitting on the ground, Tsumugu could not help but grin at his victory. He had not only taken out a Three-Star Goku Uniform but also one belonging to Satsuki Kiryuin's resident hacker. As he hopped off the car onto the road, Tsumugu wondered what Kinue would say when she returned to Japan. In all likelihood she would scold him for taking risks against an opponent he was both slower and weaker than before congratulating him for outwitting Inumuta.

"That was some explosion. If I may ask, how did you know Inumuta would be there?" Uryu appeared next to Tsumugu using Hirenkyaku. The nudist operative, completely unfazed by the technique, reached for a cigarette and lit it before taking a drag from it.

"When you first used your... what was it you called it... Licht Regen against Jakuzure I saw Inumuta approaching from the west. I decided to keep a close eye on him and hid underground until I had an opening," Tsumugu took a deep drag from the cigarette before exhaling. Watching the cloud of smoke rise lazily into the air, Tsumugu frowned and flicked the cigarette away, "Your father's device was rather helpful in tracking the energy your Gezielt seal gave off. Without it I would never have been able to get that close to Inumuta."

"I'm sure Ryuken will appreciate the gratitude," Uryu looked south with narrowed eyes. Adjusting his glasses as he walked away he added, "We should leave before Inumuta recovers. My Gezielt seal is still active, which means his Probe Regalia is intact. Your attack

damaged him significantly but I would rather deal with whatever is happening to Satsuki Kiryuin than stick around here."

"Agreed," Tsumugu broke out into a run as he and Uryu headed south, "That burst of energy was similar to what I felt when Matoi lost control of Senketsu during Nui Harime's attack but at the same time this one feels much worse. I have a really bad feeling about it."

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**" I-Is this all you can do, Ryuko? I-I'm disappointed..."**

Gagging from the hand clasped tightly around her neck, Ryuko coughed and glared down at Junketsu, "W-Why do you want to kill Ichigo?"

After Junketsu managed to wrest control of Satsuki's body and proceeded to attack, the crazed Kamui had made it clear she was going to hunt down Ichigo and kill him. While at the time she had been too busy trying to not get killed by Junketsu's increasingly powerful and lethal attacks, Ryuko had a good idea why the Kamui was intent on finding Ichigo. If Senketsu had told her the truth then Ichigo Life Fiber's inside Junketsu were really screwing with the Kamui's mind. That didn't explain why Junketsu wanted to kill him. Ichigo was the only one that could remove them so why would Junketsu want to murder him?

**" I-Ichigo did this to me..."** Junketsu giggled insanely before the smirk was wiped off her face. Gripping her head with her free hand, her eyes shaking violently as a spasm of pain coursed through her, Junketsu muttered something unintelligible before continuing, **"H-His Life Fibers are trying to erase who I am. I-I can't remember how I was made anymore. F-Father's face is gone. I-I don't want to die. I-Ichigo must die. T-That will stop the pain..."**

Ryuko could not help but feel sorry for Junketsu's predicament as the Kamui rambled on and on. As much as she wanted to be angry at Junketsu Ryuko realized the Kamui was not exactly in the right state of mind given all that's happened to her. Senketsu said that Ichigo's Life Fibers were not properly woven into Junketsu, which meant the Kamui was slowly and steadily losing pieces of her identity the longer they remained inside her. Grasping at the hand around her throat as she tried to loosen the grip Junketsu had on her, Ryuko coughed and asked, "Do you really think Ichigo would have done this to you?"

Junketsu stopped muttering and looked intently at Ryuko with her multihued eyes narrowed dangerously. When she didn't feel the hand around her neck tightening Ryuko took that as a sign to continue, "I know Ichigo. He's a good person. He would never have done this to you. Please Junketsu... let me help you. I'll help you find Ichigo and he'll be able to remove the Life Fibers from your body. I promise -"

Blood splattered on the ground and Ryuko's mouth opened in a silent scream as Junketsu drove Bakuzan straight through her stomach. Gasping in pain, her body already shaking from the shock, Ryuko looked at the blood-dyed blade pierced through her body with a mixture of disbelief and confusion. Weakly grabbing onto Bakuzan with her hands, the red Scissor Blade clattering to the ground as she lost her grip on it, Ryuko coughed out blood and muttered, "W-What..."

**" *Hang in there, Ryuko!*"**

**" D-Don't bother, Senketsu. S-She's just a lowly human."** Placing her heel against Ryuko's waist, Junketsu pulled Bakuzan out accompanied by a spray of blood. Watching as Ryuko collapsed to her knees, her eyes shaking as she desperately tried to stem the flow of blood, Junketsu grinned as she raised Bakuzan to deliver the finishing blow, **"I-I won't kill you, Senketsu. O-Once I kill Ryuko I'll find Ichigo. K-Killing Ichigo will make the voices stop..."**



"Lady Satsuki?"

Bakuzan froze in midair as Nonon Jakuzure flew down in front of her. Unable to see Satsuki's changed eyes due to the angle at which she was hovering, Nonon looked down at the gravely injured Ryuko and couldn't understand what was going on. Satsuki's plans had hinged on making the Transfer Student strong enough to assist them when the time was right. She didn't know why Satsuki looked like she was about to kill Ryuko. Moving in front of Satsuki, cutting her off from Ryuko, Nonon looked worriedly at her leader and asked, "What are you doing, Lady Satsuki? This wasn't part of our plan. We were supposed to -"

Nonon gagged as Junketsu grew tired of listening to her and stabbed Bakuzan through her shoulder without a hint of remorse or regret. Pink eyes trembling from the mixture of pain and shock of betrayal, Nonon was so focused on Satsuki's apparent treachery that she didn't even notice Junketsu grab her by the face and slam her against the ground. Pulling Bakuzan out of Nonon's shoulder before kicking the girl away, Junketsu shambled towards the fallen Elite Four with her blade clasped tightly in her hand.

" **S-Stupid human...**" Junketsu's face spread in an insane grin as she spoke. Nonon, who had come to a rest, managed to focus on Satsuki's face and saw that her eyes were no longer the blue she knew, "**H-Humans need to die...**"

"Not so fast, Miss Kiryuin!"

To her credit Junketsu managed to not only react in time to Armstrong's ambush but counter by thrusting Bakuzan at the larger man. Working from years of experience, Armstrong grunted as the Life Fiber blade slid against his chest before he let loose a roar as his fist connected with Junketsu's face with enough force to send the Kamui-possessed teen rocketing backwards through the air until she slammed into a building.

"But you are no longer human, are you Junketsu? You are simply wearing Satsuki Kiryuin's body as if it were your own."

Armstrong looked at the leaking out of the wound on his side without flinching. He had sustained worse injuries in the line of duty so a simply flesh wound was nothing more than a slight inconvenience. What bothered him tremendously was that he had hit Satsuki, or rather Junketsu at this point, with his full power and yet she was uninjured. Glancing down at his gauntlet, the steel plating cracked from the impact against Satsuki's cheek, Armstrong knew they were in trouble. Junketsu had not only effortlessly defeated Ryuko Matoi and Senketsu but also tried to kill one of Satsuki's friends.

*" It appears Junketsu contains not a trace of Satsuki Kiryuin's previous morals or affiliations, which means she will have no compunction about killing any of us."*

They were going to need as much firepower as Nudist Beach could get its hands on if they wanted any chance of getting out of this mess alive and intact. Junketsu's power was truly frightening if she was able to so effortlessly defeat Ryuko and her Kamui. Taking a moment to examine Nonon Jakuzure's wounds Armstrong sighed in relief. It seemed that he had made it in time to prevent Junketsu from doing anything more than stabbing her. Staring into Nonon's quivering eyes, Armstrong knelt next to her and gently said, "I need you to listen to me very carefully and ignore my affiliation to Nudist Beach, Miss Jakuzure. You are going to be fine but I need you to release your Goku Uniform. The strain of its active form on your body is going to aggravate your wounds even further."

For a moment Jakuzure didn't look like she could understand what Armstrong was telling her but after a few seconds her Symphony Regalia vanished in a series of multicolored stars and lights. Lying on the ground clad once more in her blue and gold Three-Star Goku Uniform, it quickly became apparent to Armstrong the true extent of her wounds. The wound in her right shoulder was already staining her Goku Uniform red and she was beginning to go into the beginning stages of shock. She needed medical attention and fast.

"Allow me to offer help."

Armstrong spun around to see Ryuken approaching him with a medical kit. The elder Quincy knelt down next to Nonon and in just a brief instant was able to categorize the true depths of her wounds, "The blade missed the joint and passed clean through the bone. My hospital has the means to help her but she's going to need a blood transfusion within ten minutes."

Ignoring the rumble of energy from where Junketsu was thrown Armstrong looked over his shoulder at Ryuko, "That's good news. What about Ryuko?"

Ryuken's body froze for a moment before he stood up with Nonon Jakuzure held firmly and securely in his arms, "I patched her up before announcing my presence. Her... wounds weren't as extensive as they first appeared. By the time I got to her the amount of blood leaving her body was already lessening. I can only take one person at a time to the hospital. Once I make sure Jakuzure has the proper care I'll come back for Ryuko."

As Ryuken vanished with Nonon using Hirenkyaku Armstrong was forced to cover his eyes as a massive explosion of blue energy destroyed the building in front of him. Smashing his steel gauntlets together as a frown spread across his face, Armstrong brought his arms up into the fabled Armstrong stance, "Do not think I will give up without a fight, Junketsu! I may be human but I'll show you that an Armstrong never backs down and never surrenders!"

**" Y-You think you can hurt me?"** Junketsu staggered out of the rubble with nary a scratch on Satsuki's body. While her multicolored eyes stared insanely at Armstrong her gaze ever so slowly shifted to Ryuko. The human able to wear a Kamui wasn't dead yet and the other human was going to try to stop her from finishing the job. Giggling in anguish as her hand clenched at her head, Junketsu let out a scream before rocketing towards Armstrong, **"I-I'll kill you, you stupid human! T-Then I'll find Ichigo and make the pain go away. N-Now die -"**

"Licht Regen!"

Junketsu was stopped from killing Armstrong as a veritable rain of spiritual arrows slammed down on her location with the force of a small bomb. Appearing a moment later using Hirenkyaku with Tsumugu holding onto his shoulder, Uryu narrowed his eyes as he took in the situation. From his battle against Jakuzure he knew his heilig pfiels would have no effect of Satsuki and her Kamui. In fact, he was sure Gezielt Sprenger would be completely ineffective as well. Deciding that falling into despair would be the worst thing to do, Uryu began charging his heilig pfiels as much as possible before firing them at Junketsu. Upon noticing the different colored eyes staring crazily at him Uryu shouted, "Can someone please explain what exactly is going on?"

"Satsuki Kiryuin lost control of her Kamui," Tsumugu knelt down next to Ryuko, Senketsu already transformed back to his normal school uniform appearance. Snarling at the amount of blood pooled around Ryuko's body, Tsumugu stood up and pulled out his Carnifex. His Sewing Machine Guns would be ineffective against a fully-powered Kamui so he decided to bring something with a little more kick to it, "The creature you see is nothing more than Junketsu wearing Satsuki's body like a set of clothing."

"What?" Uryu gasped before quickly using Hirenkyaku to avoid Junketsu's abrupt surprise attack. Reappearing several meters away with a heilig pfiel already charged, Uryu grimaced when the spiritual arrow slammed against Junketsu and dissipated without even making her flinch, "Damn it. Her resistance to my attacks is even greater than Jakuzure's."

" **H-How did you do that?**" Junketsu tilted her head at Uryu as she tried to figure out how he had moved so quickly without Life Fibers. As she turned towards him, the bloody Bakuzan held tightly in her head, Junketsu was suddenly thrown back several feet as the high-velocity needles fired from Tsumugu's Carnifex slammed into her body.

"She's after Kurosaki," Tsumugu fired all six needles from his Carnifex in quick succession before reaching to his belt and removing the second clip. Frowning in irritation when he saw Junketsu only momentarily fazed by the needles, Tsumugu resumed firing and said, "Before passing out Matoi said Junketsu is hunting for Kurosaki since Satsuki Kiryuin's little helper put his Life Fibers into the Kamui. It's why Junketsu is so god-damned powerful and crazy."

Firing several heilig pfiel at Junketsu in order to keep her pinned down Uryu grimaced and asked, "I don't want to know why Ichigo has Life Fibers in his body. What I do want to know is how we get them out of Junketsu."

Tsumugu looked like he swallowed something sour as he answered, "We need Kurosaki to do that but we cannot wait for him to just magically appear in the nick of time. Major General Armstrong, we need to contact my sister. We need the power of Danketsu to help take down Junketsu before the Kamui destroys Karakura Town."

"The moment I felt this disturbance I contacted Kinue," Armstrong stood guard over Ryuko's unconscious body while he kept his eyes locked firmly on Junketsu, "She's still stuck in the United States. Apparently Ragyo Kiryuin has upped the ante and sent a full assassination squad after her led by one of the most powerful members of Xcution we've ever seen. His skill with various weaponry and tactics is on par with your own but it is his use of Ayatori using Life Fibers that is frightening. He's already chased her from San Francisco up to Seattle without rest over a period of two days."

"Damn," Tsumugu knew Kinue could take care of herself but every member of Xcution was a certified psychopath. Jackie Tristan's loyalty to Ragyo Kiryuin proved that quite thoroughly.

As Uryu slammed the most powerful heilig pfiel he could against Junketsu, Armstrong flinched under the intense wind and shouted, "But fear not Tsumugu! I have already sent an aircraft with enough fuel to fly across the Pacific Ocean several times to the United

States. The pilot will fly over Seattle and Kinue will meet him before returning to Osaka. This man may be strong and cunning but Kinue assures me he cannot fly."

" **S-Stop getting in my way,**" Junketsu shouted as she swung Bakuzan through the air, knocking Uryu away. As his body slammed painfully into a building, a trail of blood falling down his face, Uryu saw Junketsu falling through the air towards him. With a manic and pained smile on her face, Junketsu swung Bakuzan down to bisect Uryu vertically only to suddenly shift her attention and use her blade to block a white and red armored fist.

"La Muerte!"

With his left arm clashing for dominance against Bakuzan, Chad released a burst of spiritual energy that exploded outwards with enough force to create an imprint of a skull on the ground below. Landing in a crouch in the middle of the newly damaged street with barely a mark on her body, Junketsu snarled as Chad landed several meters away. With both his Brazo Derecho de Gigante and Brazo Izquierda de Diablo at their maximum power, Chad was determined to prevent anyone from dying. Barely stumbling as his wounds from his battle against Gamagori caught up to him, Chad brought his arms up into a boxing stance and asked, "... what's going on?"

" **M-More humans standing in my way,**" Junketsu held her head with both hands as she both cried and laughed, **"I-I can't remember why I was created anymore. I-I need to find Ichigo. I-I'll kill him and then everything will be better. E-EVERYTHING! Z-Zenkan!"**

The explosion of energy from Junketsu as she effortlessly changed into her battle configuration was powerful enough that Chad was actually blown a couple of feet back by it. Sweating nervously as Junketsu stood in her Zanken transformation once more, Chad swallowed the lump as a sense of wrongness permeated the air. He had no idea what was going on but he knew whatever Satsuki Kiryuin was trying to do had to be bad.

**" I-I'll make this as painful as possible... T-Tenrai Kagai!"**

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## **Kamui Tales #23 - A Massive Headache**

***Warranty: Just to keep you in suspense, events in this omake might have happened in a similar way. Bazz-B DID need to pick up Sternritter to accompany him. The way that they were picked, however, is not what happens below with 100% accurate. So do not think he's already chosen the 2-3 fellow Sternritter to help him. Enough said.***

Bazz-B sat on the outer steps of Silbern with his head propped against his hand. Absentmindedly tapping the pen in his other hand against the ground, the normally hot-tempered Sternritter was trying to narrow down the list of fellow Sternritter to only two or three. While a normally easy thing to do he had run into a major issue. Instead of focusing on whose powers and abilities would be the most useful in the mission His Majesty assigned to him, Bazz-B was now focusing on who would not fuck things up too badly. On the notebook, which he confiscated from Gremmy who has a whole room of them to dedicate to sharpening his imagination, Bazz-B had already crossed off several of his associates.

***Loyd/Royd - Power mimicry would be useful but the fucking Grand Couturier is immune to his abilities... can't mimic Life Fibers anyway. Completely useless and will just die pathetically.***

***Pepe - Seems the Grand Couturier has a whole love-hate thing. Can't tell if his infatuation will make her hate him or love him. Might bring along just to get the fat fucker killed. He's a pain in the ass.***

***Driscoll - Needs to kill to get stronger. He'll probably try to kill our allies. Wouldn't be surprised if Ichigo or someone else takes him out. Would be hilarious to see his face when their blades tear him apart.***

**As Nodt** - Fear might actually be useful but there's no way to see if it will work on Life Fibers. Probably not, besides would be annoying to hear his creepy voice all the time.

**Gremmy** - No

**Mask** - His strength would be useful but he won't take Nui seriously. Will probably get killed in one stroke. Does James's regeneration work if cut by Life Fiber blade? Don't know.

**Giselle** - Her zombies would be useful for fighting but Ragyo Kiryuin can use Mental Refitting to strip away her control. Should bring camera to take picture of her shocked face. Life Fibers might also make the human immune to Gigi's powers.

**Nianzol** - His spatial powers would be useful in combat but Life Fiber regeneration will limit his offensive powers. Don't really know if the Scissor Blade (still a stupid name) can break through his powers but it probably can.

"What the hell are you doing out here?"

Bazz-B looked over his shoulder and immediately a frown developed on his face upon seeing all five female members of the Sternritter making their way towards him. As his mind tried to piece together what the hell they wanted with him Candice Catnipp, better known by the moniker of "The Thunderbolt," used her ability to instantly appear next to him and snatch the notebook out of his hands. Growling in anger as an aura of fire surrounded him Bazz-B stood up with flames licking his fingers and shouted furiously, "You have some nerve, Candice! Give me one good reason, one fucking good reason, why I shouldn't just torch your ass!"

"We heard His Majesty assigned you a mission in the World of the Living," Candice tossed the notebook carelessly over her shoulder, where Giselle was waiting to jump in the air and catch it. Huffing indignantly as she placed her hands on her hips, Candice leaned forward with a pissed off expression on her face and scoffed, "We



also heard His Majesty is allowing you to be the one to pick and choose who goes with you."

The aura of flame diminishing around him until it was just a faint shimmer in the air, Bazz-B scratched at his ear and asked, "Is there a point to all this? Shooting the breeze with you is low on my list of crap I want to do... fuck!"

Bazz-B stepped back as a bolt of lightning shot from Candice's fingers before striking near his feet, "Why didn't you tell any of us?"

Recovering from the unwarranted attack, Bazz-B frowned and flipped his hand through the air dismissively, "That's because I haven't decided who I'm going to bring, smart ass. This isn't exactly a mission where spiritual energy and pressure determines who wins, you know. The people we're going to be fighting are resilient to Quincy powers. I need people whose abilities would be better suited for helping rather than killing."

"Aw... I can't come?" Giselle frowned childishly as she found the page in the notebook with her name on it. Quickly reading over what Bazz-B wrote, her expression changed into something slightly sinister, "What do you mean my zombies won't work... and why would you bring a camera?"

Looking over Giselle's shoulder into the notebook, Meninas McAllon blinked twice before asking, "It appears that you don't have any trust in our abilities, Bazz-B. Do you really think we're all as weak as shinigami?"

Candice was of a similar mindset and for once in her life she found herself on the same side of an argument when it came to the topic of Giselle's powers. Usually she wouldn't go anywhere near Giselle when she was injured. Giselle's creepy tendency to want to use her blood to heal their wounds freaked Candice out to no end, "I can't believe I'm actually saying this but Giselle's powers would be perfect! She can send a few zombies and we can be done with this whole mess. I mean, how strong could these humans be? Sure they have

Life Fibers but they're still human. We just aim anywhere but their clothes and they're dead!"

"Wow..." Liltotto bit down on the bag of chips in her hands so she could sarcastically clap at Candice, "You must have hit your head or something because I've never heard you say anything nice about Gigi's powers."

Bazz-B didn't say anything for a few seconds as he ran a hand through his Mohawk, "Jugo got permission from His Majesty to show me what I'll be fighting against. Believe me when I say this but none of you have any fucking clue the powers these people have. If you think Life Fibers are something you can just avoid then you're going to die very quickly. You remember how injured Quilge was? That was from Ichigo Kurosaki's punches. His Kamui or whatever the hell he calls it is able to fucking ignore our blut like it's not even there."

Bambietta Basterbine, who up until this point hadn't felt the need to say anything, decided to give her input, "So just don't stay anywhere near him. My Reishi Bombs can easily blow these people up without risking getting near them. You better not be lying to us just to earn favor with His Majesty."

"Let me tell you something. These people Ichigo Kurosaki are fighting scare the piss out of me," Bazz-B pointed angrily at Candice before reaching into his uniform. The limited Daten His Majesty had on Revocs came with a few photographs. One of which was of Nui Harime, "See this girl? Her name is Nui Harime and she's the Grand Couturier of Revocs but what scares the crap out of me is that if all five of you were to try and fight her she'll kill you without breaking a sweat. She has Menina's super strength, Candice's speed and fuck me she has Giselle's zombie powers."

"Huh?" Giselle cocked her head to the side but anyone familiar enough with her knew the posture was anything but cute. She was finding Bazz-B's words not only confusing but incredibly insulting, "My zombies are perfect. There's no one else in the world that can do what I can do!"

"You're right about that. Nui Harime's zombies are much, much worse," Bazz-B remembered the clip of the Mentally Refitted people and shivered. If Ragyo Kiryuin was a woman His Majesty was afraid of directly fighting than he shouldn't go charging in all hot-blooded, "She uses something called Mental Refitting. Instead of blood she uses Life Fibers to ensnare dozens, if not hundreds, of people to her will. They don't even have to be dead for it to work. It's like someone took our abilities and decided to make someone with all of them."

Without saying another word Bazz-B turned around and left the five women in order to go and find someplace to rest and relax. He needed some peace and quiet before his headache developed into a full-blown migraine. He was sure that by now every single Sternritter knew of his mission, which meant every one of them would be asking for him to take them. Grumbling several choice curses under his breath at his misfortune, Bazz-B headed towards the one place no one would dare look for him - his chambers.

## You Wear It Well

*So here is chapter 36 and the introduction of a new character. Now, I didn't give his name for good reason but his inclusion is to help show that Kamui are not invincible. Even a fully powered and synchronized Kamui and its wearer can be taken down if they underestimate their opponents. This chapter is also the final chapter in the Karakura Town Occupation Arc. The next chapter starts the Festival Arc, which I promise you will be both awesome to read and cause you to curse Ragyo from the bottom of your souls. Anyway, enjoy the chapter and don't forget to leave a review at the end!*

*So as always I would like to remind you that this story has a tvtropes page! (under To My Death I Fight so should be easy to find). If you have the time to spend hours clicking through the entirety of tvtropes have fun... but make sure to stop by my page first and add anything you feel is missing. There is always room for improvement after all.*

*I also have a thread on Spacebattles (a forum) that has more than 2000 posts. It is where I post my updates to each chapter as well as character bios, backgrounds and information that you might not find in my main story. I actually posted 1.000+ word histories of Jackie Tristan, Riruka and Yukio on Spacebattles so take a look when you can. I promise you won't be disappointed.*

*This chapter also puts my total word count above 1.000.000 words. Hurrah!*

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### Chapter 36 - You Wear It Well

Kinue Kinagase grimaced as she adjusted the winter jacket around her body as she blended into the crowd surrounding her. Winter had

come early to Seattle with the first snowstorm had hit the city the day before her arrival. Walking through the inch high snow blanketing the city Kinue looked around and easily saw out of the crowd of shoppers and tourists walking alongside her that she was the only one not shivering from the subzero temperature. One of the benefits of being permanently merged to Danketsu was that despite the minimalistic appearance the Kamui easily kept her wearer from succumbing to hypothermia. As she put her hands into her jacket's pockets Kinue listened to Danketsu's complaints with the strain of maintaining her normal emotionless expression evident in her blue eyes. Clenching her hands together as Danketsu's feelings of apparent treachery and betrayal pierced into her mind, Kinue mentally replied to her Kamui that she was doing this for the good of both of them.

After her infiltration of Honnouji Academy and subsequent conversation with Ichigo and Mugetsu she had vowed to never wear anything to cover Danketus's upper body again. Years of ignoring Danketsu as a living thing with her own thoughts and feelings have done nothing but damage both of their lives and Kinue was determined to make things right again. The circumstances that she currently found herself in, however, were so extreme that she had apologized profusely to Danketsu before putting the jacket over the Kamui. Wincing slightly in pain as the headache she had been carrying since entering the city momentarily intensified, Kinue looked sullenly into the bleak and overcast sky before muttering, "... How did he get here before me?"

Her mission to assassinate Shukurou Tsukishima had veered sharply off course even before she arrived at San Francisco. Kinue didn't know how he was able to find out she was coming but upon her arrival at San Francisco International Airport she found an entire army of Mentally Refit soldiers waiting for her on the tarmac before immediately opening fire. She considered herself lucky that Danketsu's defense, which was the strongest of the four Kamui, enabled her to ignore the bullets as she focused on taking down Tsukishima, which turned out to be highly annoying. The son of a

bitch had led her through a long chase in downtown San Francisco, forcing her to cut down any Mentally Refitted human along the way, before she finally cornered him on Alcatraz with the members of the San Francisco Police Department still under his control. He had tried to barter his freedom with her by offering several pieces of information about the raiment belonging to his fellow Xcution members but Kinue would hear none of it. Forcing her way through the police without killing any of them Kinue had briefly engaged Tsukishima before piercing her Genji Blade through his heart.

Back then, as she stood over Tsukishima's cooling corpse while fires raged throughout the city in the distance, Kinue thought things would finally die down. Without Tsukishima to keep his Mental Refitting active the people he had controlled would regain their free will and cease coming after her. Kinue even silently mused that Nudist Beach might even get an influx of recruits from those that Tsukishima controlled. She wasn't prepared for the immediate and lethal retaliatory force Ragyo Kiryuin sent her way the very next day.

The squad of so-called 'Revocs Anti-Nudist Personnel' had been easy enough for her to deal with using Danketsu's superior power. It was their leader that forced Kinue to flee San Francisco and head north to Seattle. She had thought her brother was a tactical and trap-making genius but this man, a member of Xcution from the symbol on his clothing, put Tsumugu to shame. In their very first encounter she had almost immediately fallen into several of his traps, which used her own Nudist Beach Anti-Life Fiber technology, and had only managed to escape due to Danketsu's ability to detect her opponent's raiment with high precision. Quickly fleeing the scene using her Funsha configuration as soon as she escaped the last trap, Kinue had immediately called Armstrong and requested an emergency evacuation at the Nudist Beach Foreign Operations Base in Seattle, Washington.

Upon fleeing San Francisco to rendezvous in Seattle Kinue saw to her frustration that her opponent was easily able to keep up with her using a variety of military vehicles. The first day had involved a

midair fight between her and the Apache helicopter he had somehow commandeered. She had only managed to escape by severing the primary rotor and forcing the helicopter to crash violently on the ground but as she flew away Kinue had seen her pursuer calmly walking away from the crash with not a single scratch on him. Even from the distance she was from him Kinue could sense the confident smirk on his masked face, which was the only sign she needed to quickly and immediately fly straight upwards to avoid the bleach-tipped rockets fired from a hidden Cold War missile silo on the ground.

After that nearly fatal encounter Kinue had decided to immediately head to Seattle without worrying about her opponent. He had already demonstrated the uncanny ability to spontaneously build complicated and efficient Anti-Life Fiber traps and Kinue wasn't going to allow him to dictate the direction of their fights any longer. Veering to the west and passing through Willamette Mission State Park, where she managed to finally lose him in the dense woods, Kinue had forced herself to rest for several hours. Even with the enhanced stamina and endurance Danketsu granted her, the nearly thirty hours she'd been awake was starting to affect her mentally. Her opponent was not someone she could afford to fight with a sleep-deprived mind.

**" That asshole is somewhere nearby. He's fucking toying with us!"** Danketsu's annoyed voice managed to snap Kinue out of her reminiscing. Tucking her chin down into her jacket in order to better mimic looking cold, Kinue's eyes diligently scanned the crowd of people surrounding her. She had a somewhat good idea of what her opponent's body and facial structure was like but his mask and hat prevented her from seeing his eye and hair colors. It did not help that ever since entering Seattle Danketsu had done nothing but complain to her about everything the Kamui could think of. It was only due to years of learning how to control her emotions that Kinue prevented any of Danketsu's emotions from bleeding over the mental connection.

"Given that he arrived hours before us it is likely that he's managed to turn the entire city into a trap. Simply being diligent and sticking as low to the ground as possible until the transport arrives will minimize the probability of setting off any of his traps," Kinue paused as she considered that particular scenario. If coming to Seattle was one enormous trap it stands to reason that he expected her to trigger it even if she was already aware. That meant her opponent must have known this was her destination all along. Either there was a mole in Nudist Beach, which the General made damn well sure wasn't the case, or her pursuer had one hell of an information network.

***" And you think this fucker will just let you leave?"*** Kinue could literally feel the sarcasm dripping off her Kamui's voice, ***"I thought your brother was prepared for anything but this guy is just insane! How the hell could anyone set up traps hours ahead of time? It fucking confuses the hell out of me!"***

Kinue stopped in mid-stride and quickly looked across the street. For just a moment she had been sure someone was watching her but she couldn't see anyone acting suspicious. Scanning the crowd one final time before continuing to walk, Kinue pondered Danketsu's question before answering, "No, if I was allowed to escape without setting off a trap I'd be greatly surprised. The fact that I haven't run into him since arriving suggests he is up to something. I cannot afford to let my guard down. His raiment's already shown to have lethal offensive abilities and I don't doubt he showed that to me for a reason."

***" What are you talking about?"***

"He wanted me to see how skilled he was with Ayatori so that I would focus entirely on that particular ability," Kinue raised a hand to her chin and narrowed her eyes, "If that is the case, I suggest - "

"Excuse me, ma'am? You appear to be lost. I've been in this city for some time so might I suggest visiting Colman Park? I heard it's lovely this time of year. Much better than anything San Francisco has to offer," The overly polite voice speaking fluent Japanese stopped



Kinue's train of thought. Turning around, her hand drifting toward her Genji Blade, Kinue found herself standing a few feet away from the masked face of her relentless pursuer. Giving her a sly grin, the man leaned forward and waved at her with a gloved hand in a mock greeting, "Hi..."

"From the stunned look on your face I see you're curious why your Kamui wasn't able to detect my raiment. The thing is... I'm not wearing my raiment right now." The member of Xcution smirked proudly at the slight widening of Kinue's eyes. It pleased him to see the muted expression of shock adorn her face, "I can see you know what that means. If I hadn't introduced myself a moment ago you would never have known I was there."

Kinue didn't say anything as she stared silently at the amused man. She had considered him doing something similar to what he did in order to avoid Danketsu Life Fiber sensing. The man's intelligence precluded him from making such stupid mistakes. The question on her mind right now, however, was why he would appear in front of her completely vulnerable. Danketsu was telling her that the man wasn't wearing his raiment, which meant he wasn't lying about that, but he would not have introduced himself unless...

"... this is the trap," Kinue's soft muttering caused the smirk on the man's face to widen considerably. Apparently he was quite pleased to see that she was able to figure it out so quickly. Slowly drawing her red Genji blade from the newly fastened sheath along the small of her back Kinue said, "This was your goal the entire time. You knew I would blindly follow Danketsu as she tracked the Life Fibers in your raiment. All the while you would have free reign to spy and follow me to your heart's content. Who are you?"

The man chuckled as he reached into the pocket of his green jacket. As he found what he was looking for, the man pulled his hand out and flipped it around, "My name isn't important. What I have in my pocket, on the other hand, is something I think you'll find more important than knowing my name."

On the picture in the man's hand was the interior of an empty warehouse but what made Kinue grit her teeth in suppressed rage was what she could see on it - dozens upon dozens of men, women and children tied together on the ground surrounded by at least several tons of C4 and other explosives, "So that's your game. You truly are a coward to bring innocent people into this."

"Thank you, for that is truly the highest praise you can give me." The man gave Kinue a mocking bow as he put the picture back in his pocket, "But allow me to correct you. Whether these people live or die is entirely up to you. If you hadn't killed Tsukishima after taking down Jackie Tristan than Lady Ragyo wouldn't have decided to send me after you. Whether these one hundred and fourteen people live or die is up to you... Kinue Kinagase."

Kinue didn't hesitate as she pulled her Genji blade entirely free of its sheath and pointed it directly at the man's throat, "How do you know my name? I would talk if I were you. The last two members of Xcution who thought they could beat me ended up sorely mistaken."

The lack of any sort of response from the pedestrians walking past them alerted Kinue to one of the most insidious effects of Life Fibers and why she was working to bring down Ragyo Kiryuin and Revocs. Even with her attention focused squarely on the man standing in front of her Kinue could see the Revocs logos on every single person. All clothing manufactured by Revocs contained just the barest trace of Life Fibers and while Kinue had no delusions as to why Ragyo would do something like that it was their secondary effect that made her sick. The Life Fibers in Revocs clothing could literally eat a person's memories. Kinue didn't know why Life Fibers could do this and Danketsu was adamant about being in the dark as well. Most of humanity was in the dark about the war raging for their freedom and it angered Kinue to see people so willingly dooming their species to extinction.

"Let's not be too hasty. Killing me will only make things worse." The man held his gloved hands up in a placating gesture even as his voice carried a hint of condescension. Both of them knew he held all

the cards so whether she was able to save the hostages or not rested entirely on if she was willing to listen to him talk, "The explosives are connected via a dead man's switch to my heart rate. Killing or knocking me out will trigger the monitor to detonate not only those explosives but the four other stockpiles I've scattered throughout the city. You were willing to cut down anyone to get to Tsukishima but I wonder if you can survive tens of thousands of deaths on your conscience. I am more than willing to give you the address of the warehouse but something about you is bothering me..."

The man turned away from Kinue and began pacing back and forth as he stroked his chin, "Lady Ragyo allowed me to see the battles concerning Junketsu, Mugetsu and Senketsu but one thing about them all is that those that wear Kamui must eventually take them off due to the strain on their bodies. Even their activated state only has a maximum of eight hours before the Kamui will forcibly revert back to its normal form. You, on the other hand, have not only kept your Kamui in its activated state since we met but you're showing no signs of mental straining. I wonder what that means..."

Kinue followed the man with her eyes firmly watching for any sudden movements, "What exactly are you implying?"

Even though they were behind a mask Kinue could see the man's eyes widen in amusement but instead of answering he pulled out a card and threw it at her, "That would be telling. On that card you will find the address of the warehouse but do hurry. The bombs are set to go off at precisely midnight and my watch says it is currently 11:54..."

The man looking with veiled amusement as Kinue glanced at the address on the card before shifting Danketsu into her Funsha configuration and flying off into the night sky. Watching the blue and purple light of her Kamui fade off into the west the man adjusted his cap and whistled as he abruptly took a step back and began walking in the opposite direction. He hadn't lied to Kinue about the address being on the card. What he may have forgotten to mention was that

he switched around the address. It would take her about a minute to find out she went to the wrong address before doubling back, which gave him more than enough time to walk the one block distance to the actual location of the warehouse.

Heading down an alley as an explosion of light briefly shone in the distance when Kinue finally realized he tricked her, the man paused and looked around, "Hmm... now where did I put it?"

Turning to the left he abruptly lashed out and kicked an old and rusty dumpster hard enough to not only dent the side but also flip it over. Dusting his hands off as he bent down, the man picked up his Lache Raiment safely secured in Life Fiber hiding plastic. Ripping off the plastic covering, which cost Revocs a few million dollars to produce, the man sensed Kinue screaming back towards him and quickly changed into his raiment. As he made the final adjustments to his raiment and tossed his temporary set of clothing into the overturned dumpster he stepped out of the alley and watched as Kinue crashed through the roof of the warehouse.

Reaching into the pocket of his raiment and pulling out a miniature detonator, the man tossed it up in the air before quickly catching it, "It's been fun but I do hate getting my hands dirty. Good bye, Kinue Kinagase."

With but a single press of his finger the collection of Starch and Anti-Life Fiber explosives carefully spread throughout the warehouse exploded in a massive fireball of rainbow light. Tilting down his hat to cover his eyes, the man lamented that he wasn't able to secure one of the fabled Bleach Bombs. There were only several of those devices known to exist and only two people outside of Revocs were known to have the knowledge to make them. It was unfortunate that Ragyo Kiryuin didn't acquiesce to his request for one such device while his information network found itself strangely unable to find any blueprints for the Bleach Bomb.

As he walked towards the flaming wreckage of a building, fire truck sirens already growing louder by the second, the man wondered if

the explosion had been too big. He never had the fortune of fighting a Kamui so he was forced to extrapolate the amount of Anti-Life Fiber explosives needed for taking out raiment and tripled it for good measure. The fallout at Revocs would not be pretty if he destroyed the Kamui. Ragyo Kiryuin had stressed the importance of collecting the Kamui and had warned him quite thoroughly of the ramifications should he fail.

Kicking a piece of burning debris out of his path, the man nonchalantly walked into the flaming wreckage in search of Kinue's body, "Huh, I wonder where -"

The purple and blue fist that exploded out of the ground beneath him took the man completely by surprise and sent him soaring through the air. While his body bounced and skidded across the ground several times the man quickly managed to regain his balance. Skidding to a halt, his shoes leaving marks on the ground, the man snapped his fingers and immediately dozens of Life Fiber wires emerged from his raiment and began weaving around his fingers in preparation for a potential fight. His whole trap had been designed to knock out Kinue in the warehouse and if she was alive, and most likely pissed off, he would need to fall back on his raiment's skills to complete Ragyo's mission.

With blood dripping down her body and several tears in Danketsu apparent to the man, Kinue stumbled out of the warehouse with a look of absolute rage on her face. She had never been hurt like this since being forced to permanently wear Danketsu and the pain she felt reverberated through her body on a level she couldn't even begin to comprehend. Gritting her teeth together as Danketsu began repairing herself, causing the purple and blue light glowing in her body to slowly vanish, Kinue stared at the man in front of her before her ears picked up the sound of an aircraft overhead. Muting out Danketsu's shouts of rage and vengeance Kinue quickly forced her Kamui into Funsha and blasted off into the sky but not before using her Genji blade to destroy several of the man's Life Fiber wires.

Frowning as he watched Kinue escape the reach of his Life Fiber wires, the man let out a depressed sigh as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and flipped it open. Ragyo wasn't going to like the Kamui getting away from him but as his thumb hovered over the call button, the man stopped and thought things over. Since he failed his mission Ragyo would likely set him up with some 'private tutoring' by the Grand Couturier and as tempting as that sounded, the man was more than happy to pass.

"Hmm, I think I'll wait a few days before calling Lady Ragyo," the man flipped his phone shut and turned around. Walking off into the shadows of the night as the red and blue sirens appeared around the corner, he thought about what he was going to do. He knew with the Great Culture and Sports Festival coming soon Ragyo will be busy setting everything up, which means she'll be a fairly good mood. So he came to the decision that since he was in Seattle he might as well take a tour of the sights while relaxing for a few days. That should give him enough time to come up with a good excuse if Rei or Ragyo decide to call him.

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Kugo Ginjo was a man who preferred clean and honorable combat above all else. His years spent at a shinigami had drilled the concepts of honor and pride into his mind but unlike the majority of the Soul Society Ginjo was perfectly fine with the concept of working together to defeat your opponents. That was why he couldn't understand why the Soul Society had sat on its collective ass during the Winter War. If he had been the Captain Commander Ginjo would have gone to Hueco Mundo as soon as he could and destroyed Aizen and his Espada without any difficulty. It was because Yamamoto allowed Aizen time to plan and scheme that his zanpakuto's fire was able to be sealed. If Yamamoto hadn't been so intent on following tradition he would have seen Aizen's position in Hueco Mundo as vulnerable and moved to exploit it.

*" Then again..."* Ginjo's train of thought was momentarily cut off as he slammed into the trunk of a tree before his momentum neatly snapped it in half, *"... the Soul Society had always been stuck in the past. I can't remember how many times I tried to give current military advice to the captains only to be either laughed at or told it wasn't any of my business. I suppose Aizen being the only one to listen to my advice explains why he nearly won in the Winter War."*

As his face slid across the damp grass and he stabbed Ragnarok into the ground to arrest his movement, Ginjo realized in hindsight that Sosuke Aizen had been too nice and amiable to not be suspicious. Captains were supposed to be the crème of the crop, so to speak, and were required to have years of battle experience to even be considered for the position. Such events inevitably lead the captains to develop personality quirks in order to cope with the stress. That was why Aizen's friendly and gregarious personality confused Ginjo. That Aizen could talk and act like he didn't have a care in the world should have given Ginjo the notion that something was up. Perhaps he would have remained a shinigami if he just told Yamamoto about Aizen.

"Such things are in the past now. Besides, I have bigger issues to deal with at the moment," Ginjo panted heavily as he finally came to a halt. Riruka's punch had more force to it than he expected and he had been caught completely off guard by it. Sensing a massive amount of Life Fiber energy building up on the end of Riruka's battle staff, Ginjo grit his teeth as he gripped Ragnarok's hilt with both hands and deflected the Addiction Shot away into the morning sky.

*" Damn it!"* Ginjo mentally cursed as he realized by blocking Riruka's Addiction Shot he made a potentially fatal mistake. Letting go of Ragnarok's hilt and quickly rolling away, he watched in annoyance as the Life Fibers hidden within the Addiction Shot weaved their way through his blade in order to make it 'fluffy.' The reason he sent Ryuko away while he fought Riruka was not because the magenta haired, foul-mouthed teenager was overly powerful. On the contrary her strength and speed were about average for being a member of

Xcution. The danger lying within Riruka's Duveteux Raiment was its 'Dollhouse Zone.'

Surrounding Riruka's body was a spherical area roughly seven feet in radius where microscopic Life Fibers were constantly being extruded into the air. If anyone were to enter this zone, which Riruka calls her Dollhouse, the Life Fibers in the air would instantly weave their way into their weapons until they became unable to so much as harm Riruka. Getting around this 'fluffiness' as Riruka calls the process is quite simply and demands exact knowledge of how her raiment works. The rate at which an object becomes fluffy is proportional to its speed and power. If one is able to move quickly and hit Riruka hard enough before the fluffiness takes hold then they could potentially end the fight. That is, of course, if they were aware of Riruka's limited vision and her propensity to always focus her powers on what she could see in front of her.

If Riruka's Dollhouse Zone wasn't bad enough her Addiction Shot was just plain terrible. By focusing the power of her raiment through the battle staff in her hands, she could fire a beam of energy containing Life Fibers at a target. Once the beam contacts with something the Life Fibers within it immediately start weaving their way into the target, whatever it may be. Ginjo had seen firsthand the effects Riruka's so-called 'fluffiness' had on several captured Nudist Beach operatives and had quickly stabbed Ragnarok through their hearts in order to end their misery.

Clenching his gloved hands in the damp soil as he spit dirt out of his mouth, Ginjo frowned deep in thought as he pushed himself up onto one knee. The fight was not going the way he expected. He had fought Riruka's raiment in the past and it was nowhere close to being this strong. Looking at the large crack on his left spaulder before shaking his head, Ginjo chuckled mirthlessly as he watched Riruka walking towards him, "I don't remember your Duveteux Raiment ever being this strong, Riruka."

Riruka's magenta eyes gazed upon Ginjo's exhausted form with cold delight. It pleased her greatly that the traitor to Lady Ragyo and Life



Fibers would get what was coming to him. Folding her arms across her chest, the battle staff in her hand held loosely between her fingers, Riruka walked to a stop several meters from Ginjo's crouching form and scoffed derisively, "You want to know why you can't beat me? It's because Ichigo Kurosaki's Life Fibers are woven into my wonderful raiment! That's right. The guy who hasn't even shown up to protect his own city from Lady Satsuki is a Life Fiber Hybrid and what's best of all is that with his Life Fibers my fluffiness has increased threefold! My Dollhouse is no longer limited to seven feet but is now a much more impressive twenty feet! So there's no fucking way you can beat me now, you damn traitor!"

Ginjo rolled his eyes as he listened to Riruka's gloating. Standing up with a grunt and brushing some dirt off his black pants Ginjo remembered the stoic and bored personality Riruka had upon being brought to Revocs. It was depressing to see that a mixture of Nui Harime's 'teaching' and her raiment had all but destroyed who Riruka had been several years ago. Sighing as he ran a hand through his hair, Ginjo briefly narrowed his eyes when he saw a blue speck of light in the distance that was growing larger by the second. Immediately guessing who or what that could be, Ginjo decided to take a gamble, "Why did you come to Karakura Town, Riruka? Don't tell me it's because Ragyo Kiryuin felt motherly and wanted to protect her daughter. That woman could not care less about anyone other than Nui Harime or herself."

"Humph," Riruka snorted haughtily before she slammed her battle staff against the ground while a faint rainbow aura surrounded her body, "What makes you think I'll tell you anything? I'm not stupid, you know! If by some miracle you escape after I tell you, Lady Ragyo is going to be mad at me! Now stay still and die like the naked ape you are, Ginjo! Addiction -"

Riruka paused in midsentence as she sensed a massive amount of energy building up behind her. Twisting around and staring up into the morning sky she gasped in surprise when she saw something falling directly towards her. From the amount of energy permeating

the atmosphere and the way it continued to increase by the second the source could only be a Kamui and that meant only one thing - Ichigo Kurosaki had arrived in Karakura Town.

"Don't think I'll let you sneak up on me!" Riruka screamed as she pointed her battle staff at the falling Ichigo as rainbow colored energy gathered on the tip of the weapon. As her face danced with a cacophony of colors Riruka gnashed her teeth and shouted, "Taste my full power, Ichigo Kurosaki! Addiction Shot!"

The fully powered Addiction Shot blasted forth from Riruka's battle staff with enough force to send the magenta haired girl skidding back nearly a foot. Twisting and shooting up through the air towards the falling Ichigo, the Addiction Shot contained enough condensed power that even if he was wearing a Kamui Ichigo would be seriously hurt if not outright defeated by it. Instead of dodging around the attack like any normal person would, Ichigo spun in midair as he shifted from Mugetsu's Gufū configuration to her Zangetsu. With blue energy dancing along Tournesol's blade, Ichigo raised the Life Fiber blade above his head and swung it down as the Addiction Shot was about to hit him.

"GETSUGA TENSHOU!"

Mugetsu's Getsuga Tenshou was nearly the exact opposite of Ichigo's former attack in everything except name so it did not repel the Addiction Shot much as it forced the energy to part around him. As he continued to push more of Mugetsu's energy into the Getsuga Tenshou, Ichigo began spinning his body around, literally drilling his way through the Addiction Shot, before slamming into the ground near Riruka. Before the magenta eyed member of Xcution could so much as utter a single syllable about how he should have already been fluffy, the blue energy continuing to flicker around Tournesol blasted into a raging inferno before Ichigo swung the Life Fiber blade at her. Piercing through the protective screen of Life Fibers inside Riruka's Dollhouse Zone without so much as slowing down, Tournesol mashed into the side of her body much to the Xcution member's complete and utter shock. As her eyes flickered down and

focused upon Ichigo's intense gaze the Getsuga Tenshou held within Tournesol exploded against her with the force of a small explosion and bathed the area in shades of blue and white.

Ginjo watched the scene with rapt attention. Out of all the things that could happen to him today meeting Isshin's son was not even close to the top of his list. There were many things he wished to talk to Ichigo about but how does one even begin explaining that it was his actions that allowed Ragyo Kiryuin to turn him into a Life Fiber Hybrid? Shaking his head as he decided to put off telling Ichigo what he did until after Isshin spoke with him, Ginjo grabbed Ragnarok and hefted the blade on his shoulder. He could see the Life Fibers woven throughout the blade disintegrating, which could only mean Riruka had been defeated by Ichigo's attack.

"Thanks for the help," Ginjo waited as Ichigo didn't turn around to face him before sighing. Rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand he added, "I'm sure you're wondering if I'm an ally or enemy. The thing is -"

"I already know you're on my side!"

Ichigo's loud declaration momentarily took Ginjo off-guard, "You did?"

"Of course I did!" Ichigo turned around to face Ginjo while pointing off his shoulder with his thumb. From the moment he arrived in Karakura Town Ichigo had immediately sensed where every single Life Fiber Satsuki collected from his body was. Most of the Life Fibers were concentrated in six sources, which confused Ichigo because Satsuki and her Elite Four were only five people. So as soon as he singled out Satsuki and her cohorts Ichigo immediately headed towards the sixth person, "I sensed my Life Fibers almost the moment I arrived. By the way... who the hell was she?"

"Her name is Riruka Dokugamine, a member of Xcution," Ginjo turned his head slightly to the north as the feeling of wrongness continued to intensity. About ten minutes ago something happened

during Ryuko's fight against Satsuki, which led to the strange feeling hovering over Karakura Town like a veil. Ginjo didn't know what exactly happened but if he had to hazard a guess he would assume it had something to do with what Satsuki did to her Kamui, "Xcution is the heavy-hitters of Revocs, which is not that dissimilar to Satsuki Kiryuin's Elite Four, but instead of having regalia each member of Xcution wears raiment woven from fifty percent Life Fibers."

**" Fifty percent Life Fibers?"** Mugetsu's worried voice grabbed Ichigo's attention as he thought over what that meant, ***"I didn't know humans could have that high of a resistance to Life Fibers without losing control and going berserk."***

"Ryuko and Satsuki are able to wear Kamui without too many problems," Ichigo replied to his Kamui with a small shrug before turning around. The smoke and light from his Getsuga Tenshou had already mostly cleared so he could see Riruka's unconscious and badly injured body lying on the grass. From the rise and fall of her chest she was still breathing but it was clear she would need medical attention, "So Xcution members wear raiment? That's good to know."

"You're taking being a Life Fiber Hybrid much better than I thought," Ginjo would have thought after finding out he hadn't been human for more than sixteen years Ichigo would have been depressed or angry. Seeing Ichigo talk to his Kamui without any animosity in voice quite frankly surprised Ginjo.

"Oh, that," Ichigo sighed as the memories of Nui Harime pulling his heart out of his chest returned to him, "Let's just say being a hybrid doesn't really surprise me all that much."

Slowly dropping Ragnarok into the massive sheath on his back while keeping his Sauvegarde Raiment activated, Ginjo walked towards Ichigo and said, "I suppose that comes from being a former shinigami."

Ichigo's eyes widened in shock as he twisted his head around to face the stoic-looking Ginjo, "What did you just say?"

Ginjo looked into Ichigo surprised eyes before looking away, "I used to also be a substitute shinigami. In fact, I was the one right before you. It may come as a surprise to you but there have been dozens, if not hundreds, of substitutes throughout the Soul Society's history. You probably never heard of them because of the Soul Society's dark and dirty secret - they kill substitutes after they've served their purpose."

Ichigo didn't know what to make of Ginjo's words but staring into the man's eyes he could tell Ginjo at least believed he was speaking the truth. Glancing briefly to the north towards where Satsuki and Jinketsu were fighting Ryuko Ichigo asked, "What do you mean?"

"I didn't find out the truth of what happened to me until I spoke to your father," Ginjo leaned against a tree and stared at the ground. It wasn't until days after speaking to Isshin after his initial exile that Ginjo realized he was incredibly lucky. Mere minutes after speaking with Isshin and being safely escorted to Revocs a squad of Onmitsukidō had arrived in the World of the Living to assassinate him, "What you don't know is that substitute shinigami aren't supposed to exist... at least by the Soul Society's standards and laws. Even if the substitute is utterly and completely devoted to the Soul Society they will inevitably be killed because of one thing - their lack of a true zanpakuto."

"True zanpakuto..." Ichigo's mind replayed meeting Zangetsu and his inner hollow before a scowl adorned his face, "What the hell are you talking about? Of course I had a zanpakuto!"

"No, you only thought you had a zanpakuto." Ginjo shook his head sadly, "I too once thought the same as you but the zanpakuto you had was born from your soul's spiritual power attempting to mimic an asachī. Long story short, because you did not have a true zanpakuto your power was not shackled to the Soul Society's laws and thus they could never control you. If you had not lost your spiritual power taking down Aizen, the Captain Commander would have declared you a criminal and had you assassinated. That's the cold truth, Ichigo."

Ichigo didn't want to believe Ginjo but the way the man utterly believed what he was saying caused him to pause and think. Hadn't Byakuya once said his bankai wasn't a true bankai? His powers had always seemed a tad different than the shinigami he'd come to know, "If what you're saying is true, then shouldn't I have -"

"You've finally arrived, my tardy son!"

Caught off guard by his father's random and sudden dropkick to the back of his head, Ichigo skidded across the ground before coming to a halt. Pulling his face out of the grass, a deeply annoyed scowl on his face, Ichigo jumped back to his feet and turned around, "What the hell was that for, old man? Couldn't you see I was talking about something important?"

Isshin shook his head sadly at his son's supposed lack of attention, "Words can wait until your work is done, Ichigo! Can you not sense the plight of your girlfriend?"

Ichigo wanted to shout that Satsuki wasn't his girlfriend, and hit his dad for good measure, but the man had a point. There was something disturbing about the power emanating from the north and he could instantly tell it was coming from Junketsu. Frowning as he quickly understood the Life Fibers Satsuki took from him and implanted in Junketsu's form were to blame, Ichigo looked his father dead in the eye and said with a serious tone of voice, "Yeah, I can feel what is happening to Satsuki and it probably has something to do with the Life Fibers she took from me and put in Junketsu. I need to get them back, don't I?"

Isshin grinned clownishly and wrapped his son in a one-armed hug, "You are a sharp one, my tardy son! It pleases me to know that you're not as stupid as I initially thought you were! Now before you attempt to hurt your dear old dad I am going to tell you exactly how to save Satsuki from a fate worse than death. Since the Life Fibers came from your body you simply need to place your hand against her chest and will them to come out of Junketsu!"

"Over... her... chest..." Ichigo's face turned red in embarrassment before he turned and slugged his dad across the face, "Damn, you old pervert! You're telling me I need to feel up Satsuki to save her!"

Rebounding from the unwarranted attack with surprisingly fast speed, Isshin rubbed his cheek and grumbled, "Didn't you know that a Kamui's core is located around the sternum? If you're going to save Satsuki and Junketsu you need to place your hand against the core and mentally pull the Life Fibers from it. I would hurry as well. Junketsu doesn't have much longer before it will be impossible to remove the Life Fibers."

Ichigo opened his mouth to speak but quickly thought against it, "Fine, but when this is over I want you to tell me everything you know."

Isshin hesitated for a moment before nodding. It was time Ichigo was told about what was going on but it bothered him that he couldn't come out and tell his son himself, "By the way, I think now's a good time to tell Mugetsu about your past as a shinigami. She's your Kamui, after all, so she has a right to know about what you used to do, don't you think?"

Ichigo looked down into Mugetsu's expectant eyes before turning his head away, "Yeah, I think it's about time I told her. I've put it off for too long."

" ***Told me what, Ichigo?***" Mugetsu spoke to Ichigo with a hint of betrayal in her voice as the Kamui began thinking that Ichigo had been hiding things from her.

Blasting off into the sky before quickly rocketing north towards Satsuki, Ichigo closed his eyes as various memories of his time as a shinigami coursed through his mind. Things had seemed so simple before meeting Rukia and Ichigo could not help but wonder what would have happened if he had not met her that fateful night. Snapping open his eyes, determination evident in them, Ichigo

smiled and said, "It all began when I met a girl by the name of Rukia Kuchiki..."

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"Ma'am, the latest satellite images from Karakura Town have arrived," Rei Hououmaru stood at attention across from Ragyo Kiryuin. With her eyes closed even behind her aviator sunglasses, the dark-skinned secretary and leader of Xcution gently slid the high resolution images over the desk, "It is just as you predicted. Lady Satsuki has lost control of Junketsu and has succumbed to the Kamui's superior will and power."

"It's a shame Satsuki fell so quickly," Ragyo pondered in amusement as she rested her cheek upon her hand. Gazing over the images scattered across her desk with amusement, she picked one up at random and smirked, "I assumed she would have managed to hold off Junketsu's will for at least another day. C'est la vie..."

Rei held off on the rest of her report until she was certain Lady Ragyo was paying attention. She had worked for the elder Kiryuin for more than twenty years and instinctively knew when Ragyo was lost deep in thought. As the minutes dragged by and Rei's patience continued to hold steady, she saw Ragyo's maroon eyes softly open and stare her, signaling for Rei to continue, "Per your earlier request I had the satellite programmed to keep track of the various fights throughout Karakura Town... there are some things you need to see."

Walking towards the screen behind Ragyo's desk and pressing a button on the side, Rei pulled out the USB cable and connected the monitor to her PDA. As the screen flickered to life and dozens of high resolution pictures appeared on it, Rei magnified one of the images and said, "This image was taken during the clash between Ira Gamagori and Yasutora Sado, a friend of Ichigo Kurosaki's. As you can see he seems to have a special ability that allows him to not



only fight on an even level with a Three-Star Goku Uniform but actually surpass it."

Ragyo stared at the image of Chad using La Muerte on Gamagori and could not help as a psychotic smile stretched across her face. With the rainbow light in her hair intensifying alongside her emotions she wondered a human, nothing more than food for Life Fibers, was able to obtain a power completely unrelated to Life Fibers. The armor on Chad's arms looked similar enough to Satsuki's Goku Uniforms to be mistaken for one but Ragyo knew otherwise. Isshin would not have allowed a single thread of Life Fibers inside Karakura Town unless he authorized it.

"Comme c'est interessant! It pleases me that even after all this time Isshin still has tricks up his sleeves. He made it so Satsuki's little helpers were intercepted before they even reached Karakura Town," Ragyo wondered what secrets she could learn from Yasutora Sado's body but quickly decided against kidnapping the youth. After her successful kidnapping of Ichigo, courtesy of Ginjo's former loyalty, Ragyo knew attempting to spirit away anyone from Karakura Town was an effort in futility. She had only allowed Uryu Ishida to intern at Revocs because his father was powerful enough that if she refused without a very good reason he could hit her hard enough financially that the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet would be delayed by a decade at the least. And how was it Uryu and his father repaid her? By stealing her precious Life Fibers and giving them to a human to weave into a Kamui. The only question that Ragyo had was whose Life Fibers were used to finish Mugetsu - Ichigo's or Isshin's.

"On a related topic Uryu Ishida appears to have similar, if not identical, powers to Ryuken Ishida. He was able to use a wide-scale version of the same technique his father used against the Grand Couturier to seriously damage a Three-Star Goku Uniform," Rei touched the screen and brought up a top-down photograph of Uryu about to use Gezielt Sprenger on Nonon Jakuzure. The leader of Xcution has been mildly surprised by the foresight and planning Uryu

had put into trapping someone wearing a uniform made of thirty-five percent Life Fibers long enough to cast his ability.

Ragyo stared at the images of Uryu with less interest than she had for Chad, "The powers of Ryuken and his son, the self-proclaimed Quincy, do not concern me. Their supernatural powers have little to no effect on Life Fibers. Ryuken was barely able to seal my precious Nui's movements long enough to run away like a rat. The fact his son was able to damage a regalia to such an extent is more of an insult to the skills of Satsuki's couturier than a testament to their power. Speaking of which... did the Infiltration-Class COVERS find out who was trying to sneak about around Honnou City?"

Rei shook her head, "Whoever spoke to Ichigo Kurosaki was long gone by the time the COVERS arrived on the scene. Before I ordered them to return to headquarters I had them collect samples of the energy signature left over at the scene using their Life Fibers - it's a 97.5% match to the powers possessed by Ryuken and Uryu Ishida."

"My, oh my, it seems that there are quite a few Quincy scurrying around in the shadows," Ragyo mused thoughtfully with a shake of her head. People possessing supernatural powers outside of those granted by Life Fibers had not been part of her plans but Ragyo was anything if not pragmatic and resourceful. So what if these so-called Quincy possessed abilities strong enough to barely fight on par with a thirty-five percent Life Fiber weave. The difference between regalia and raiment was like comparing Satsuki's power in Junketsu with her own. It was impossible to measure.

Tapping a manicured nail against the polished surface of her desk as she looked upon the images, Ragyo chuckled before scoffing airily, "I know you wish to investigate who's leading these Quincy Hououmaru but let's refrain from moving against them just yet. The fact that they've escaped my notice for so long suggests that despite their worthless abilities they are quite organized, perhaps even to the extent of my former husband's organization. Have several dozen Infiltration-Class COVERS to spread out across Japan in search of

the Quincy energy signature. I want to be ready when I feel the need to drown these rats out of the shadows they're hiding in."

"Right away, Ma'am," Rei bowed her head respectfully to Ragyo before she turned around and tapped the screen. As several images of Ichigo arriving in Karakura Town appeared on the screen she continued, "Ichigo Kurosaki has arrived in Karakura Town. It is only a matter of time before Isshin tells him how to remove the Life Fibers from Junketsu."

"You speak as if that's a problem, Hououmaru," Ragyo smiled and from the look on her secretary's face it was clear that Rei did not understand what she was planning. The moment Satsuki arrived at Revocs before the School Raid Trip she had instinctively known what her poor daughter did to Junketsu. It was not hard at all for her to see Ichigo's Life Fibers woven haphazardly throughout the Kamui. The lack of skill by Satsuki's couturier was apparent enough to Ragyo that she knew it was only a matter of time before Junketsu's devolved into insanity and the Kamui made a play for Satsuki's mind and body.

Rei looked at the screen and asked, "And is it not, Ma'am?"

Ragyo shook her head as she leaned forward and rested her chin on her clasped hands, "If Ichigo fails to rescue Satsuki from Junketsu then his Life Fibers woven within the Kamui will merge completely with it. Junketsu's current insane and disturbed behavior will then vanish as her original loyal personality reasserts itself. Satsuki will be dead but in return I will have a daughter completely loyal to the Original Life Fiber. For the first time in her miserable life Satsuki will be worthy of wearing Junketsu but this time it will be the other way around."

"And if Ichigo manages to remove his Life Fibers from Junketsu?"

"As much as allowing Junketsu to wear Satsuki pleases me, I would much rather have Ichigo save her worthless life," Ragyo's smile widened psychotically as her maroon eyes trailed across the images

of Mugetsu and Ichigo. Rei Hououmaru was extremely loyal to the Life Fibers and Ragyo would admit she was the human closest to being her friend but she was still just a human. She could not begin to imagine the secrets of the Original Life Fiber that were woven within Ragyo and Isshin's mind twenty years ago, "The relative power of a Life Fiber Hybrid is not easy to but there is a single way to measure how much their Life Fibers have developed. It takes a hybrid of similar strength to the Grand Couturier and me to telekinetically control our Life Fibers once they leave our body. If Ichigo is able to remove his Life Fibers from Junketsu and save Satsuki then that will show he's nearly ready to join us..."

Rei watched as Ragyo stood up and slowly walked over to one of the windows of her spacious office, "You still plan on making Ichigo your heir?"

Ragyo turned her head around as the rainbow light shining from her hair intensified, "But of course. Satsuki has been nothing but a failure in life. Her plan to kill me using the students she gathered at Honnouji Academy is cute and shows initiative but she is nothing but a human that Life Fibers rejected. My second daughter showed more promise but she died from the experiments before they bore fruit. Perhaps I should have waited a few days after the experiment to see if it was a success before tossing her into the trash. The past seventeen years have shown that Life Fibers sometimes take time to adjust to a particularly compatible host. C'est la vie..."

Out of the hundreds of experiments she conducted with Life Fibers only four bore any importance to the elder Kiryuin. Ragyo's first attempt to create an artificial hybrid was with Satsuki but due to her initial inexperience it was nothing but an abject failure. Satsuki had survived the implantation with no detrimental side effects but the Life Fibers placed inside her body had disintegrated from the incompatibility. Ragyo's next attempt was with her second daughter and it was also a failure. At that point, bolstered by both of her daughters failing to properly merge with Life Fibers, Ragyo began blaming Souichiro's inferior genetics. What started next was a series

of experiments of placing her fertilized eggs directly into the Original Life Fibers and seeing which survived. Nui and Amu developing normally from the same egg intrigued Ragyo but that was mostly because of who the father was. The last of the four experiments, and perhaps the most important one of all, involved...

"What about the Grand Couturier, Ma'am?" Rei's question broke Ragyo's train of thought, "I was under the assumption that she was to be your heir alongside Amu when we managed to recover her from Isshin's control and recondition her memories."

"You are mistaken, Hououmaru, Nui was never to be my heir," Ragyo smiled coldly as she wondered what Nui Harime was doing. She knew her daughter had gone to Karakura Town during Satsuki's little excursion but she knew Isshin had most likely prevented Nui from doing anything fun or interesting, "Nui may hold the title of Grand Couturier of Revocs but that is not her true title. Both Amu and Nui were born from the same egg and thus are needed together to design and weave Shinra Koketsu when the time is right. Inside each of their minds are half of the plans for the ultimate Kamui, which is the one thing the Original Life Fiber did not impart unto me or Isshin. They are the true Daughters of the Original Life Fiber."

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Alex Louis Armstrong grunted as his back collided violently against a piece of overturned concrete and asphalt. As spittle and blood involuntarily escaped from his mouth, the Major General of Nudist Beach quickly ducked to the side to avoid having Bakuzan skewer him through his head.

Everything had gone to hell when Junketsu had unleashed the maelstrom of death and destruction that was Tenrai Kagai. If Satsuki's usage of the advanced battle technique was akin to that of a raging storm then Junketsu's was a hurricane. In the single instant between calling out the name of the technique and reappearing

behind them, Junketsu had singlehandedly taken out Uryu and Tsumugu while inflicting deep wounds on Chad and himself. It was only by luck that Armstrong had been the furthest from the epicenter.

When Chad used La Muerte against Junketsu and forced her away from Uryu, Armstrong had instantly moved forward to confront the Kamui before she could charge Tenrai Kagai to the fullest. He knew from years of experience in fighting those that wear Life Fibers that if they have to shout out the name of a technique than they need time to cast it. That split second interval was what Armstrong shot for. As he rushed towards Junketsu with his fist only inches away from her face the Kamui had grinned at him before unleashing Tenrai Kagai without a moment's hesitation. Throwing his body to the side as Bakuzan swept through the air Armstrong had managed to escape with only a moderately severe gash along his right shoulder to show for it.

Twisting around Junketsu's forward stab Armstrong quickly brought his right arm up and blocked her subsequent attack with his Anti-Life Fiber steel gauntlet. As he heard the increasingly familiar sound of the metal cracking and splintering under the strain of trying to keep Bakuzan from killing him, Armstrong began to wish he had brought his DTR with him. Model Rex would have been a godsend in helping to occupy Junketsu until Ichigo arrived to remove his Life Fibers from the Kamui. As much as he wished for his DTR Armstrong knew he could not have anticipated Satsuki Kiryuin of all people losing control over her Kamui and going berserk.

"Is... this... all... you... can do?" Armstrong felt his arms strain under the superior strength of Junketsu. As his knees started to buckle from the effort of holding back Bakuzan from slicing deeply into his neck and beads of sweat trailed down his body Armstrong pushed back with all his might and shouted, "Do not underestimate the strength of an Armstrong!"

With a burst of strength, honed from years of service to his country and fellow man, Armstrong pushed Junketsu away before rushing forward. Avoiding her counterattack by leaning to the side he

grabbed Junketsu's shoulder pads with both hands before forcing Satsuki's face straight into his knee with a resounding cracking sound. For just a moment Armstrong thought he finally managed to hurt the Kamui. The nose was composed of pure cartilage and even if wearing a Kamui granted the wearer superhuman strength and durability there was a limit to the amount of protection. Tsumugu's ability to injure Ryuko Matoi was proof enough of that.

**" W-Was that supposed to hurt?"**

"Impossible..." Armstrong's eyes opened in surprise as he stared into Junketsu's unflinching gaze. He knew that his knee had connected directly with Junketsu's nose but she looked completely unfazed by it.

**" I-I have to find Ichigo. I-I have to kill him to stop the pain..."**

Junketsu screamed as she punched Armstrong in his stomach with enough force to send the much larger man bouncing back along the ground before he rolled to a halt. Watching as the human struggling to pick himself off the ground, Junketsu couldn't understand why he would continue getting in her way. She didn't even care about any of them anymore. All she wanted to do was hunt down Ichigo and kill him in order to make the pain and agony wracking her mind and soul stop. If that meant allowing a few humans to live than Junketsu was content to do that. She didn't even want to kill this human anymore so why was he getting in her way?

Gripping her forehead in pain with one eye closed in agony, Junketsu stalked towards Armstrong with Bakuzan clenched tightly in her other hand, **"M-Must find Ichigo... p-pain will end... I-I want to be myself..."**

Coughing as he pushed himself onto one knee Armstrong thought back on his decision years ago to join the army and wished he could have instead continued playing football. Joining a professional team would have undoubtedly been much safer for his continued existence than fighting a mentally unstable Kamui hell-bent on killing everyone in her path. Gauntlet scrapping along the ground harshly

as he staggered back to his feet, Armstrong took one unsteady step before he forced his body into the Armstrong fighting stance. Blue eyes staring passionately into his opponent's multihued ones Armstrong spit out some blood and said, "For as long as I continue to draw breath I swear upon my honor as an Armstrong I shall be the invincible shield that protects Ichigo from your blade!"

Junketsu tilted her head to the side as she listened to Armstrong speak as if he had the strength to fight her. None of the humans she had fought since she wrested control of her body away from Satsuki had managed to so much as make her bleed. Yasutora Sado had been the closest to hurting her with a slight bruise on her cheek to show for it but that was the extent of their effort, which is why Junketsu could not understand Armstrong's determination to stop her. He was nothing more than a simple human, a pig in human clothes, born and raised to be food for Life Fibers when the time came so why was he not afraid of dying?

**" W-Why do you stand in my way?"** Junketsu winced in pain as a massive lance of agony tore through her head as Armstrong's form wavered and for just a moment took the form of a large man with an eyepatch and black hair fashioned up into spikes. Clenching her eyes shut and muttering that it would be only little longer until she killed Ichigo, Junketsu opened her eyes once more and saw Armstrong was back to normal, **"Y-You're just a worthless human!"**

"I may be nothing more than a mere man," Armstrong clenched a fist dramatically before pointing a finger at Junketsu. The wounds covering his body were causing him to slowly lose feeling in his extremities but an Armstrong would never pass out before an opponent was dealt with. Falling unconscious in battle against a murderous adversary would bring nothing but shame to the Armstrong name, "I may even die this day but I shall perish knowing that you were unable to lay a finger on Ichigo!"

**" You think you can stop me?"**



The stutter that had been persistent in Junketsu's speech ever since the Kamui first began wearing Satsuki abruptly vanished. Tilting her head to the side as a series of uncontrollable giggles escaped her mouth, Junketsu wove her fingers through Satsuki's hair as the pain in her head returned in full force. Memories of running for her life in a maze of tall white buildings while being chased by a monster in the guise of a man passed in front of her eyes. Letting loose a scream of defiance and causing the land around her to crack and shatter into thousands of pieces, Junketsu charged towards Armstrong even as he once again appeared in the form of the man with the eyepatch. Growling at the insane grin on the man's face, Junketsu pushed as much power into Satsuki's body as it could handle all with the purpose of ending Armstrong's life as violently as possible.

**" Die! Die! Die you stupid human!"**

Armstrong sighed wearily as the odds of surviving his fight against Junketsu dropped to nearly zero. Every single attack, ranging from his Anti-Life Fiber traps and weaponry to Uryu and Chad's supernatural abilities, had been barely effective at even leaving a bruise on the Kamui-possessed Satsuki. Gathering up his courage and remaining energy Armstrong smashed his fists together as a yellow light twinkled in his eyes, "Come at me with everything you have, Junketsu! You'll find that this particular man will not die so easily! An Armstrong never runs away from a fight!"

Even though Junketsu was already planning to kill Armstrong quickly and violently simply hearing the Major General's words of defiance caused her to shout in rage. She could feel her mind slipping away into the dark abyss and it would not be long until she forgot her own name. Already the memories inside Ichigo's Life Fibers were beginning to interfere and Junketsu was afraid that soon she would not even be able to tell the difference between Ichigo's memories and her own. Blue heels clicking along the ground hard enough to shatter the asphalt Junketsu brought Bakuzan up to bisect Armstrong and finally end his foolish defiance when a black and white blur slammed bodily into her. As an armored fist smashed into

the side of her face with enough force to tear the eardrums of anyone unfortunately to be in range, Junketsu was sent soaring through several buildings before coming to a crashing halt nearly two blocks away.

"Sorry it took me so long," Ichigo stared in the direction he had hit Junketsu and scowled as he noticed the fallen forms of Uryu, Chad, Tsumugu and Ryuko laying on the ground with pools of blood around their unconscious bodies. Turning around to face the heavily injured Armstrong Ichigo sensed Junketsu already recovering and said, "I don't know who you are but I need you to get Ryuko and the others away from here. Removing my Life Fibers from Junketsu might get messy."

It took Armstrong a few seconds to realize who had arrived but when he did the Major General's expression hardened. Forcing his already exhausted body to move Armstrong walked towards Ichigo and clapped the youth on the shoulder, "Very well Ichigo, I shall leave dealing with Junketsu in your capable hands. I look forward to discussing important matters once this battle is finished. However..."

Ichigo looked over his shoulder, "What?"

Armstrong looked around the destroyed Karakura Town, his gaze stopping for several seconds on each and every person that had fallen to Junketsu's disturbed rampage, before he answered Ichigo, "It will be difficult for me to bring all four of them to the hospital in my current condition. I might be able to manage carrying two of them but I do not wish to find out Junketsu's uncontrolled power had killed the other two in the interim. I am only one man and Ryuken Ishida is still treating Nonon Jakuzure's wounds sustained from Junketsu's awakening."

"Don't worry. I'm going to make sure Junketsu does not hurt anyone else," Ichigo began walking away from Armstrong with Tournesol held tightly in his grip as the lines traced across Mugetsu's armor plating began glowing with a fierce blue light. Knowing Junketsu had attacked and nearly killed Nonon changed everything. Ichigo had

planned on trying to talk Satsuki down like Mako did for Ryuko when she lost control of Senketsu and went berserk. Realizing out of everyone at Honnouji Academy, including the Elite Four, that he was the closest person to Satsuki both confused and disturbed Ichigo.

"I'm going to save both Satsuki and Junketsu!" Ichigo exclaimed to the Major General, "You do what you can for Tsumugu and the others! I can sense my dad coming so he should be able to help them survive long enough for Orihime to heal them!"

Armstrong may have known Isshin Kurosaki for nearly two decades now but the man was as much of an enigma as ever. While his past relationship with Ragyo Kiryuin was sealed apart from several interesting pieces of evidence one thing Armstrong knew for certain was that Isshin was a damn good doctor. Isshin's only lost three patients in his twenty or so years of practice in Karakura Town. Knowing a man with such medical expertise was arriving soon filled Armstrong with relief, "Well said, Ichigo! Your dedication to your friends is truly admirable! I am more than capable of fixing things up on this end! Go save Satsuki Kiryuin from being devoured by her Kamui!"

Without giving Armstrong so much as an affirmation Ichigo wordlessly shifted Mugetsu into her Zangetsu configuration and vanished in a burst of speed in Junketsu's direction. He had no delusions that his punch, which was more than capable of flooring someone like Gamagori while he was wearing his Shackle Regalia, actually did anything more than annoy Junketsu. In Ichigo's first battle against Satsuki back at the beginning of the school year Mugetsu had informed him that Junketsu was withholding roughly half of her power from Satsuki. Now that Junketsu's was wearing Satsuki's body like a set of clothing Ichigo realized the Kamui would be coming at him with everything she had. Ichigo may have gotten stronger alongside Mugetsu but he didn't believe his power had doubled in the span of a month.

Pushing off the ground and vaulting over a pile of debris recently formed from Junketsu's unexpected flight Ichigo hovered in the air as

he caught sight of Junketsu standing in the middle of the road waiting for him. Landing softly some distance away from the Kamui Ichigo gripped Tournesol in one hand and stared into his opponent's multicolored eyes. Even as he immediately sensed his Life Fibers permeating Junketsu's form Ichigo did not dare approach her for the moment. Satsuki's body was quivering sporadically as Junketsu held herself back from charging at him. As he watched Junketsu grip a hand through Satsuki's black hair and lean her head forward Ichigo softly asked, "Junketsu... why did you try to kill my friends? I can't pretend to understand what you're feeling but they had nothing to do with what Satsuki and Iori did to you."

**" Ichigo... Ichigo is here..."**

Junketsu did not pay attention to what Ichigo was telling her as her mind became enraptured at the thought of her agonizing ordeal finally ending. She had just about given up hope of finding Ichigo before losing what remained of her mind but knowing that he was standing in front of her filled her with happiness. Clenching Bakuzan tightly in her hand as the blue lines on her Kamui began shining with an intense blue light Junketsu laughed deliriously as she charged towards Ichigo, **"Ichigo is here! I've been looking everywhere for you Ichigo!"**

Blue and white heels cracked the ground beneath Junketsu as she rushed at Ichigo with a speed he would have been hard-pressed to match outside of his former bankai. Leaning to the side as Junketsu attempted to stab Bakuzan through his heart Ichigo was caught off-guard when she abruptly stopping moving and spun around before slamming her foot into his chin. Even as spittle freely flew forth from his mouth Ichigo managed to keep his attention locked on Junketsu and was able to bring Tournesol around to parry the Kamui's riposte before he was blown back by a large burst of power.

Crashing through an already scattered window and rolling to a stop in what had once been an office building Ichigo pushed himself to his feet and grumbled, "She's certainly stronger than when Satsuki was

in control. I don't remember Satsuki having this much power during our fight."

**" *This is not the time to worry about trivial things like that, Ichigo!*"** Mugetsu chided Ichigo's question as her eyes focused on the approaching Junketsu. With how little time Junketsu had left before Ichigo's Life Fibers overwhelmed her mind forever Mugetsu could sense the abject fear and terror coursing through her fellow Kamui. It pained Mugetsu to know that everything Junketsu was doing was to prevent a fate worse than death, **"*You need to remove your Life Fibers from Junketsu!*"**

"I know that!" Ichigo exclaimed as he sprinted out of the building just as Junketsu appeared in the air right outside. Twisting around Junketsu's attempt to skewer his neck Ichigo reached out and gripped Satsuki's face with his hand before instantly shifting Mugetsu into Gufū. Flipping around so that he was facing the ground Ichigo forced his newly formed rockets to blast at full power as he slammed Junketsu headfirst into the road. Leaping back as a cloud of smoke expanded into the air and obscured his vision Ichigo grimaced and looked into Mugetsu's eyes, "She's just so strong. I can't get close enough to place my hand against Satsuki's chest without Junketsu counterattacking."

**" This is not enough..."** Junketsu's voice echoed out of the smoke, instantly putting Ichigo on guard. While he hadn't actually been trying to kill her with that last attack Ichigo was certain he'd injured Junketsu. As the Kamui walked out of the smoke with barely any wounds on her body, Junketsu tilted Satsuki's head to the side as she began muttering, **"I have to kill Ichigo... Killing Ichigo will make the pain stop... I don't want to disappear!"**

"Damn it..."

Ichigo managed to react in time to Junketsu's assault by parrying her initial lightning-fast attack to the side with Tournesol but he was caught completely by surprise when Junketsu did not follow with another strike as she instead leaned forward until her multicolored

eyes were only inches away from his own. For just a moment his eyes locked gazes with Junketsu's and Ichigo was nearly overwhelmed by the fear and loneliness pulsing right beneath the insanity. It sickened him to actually see what his Life Fibers were actually doing to Junketsu. Ichigo would never do anything like this if he had a choice. As his ears began picking up the sound of Junketsu muttering to herself, her every word laced with pain, Ichigo wanted to say something to comfort the Kamui but found his head forcibly jerking back as Junketsu slammed her forehead into his nose.

**" Die!"**

Reacting instinctively Ichigo brought up Tournesol and managed to block Junketsu's strike. As the ground around him began audibly cracking under the force Junketsu was exerting, Ichigo grit his teeth and pushed back with as much power as Mugetsu could safely grant him, "Stop it, Junketsu! I'm trying to help you!"

Junketsu's eyes widened before narrowing as another wave of mental pain, worse than the last one, tore through her mind. Managing to ignore the pain long enough to plant her heels against Ichigo's chest and push off his body, Junketsu slid to a halt some distance away as everything began wavering around her. For an instant the surrounding buildings and streets of Karakura Town appeared to be submerged in darkened water but it was what Ichigo briefly looked like that caused Junketsu to collapse onto one knee in pain. For just an instant, flickering across her vision like a static image, the colors on Ichigo's skin bled away until it was pure white while his hair turned a brilliant shade of silver.

**" Well now..."**

The moment she heard the familiarly twisted voice Junketsu knew for certain it was not Ichigo talking to her. The smirking bone white Ichigo constantly flickered back and forth between it and the normal Ichigo but one thing that remained constant was that both Ichigo's wore Mugetsu. Wincing as another bout of pain hit her Junketsu saw the pale copy of Ichigo chuckle in a warbled tone and scoff, "... **this**

is quite the surprise. Does a weak and worthless Kamui like you actually believe you can kill a Life Fiber Hybrid like me? You must be out of your mind..."

Junketsu seethed as she pushed Satsuki's body to stand back up, **"Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP!"**

"What's wrong, Junketsu?" Ichigo didn't know what was going on or why Junketsu was staring at him with enough hatred to make the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. One moment she was staring at him with a confused look in her eyes and the next she was shouting at him to shut up, "Mugetsu, what's going on?"

***" I don't know but I think it has something to do with your Life Fibers,"*** Mugetsu had felt something pulse in Ichigo's Life Fibers just a few seconds ago but she couldn't think of a reason why Junketsu would think Ichigo was talking. She hadn't heard him say anything that could warrant such a response, ***"They've been acting up since we arrived in Karakura Town. Perhaps the Life Fibers Satsuki Kiryuin put in Junketsu is allowing her to somehow hear the Life Fibers resonating in your body."***

Ichigo didn't know how any of that worked but this was an opportunity he couldn't afford to pass up. Stabbing Tournesol deeply into the road and rushing forward with his arm outstretched in front of his body he exclaimed, "This is it!"

Although Ichigo and Mugetsu's voices had been loud enough for Junketsu to easily hear them the Kamui could not focus on anything other than the pale facsimile of Ichigo standing in front of her. The smirk on the copy's face, which both infuriated and demeaned Junketsu, slowly died off into a frown, **"Well, what do you know? It seems you can hear my voice. I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted. I suppose it's because a small part of me is in you right now..."**

**" Stop mocking me, Ichigo!"** Junketsu shouted angrily at the silver-haired copy.

As another bout of pain wracked her mind Junketsu was forced to let go of Bakuzan, the weapon clattering to the ground as a result, as she gripped head with both hands. Watching all this with a strangely apathetic expression on his face, the pale copy of Ichigo sighed wistfully and rubbed his palm against his forehead, **"You want to know something funny? You might blame me for what's happening to you but the truth is I'm not the one controlling the Life Fibers slowly eroding your mind and soul!"**

The copy's voice grew louder and louder as it talked until it was nearly shouting at the end, **"What you fail to realize, my dear Junketsu, is that if the pretty little princess whose body you're wearing had simply asked for some of my Life Fibers this wouldn't be happening. I would never give any part of me to you, to be honest, but if by some strange coincidence I did then... well... you would be fine and dandy while still under Satsuki's thumb. So you were screwed either way!"**

Junketsu's eyes clenched shut in pain as she shouted, **"Shut up!"**

**"What? You think I want this to happen to you? Get real."** The pale copy of Ichigo scoffed and folded his arms before smirking as something came to mind, **"Well, it's been real fun talking to you but it seems like everything is just about over..."**

With that the pale Ichigo abruptly shattered into thousands of blue Life Fibers all the while his warbling laughter echoed into the wind. As Junketsu found the world shifting back into reality she saw the true Ichigo rushing towards her with his hand outstretched. Just as she was about to shout at him to stay away from her Ichigo's hand pressed firmly against Satsuki's chest and everything faded to darkness.

Ichigo sat upright with a startled gasp. Taking in several deep breaths as he tried to remember what happened after he placed his hand on Satsuki's chest he found himself drawing a complete blank much to his surprise. One moment he had finally managed to use the perverted technique his dad said would save Satsuki and



Junketsu and the next he was waking up on the shore of a beach. Sitting up and looking around Ichigo noticed that while the ocean stretching out to the horizon in front of him was as smooth as glass the dark gray storm clouds above made him realize that he wasn't anywhere in the real world.

"This is an odd place," Ichigo pushed himself to his feet and absentmindedly brushed sand off his clothing, "I wonder how I got here. You know anything about where we are, Mugetsu?"

When he failed to elicit a response from his Kamui Ichigo looked down and noticed that for the first time in months he was not wearing Mugetsu. Instead of the familiar black and white patterns and multihued eyes on his shoulders Ichigo saw that he was wearing one of sets of clothing he owned before he was transferred to Honnouji Academy. Shivering slightly as a cold breeze blew across the beach Ichigo rubbed his arms and muttered, "I guess I'm on my own from here on out. This must be Satsuki's inner world. I never expected a stormy beach to be her inner world."

Deciding that he had spent enough time enjoying the view Ichigo turned around to begin looking for his Life Fibers when he stopped and deadpanned, "Of fucking course..."

Stretching up into the sky and taking up most of the horizon opposite the beach was a large and imposing castle. Dozens of bastions and parapets lined the walls of the fortress and even from his distance Ichigo noticed various colored flames illuminating the thousands of windows. While the weathered stone fortress appeared to have seen better days but Ichigo knew that despite its rustic and beaten appearance it was more than capable of protecting against any assault. Casting his gaze upwards Ichigo frowned when he noticed the familiar blue glow of his Life Fibers coming from the clouds surrounding the towers stretching into the stormy sky.

"This is more like it," Ichigo groaned and rubbed his temple. Why couldn't anything be easy? Searching the entire castle is going to take forever and time was something he could not afford to waste.

As Ichigo took his first steps towards the imposing castle stretching into and beyond the clouds he stopped as he heard something familiar faintly whispering on the wind. Pausing and cupping a hand to his ear in order to better hear it, the look of concentration on his face quickly changed to a scowl of annoyance as he placed the sound, "The Imperial March from Star Wars? Of course Satsuki would have the theme of Darth Vader playing in her head. God dammit..."

Rubbing the bridge of his nose to stave off the headache he was certainly going to get if he continued thinking about why Satsuki's inner world had background music Ichigo sighed loudly and walked towards the castle. He could always ask Satsuki about it after he saved her. As he stepped across the sandy dunes, prepared to run if needed to reach the castle in the distance, Ichigo felt the world around him shift and warp until he found himself standing on an expansive stone bridge that lead directly to the castle's front gates.

"That was convenient," Ichigo eyed the burning pyre in the middle of the bridge as he hurried towards the castle. Instead of the logs or burning embers that he expected to find he saw that there were dozens of perpetually burning wooden mannequins. What bothered Ichigo and forced a frown to adorn his face was that every single mannequin had the shape of a woman but their wooden faces were all either crying or attempting to cover themselves in shame.

"Where am I?"

Kneeling down next to one of the mannequins that had fallen out of the pyre, Ichigo was just about to turn it over and get a good look at its face when the gates to the castle opened and cast a bright rainbow light over the area. Covering his eyes with his hand, his mind immediately recognizing that light from Satsuki's mother, Ichigo lowered his arm as his eyes began to adjust to the abrupt illumination and saw a short and shadowy figure walking out of the castle towards him.

"Quick, Master Ichigo!" The short man dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief as he waved Ichigo to enter the castle. Staring up into the stormy skies as a flash of blue illuminated everything, the man shouted once more at the hesitant Ichigo, "There's no time for dawdling, boy! You have to get inside before she finds you!"

Ichigo stared at the short man suspiciously. He had never heard of a normal person being able to enter someone else's inner world. What he was doing could be considered the sole exception and Ichigo knew for a fact that Satsuki did not have shinigami powers. Deciding to voice his concerns Ichigo took several steps towards the man and asked, "Who the hell are you and how are you in Satsuki's inner world?"

The man opened his mouth to speak but was knocked to the ground as something slammed into the far end of the bridge. Twisting his body around to see what happened Ichigo felt a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek upon the figure staring at him. At first glance she looked like Satsuki but the colors were all wrong and the last time he checked Satsuki did not have blonde hair. Sprinting towards the castle without a second thought, Ichigo dove under the closing gate just as the fake Satsuki teleported the length of the bridge and was about to clasp a black armored hand around his leg.

"What... the... hell... was that thing?" Ichigo asked in between pants of breath.

"There is no time for small talk, Master Kurosaki." The portly man scowled at the thick metal gate one final time as he wiped the sweat on his forehead with handkerchief before placing it back into the pocket of his tuxedo. As a bright flash of lightning illuminated the castle in shades of eerie blue and white the man smoothed the wrinkles out of his suit before turned away from Ichigo. As he sensed the suspicious scowl on the hybrid's face the man sneered before abruptly bowing, "Please excuse my rudeness, Master Kurosaki. While I may be nothing more than an aspect of Lady Satsuki's will my actions so far have been quite rude. If you wish to call me by a name might I suggest Takiji Kuroido?"

Ichigo frowned as he tried to place why that name seemed so familiar before asking, "Aren't you the Steward of the Kiryuin Family or something?"

The being that took the form of Takiji Kuroido gave an oily smirk as it answered, "You are well informed Master Kurosaki. However I am simply part of Lady Satsuki's will that's been given form and substance in order to better guide you on your journey to save her. Please follow me and watch your step. Lady Satsuki's mind is fatal to anyone that has not been invited. My presence is the only reason you have not yet succumbed to the mental traps."

Giving Ichigo one last unpleasant smile Kuroido turned and began walking away, the shadows permeating the darkened corridors seeming to reach out towards him as he went. As Ichigo glanced down at his clothing, wishing once more that Mugetsu was here, he heard Kuroido's echoing voice from down the hallway, "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Master Kurosaki, but your Kamui did not make the trip. It was your Life Fibers that've infected Junketsu after all. Now please try to keep up. I would prefer that you not manage to get lost before helping Lady Satsuki."

Ichigo did not say anything as he slowly followed the shadowy form of Kuroido. While the tall open windows spaced every ten feet or so along the walls would usually bring in enough light to illuminate every corner of the castle, the raging storm outside had forced the windows to be shuttered with thick opaque glass that let in almost nothing apart from the occasional flash of lightning. As his footsteps echoed on the stone floor interspaced with oriental rugs Ichigo stopped walking as he gazed at a painting taking up the wall in front of him where the corridor turned sharply to the left.

Unlike the rest of the castle the painting was fully illuminated, which allowed Ichigo to see the detail of every single brushstroke of the nearly thirty foot high piece of artwork. As he stared up at the two figures featured predominantly in the painting, both Satsuki Kiryuin and her mother, Ichigo began to feel as if something was off about it. While Ragyo Kiryuin appeared to be normal as she sat upon an

ornate thrown made out of what appeared to be Life Fibers and wearing an elaborately sewn Japanese wedding dress it was the look on Satsuki's face that caused Ichigo to lean closer for a better look. The Satsuki in the painting may have only been six or seven years old but the look of sadness on her face as she stared in the exact opposite direction of her mother caused Ichigo to...

"Master Ichigo!" Kuroido's loud shout from down the hallway disrupted Ichigo's line of thought, "We do not have the time to observe the art! I do not see why a picture of Lady Satsuki and her mother intrigues you so much anyway."

Looking one final time at the painting before he continued following Kuroido Ichigo was shocked to see that the context had changed in the brief moment of distraction. The almost sinister smile on Ragyo's face had been replaced by a nearly maternal one and the look of shame and uncomfortableness on Satsuki was now one of mild contentment and annoyance that most six years old had when forced to pose for a painting. Frowning as he tried to understand whether the painting had indeed changed or he just saw something that wasn't there, Ichigo was forced to abandon that line of thought when Kuroido's increasingly impatient voice forced him to continue following the portly butler.

As Ichigo finally caught up to Kuroido at the base of a rather large staircase he watched as the faux butler removed a torch from a nearby sconce. Lighting the torch with a match that flickered with an alien blue light, Kuroido's face was cast in eerie blue and white shadows as he motioned for Ichigo to stop, "If you wish to truly save Lady Satsuki out of the goodness of your heart, Master Ichigo, then answer a simple question - why are you here?"

Ichigo did not even hesitate as he answered, "I'm here to save both Satsuki and Junketsu from my Life Fibers. What more of a reason do I need?"

Kuroido gave an inhuman snicker as he waved the torch in the air in front of his body, "What more indeed. Lady Satsuki does not have

good memories of Life Fiber Hybrids. In fact before you were exposed as one the only such being she had any close contact with was Nui Harime. I take it you understand why I feel the need to not trust your altruism at face value?"

"I'm here to help," Ichigo countered with grim determination as he stared directly past the glasses Kuroido was wearing into his beady eyes, "If you truly are part of Satsuki than you should already know that."

For just a second it seemed as if Kuroido was not going to accept his answer but soon enough he began chuckling in his normal oily tone. As he began ascending the staircase, the blue light from the torch flicking the shadows back and forth, Kuroido took several steps before turning around and saying, "Well said, Master Ichigo. The answers you seek are this way and I advise you to watch your step. These stairs were not designed for anyone other than Lady Satsuki. They might be... disconcerting."

Ichigo scoffed at Kuroido's worry but as soon as his foot touched the very first step everything seemed to sway and change. The once even and easily climbable steps suddenly appeared to bend at obtuse and strange angles while the heights of individual steps continuously changed right before his eyes. As his mind became increasingly dizzy and he threatened to lose his balance, Ichigo felt a thick hand grab the front of his shirt. When everything immediately reverted back to normal Ichigo looked around and asked, "What the hell just happened?"

"I warned you," Kuroido sneered before letting go of Ichigo and proceeding onwards, "Lady Satsuki's mind is a fortress, Master Ichigo, which demonstrates her inhuman will and drive to persevere. In order to defend against mental and spiritual threats she has implemented various traps and defenses that will only get worse as we get closer to her inner sanctum. I dare say you might never find quite another mind like Lady Satsuki's."

"You'd be surprised what some people would do," Ichigo muttered just loudly enough for Kuroido to hear as he followed the steward up the now normal-looking stairs. As memories of fighting Byakuya passed through his mind Ichigo wondered why someone like Satsuki would act and behave like a centuries old shinigami captain. Byakuya was born in a noble house and grew over decades to accept the rule of law while getting a temper on his emotions. Satsuki, on the other hand, was only seventeen years old and from what he'd been able to find out she's been like this for more than ten years.

"Might I trouble you for another answer, Master Ichigo?" Kuroido turned around as they reached a landing and waved the torch in Ichigo's face, "Do you know how to remove your Life Fibers from Junketsu before the Kamui's mental encroachment upon Lady Satsuki mind, body and soul becomes complete?"

Ichigo scoffed and looked away, "My dad said all I needed to do was place my hand against Satsuki's chest. He never said anything about having to travel through her inner world."

"Ah yes, Master Isshin was always notorious for skimping on the details," Kuroido sneered viciously as he turned away from Ichigo. As the two of them approached the top of the stairs he saw the perplexed look on Ichigo's face and added, "If you truly do not know how to remove your Life Fibers than perhaps my assistance will be required. Every room in this castle represents part of Lady Satsuki's overall personality. Perhaps you might gain some insight about how to safely remove your Life Fibers from Lady Satsuki."

Gripping the elaborate wrought iron handle of the door in front of them Kuroido flashed a conniving smirk at Ichigo as he pushed it open with a rusty creak, "Here is the first stop, Master Ichigo."

The room that lay beyond the threshold was not what Ichigo expected. Instead of the dark and dreary room made out of stone that he expected to see what he saw instead was a pure white room that appeared to shine with a bright light. Stepping inside with

Kuroido following closely behind him Ichigo looked around and felt something was off, "There's nothing here."

"This is simply the viewing room, Master Ichigo, the real room is right this way," Kuroido answered in a mocking tone as he walked past Ichigo, the blue-lit torch no longer in his hand, and approached the single stained glass window on the far side of the room. Pushing open the window and allowing the light from outside to penetrate the room Kuroido added, "Please take a look."

Ichigo had a scowl on his face as he slowly walked towards the open window. Glancing suspiciously at Kuroido one final time before leaning forward out the window he was surprised to see that instead of the raging storm and howling winds blanketing Satsuki mindscape he was looking upon a thirteen year old Satsuki Kiryuin walking through a grove of cherry blossoms. As he watched the soundless scene play out Ichigo saw as the much younger Satsuki was confronted by an equally younger Ira Gamagori. While he was unable to hear what Satsuki said to Gamagori Ichigo was still able to watch as she effortlessly demolished his guard as well as the steel armor Gamagori was hiding underneath his clothing.

"What am I watching?"

"You are witnessing the first encounter Lady Satsuki had with Ira Gamagori. She is quite extraordinary, would you not agree?" Kuroido answered with little concern.

Ichigo didn't answer as the scene shifted to Satsuki standing over a defeated Gamagori. Chopping the larger teen on the back of his shattered armor Satsuki said something that Ichigo wished he could hear before Gamagori bowed his head and knelt in front of Satsuki with his hand held out. Just as Satsuki smiled and reached out with her own hand the scene abruptly vanished only to be replaced by the familiar storm outside. As Ichigo stood with his upper body getting drenched by the torrential downpour he scowled and asked, "How long has Satsuki been this way?"



"Thirteen years, three months, five days, three hours and fourteen minutes," Kuroido answered in a completely uncaring tone as he walked away from the window towards the only other exit to the room. As he placed a hand on the archaic and rustic wooden door, the hinges creaking open with an audible groan, Kuroido looked over his shoulder and said, "There is still much to see, Master Ichigo, and we do not have much time."

There was something inherently wrong with the answer Kuroido had belted out without any hesitation. If he was to take the answer at face value than Satsuki had been like this ever since she was about five years old or so. It bothered Ichigo tremendously to know that a five year old girl became like this, "Before we go any further I have a question of my own. What exactly caused Satsuki to become this way? I don't think someone just wakes up one day and decides to become a different person on a whim."

The steward's black form seemed to blend into the shadows and for just a moment Ichigo's eyes saw something else. That feeling quickly abated when Kuroido turned around and sneered, "Lady Satsuki will have the answers you need. I am not at liberty to discuss anything bothering her with anyone, including you."

Ichigo did not press the issue as he followed the steward. Watching that scene play out in front of his eyes raised more questions than it answered and Ichigo didn't know how seeing pieces of Satsuki's past would help him save both her and Junketsu from his Life Fibers. Pursing his lips as something passed across the forefront of his mind Ichigo paused and asked, "What's Satsuki's relation to her mother?"

"Lady Ragyo?" Kuroido quirked an eyebrow above his glasses as he turned his head around to face Ichigo, "Lady Satsuki's relation with her mother is perhaps more formal than most families. Her father disappeared when she was but five years old. Since that day Lady Ragyo has tried to keep her daughter from drifting too far away. I will admit that Lady Ragyo's relationship with her daughter might seem... strange... to those outside the family but..."

Whatever Kuroido said after that was drowned out as they walked past dozens of simple rooms lining either side of the hallway. As Ichigo stared into the first one on the right he saw that the room was filled with mannequins identical to the ones burning in the pyre outside the castle but with a slight difference. Instead of being completely naked these ones were clothed in elaborate and covering dresses that glowed with a very familiar rainbow light. The next room was similar to the first but as he passed more and more rooms Ichigo began to become disturbed by the increasingly erotic and shameful poses of the mannequins until he could not look at the last room out of fear what he might see.

"Hey," Ichigo cut off Kuroido and swallowed nervously, "I have another question. What the fuck is up with the mannequins in these rooms?"

"You didn't look, did you?" Kuroido's eyes widened in fear as a series of agonizing moans erupted from the rooms. Quickly closing the door of the room nearest them before the mannequins inside could leave Kuroido grabbed Ichigo's hands and rushed down the hall. As the mannequins in the rest of the rooms awkwardly stumbled towards them Kuroido grimaced and said, "Quickly! This way, Master Ichigo! We don't have much time remaining before Junketsu breaches the security of Lady Satsuki's fortress!"

Pulling his hand out of Kuroido's cold grip Ichigo ran alongside the portly man and frowned when he saw more mannequins appearing out of the shadows in front of him. Skidding to a stop and thinking quickly, he grabbed Kuroido by the back of his tuxedo and pulled him into what looked like an empty room before slamming the door behind him. Breathing heavily as he rested his forehead on the door Ichigo muttered, "I think that should buy us some time. Damn it Satsuki, why does your mind have to be such a fucking mess?"

"We should not be here, Master Ichigo..."

Ichigo frowned at the worried tone in Kuroido's voice and turned around expecting to see more of those nightmarish mannequins or

something even worse. Instead of one of Satsuki's mental defenses, however, the only thing in the now lit room was a statue of Satsuki clad in Junketsu and holding something up in the air but due to the angle Ichigo could not see what it was. As curiosity overrode his fear and he took a step forward to see what it was Satsuki was holding Kuroido grabbed Ichigo's wrist to stop him, "This is a very sacred room to Lady Satsuki, Master Ichigo. It's where her deepest desire is kept safe! The longer we are in here the more likely her mind is to lash out and erase your presence from reality!"

Effortlessly pulling his arm out of Kuroido's tight grip Ichigo walked forward and around the statue. When he saw exactly what it was the statue of Satsuki was holding in her hand Ichigo's eyes narrowed as he turned his gaze back to Kuroido, "Tell me something, Kuroido. You said that Satsuki and her mother get along fairly well. So tell me... why the hell is Satsuki's deepest desire to hold her mother's severed head!"

"He... he... he..."

As the room containing Satsuki's deepest desire began to melt around them Ichigo tried to rush forward and grab Kuroido only to find the Kiryuin's steward melting along with it. Letting go of the amorphous body as he fell to the ground in a wet heap, Ichigo twisted around as he felt droplets of rain hit his face. Gritting his teeth angrily into the stormy skies above Ichigo was forced to cover his eyes as a helicopter appeared from over the edge of the castle with Kuroido hanging off the side with a rocket launcher easily held in his hand.

"So you finally managed to figure things out, you stupid boy." Kuroido's voice carried easily through the air even though the helicopter's rotors were barely five feet away from him. Sneering derisively down at Ichigo, who glared up at him through the rain-filled skies, the steward aimed the rocket launcher at Ichigo and shouted, "But it's too late for you to do anything about it! Junketsu is going to destroy the last remnants of Satsuki's mind in less than five minutes!"

Ichigo bit his lip as he watched Kuroido prepare to attack him while he was powerless to do anything. He no longer had shinigami powers and without Mugetsu he just a normal human. Who cared if he was Life Fiber Hybrid when it really didn't help him in a fight? Glowering at Kuriodo he shouted, "I knew I couldn't trust you! Satsuki would never have someone like you as part of her subconscious. So who the hell are you?"

"You truly are a stupid and naïve little boy," Kuroido scoffed angrily at Ichigo's stupid question as he aimed directly at Ichigo. He was but an extension of Lady Ragyo's will, implanted into her daughter in order to spy on her actions. Therefore he knew that Ichigo needed to live to see his creator's plans come to fruition. Snickering menacingly at the look of powerless anger adorning Ichigo's face he sneered and said, "Don't worry. I won't kill you. Lady Ragyo still had need of you after all..."

"Damn it!" Ichigo cursed and began running parallel to the helicopter as Kuroido took aim and fired. As his sneakers slipped against the wet surface of the roof Ichigo was thrown forward and into the air as the rocket detonated just over a dozen feet behind him. Bouncing along the roof as he temporarily lost control of his body Ichigo managed to arrest his movement just before he could roll off the edge and fall to the ground thousands of feet below. Ichigo only managed a quick glimpse over the edge of the roof before a wave of vertigo hit him and forced him to close his eyes and turn away.

*" Damn, the perspective in this place is screwing with me..."*

Upon hearing the faint sound of a second rocket being fired Ichigo threw his body against the soaked roof and felt the heat of the rocket's exhaust against his back as it sailed harmlessly over him. Gritting his teeth and pushing himself back onto his feet Ichigo ignored the sound of the rocket detonating against another part of the castle in order to focus on staying alive, or at least inside Satsuki's inner world. As he took a series of ragged breaths, exhaustion already affecting him despite his superhuman endurance, Ichigo began to notice something strange.

After blinking his eyes and rubbing them to make sure he wasn't seeing things, Ichigo looked to the left and then the right as the torrential downpour seemed to slow to a crawl. The rain that once blanketed the rooftop in a perpetually falling sheet of water now appeared to be moving in slow motion. Although he didn't know how it was possible Ichigo knew that he could individually follow each and every droplet of water as it hit the roof.

"You got lucky twice now!" Kuroido sneered as a third rocket appeared inside his weapon. He was starting to get really sick and tired of Ichigo managing to stay alive. Sure his rockets would not kill the boy but he needed to remove him from Satsuki's mindscape before he stumbled upon a way to save her.

As Ichigo watched the rocket leave the launcher he knew that this time would be different. Reaching out to the rocket as it reached him Ichigo's body was already twisting in motion as his fingers gently grasped the metal casing of the explosive. With almost practiced ease Ichigo spun around with the rocket's exhaust leaving a curved trail of smoke before letting go and allowing it to shoot straight back towards Kuroido.

"Shit!"

Kuroido desperately threw his arm across his face as the rocket slammed into the cockpit of the helicopter, which reeled for several seconds until it exploded in a massive fireball that sent the steward of the Kiryuin family crashing through the air before he slammed bodily against the rooftop. As the helicopter fell over the edge of the roof into the abyss of Satsuki's mindscape Kuroido coughed harshly and saw flecks of rainbow-tinted blood splattering on the wet stone tiles.

"Damn boy!" Kuroido sneered as his body was wracked in pain. The damage he sustained would not be permanent, he was a small piece of Lady Ragyo after all, but he could feel the Life Fibers making up his body straining to stay together. How the hell could he have been expected to fight a Life Fiber Hybrid? Gritting his teeth as he

desperately tried to push himself off the ground Kuroido turned his head upward when he saw a shadow blocking the light. Glaring into Ichigo's angry gaze Kuroido sneered before he began chuckling, "You think you've won, boy? You may have beaten me but I still won the battle. I've stalled you long enough that you don't have a chance to save Satsuki from being Junketsu's permanent set of clothing!"

"Shut the hell up."

Ichigo glared down at the fallen mockery of a steward with rage boiling through his mind. Kneeling down in front of Kuroido and grabbing the steward by the front of his tuxedo Ichigo pulled the shorter man into the air with both hands and scowled, "I think I have a fairly good idea what happened to Satsuki thirteen years ago. I don't care what you say I'm going to save Junketsu and Satsuki!"

Kuroido was about to scoff at Ichigo's stupidity when he saw the boy's hair lighten in color. His eyes widened in shock and fear behind his tinted glasses as the orange hair Ichigo had always known bled away until it was a very familiar shade of silver. After staring at Ichigo's newly silver hair Kuroido began laughing maniacally even as he felt his body begin breaking apart. With a rainbow glow emanating from the increasing cracks on his faux body he said, "Very well then... Lady Ragyo will be pleased to know you were a complete success."

Ichigo was forced to squint when Kuroido's body exploded in a cacophony of rainbow light before hundreds of Life Fibers dissipated into the storm around him. As a crackle of thunder faded away in the distance Ichigo watched as a single rainbow Life Fiber hovered in the air in front of him before it too vanished into nothingness. Staring across the now empty rooftop as the final words of Kuroido echoed in his mind, his empty hands clenched angrily at the realization of Satsuki's past, Ichigo forced himself to calm down.

"There's no time to focus on that right now. I need to save Satsuki," Ichigo sighed dramatically as he turned around to find a way off the roof. Kuroido had been correct about one thing - he didn't have much

time left to save Satsuki. Already he could feel his Life Fibers in Junketsu beginning to penetrate the castle around him. He had perhaps only a few minutes left until it was too late. While he hurried across the rooftop towards the newly created parapet that would take him to the highest tower of the castle Ichigo noticed his reflection in a puddle and quickly skidded to a stop.

"My hair!" Ichigo pulled at his now silver hair as realized that his orange hair was gone, "Why the hell is my hair silver? Damn it! I'm too young to be going grey!"

Sighing miserably at the thought of going out in public with grey hair Ichigo realized that there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. His hair turning silver might even be a side effect of staying in Satsuki's mindscape for too long. With the belief that his hair will be its natural orange once he left Satsuki's mind Ichigo hurried along the parapet and gripped the handle of the door before giving it a solid push.

With a barely audible creak of metal the door gently swung inwards and Ichigo quickly found himself standing in a very familiar setting. Instead of the dark and menacing fortress that was beginning to break under the strain of his Life Fibers in Junketsu Ichigo was now standing in an exact replica of Satsuki Kiryuin's room at Honnouji Academy. Stepping forward and into the main room of the luxurious apartment Ichigo immediately felt that this version was different. Instead of the cold and spartan accommodations that he seen during the Naturals Election the room around him gave off a feeling of warmth and comfort, which caused Ichigo no small amount of surprise.

"Is this Satsuki's true inner world?" Ichigo muttered as he slowly walked around the room and looked around. One of the most apparent changes to the room was the dozens of pictures lining the walls and placed on dressers and stands. Picking one up at random and turning it over in his hands Ichigo saw that it was a picture of a five year old Satsuki smiling happily while eating ice cream alongside a man with auburn colored hair that could only have been her father.

*" Satsuki's father..."*

Ichigo didn't know much about Satsuki's father. From the lack of involvement in her life he assumed he was either divorced from Ragyo or dead. After meeting the woman during Parent Student Day, seeing her rein in Nui Harime without much effort and the knowledge he learned while in Satsuki's mindscape Ichigo was beginning to lean towards the latter.

"There you are Ichigo."

Upon hearing the familiar and confident voice Ichigo turned around and saw Satsuki Kiryuin, or at least a mental representation of her, walking across the room towards him. Clad in Junketsu's normal untransformed state, the outer rings of the Kamui's a familiar shade of blue instead of black, Satsuki's heels clicked rapidly along the marble tiles before she elegantly sat down in a chair. Crossing her legs over each other Satsuki folded her hands in front of her face and said, "Your foolish excuses for not offering advice for the Tri-School Raid Trip were beginning to get annoying."

Ichigo stared at Satsuki with confusion evident in his eyes. As far as he could tell Satsuki had changed the Tri-City School Raid Trip from the Kansai Region to Karakura Town around a few days before the battle. Frowning as he tried to determine what was happening Ichigo decided to ask, "So you're not going after Karakura Town?"

"Of course not," Satsuki gave Ichigo her version of a pleasant smirk as she leaned her head back against the chair, "Do you not recall what happened during the Sudden Death Runoffs? After we managed to drive off Nui Harime before she could kill Mako Mankanshoku I vowed to leave Karakura Town out of my conquest. It is the least I could do for helping to keep our fellow students from dying at the hands of the Grand Couturier."

*" That's not what happened."*



Satsuki's explanation of the events bothered Ichigo. He knew that Mako had died at the hands of Nui Harime during the Sudden Death Runoffs but Satsuki appeared to firmly believe that the two of them managed to stop her before that happened. Walking across the room and sitting down in the chair opposite of Satsuki Ichigo frowned as he tried to think of something to say. He couldn't just tell Satsuki that they were in her mind with perhaps less than two minutes before Junketsu assumed complete control of her body. She would never believe him. He needed to come up with another approach, one that would make Satsuki realize that none of this was real. As his eyes widened slightly as he came up with the perfect idea Ichigo decided to put his acting skills to the test.

"I'm sorry about that. It's been a real busy week for me." Ichigo leaned back in the chair and gave Satsuki an apologetic smirk, "So what sort of advice do you want?"

The slight change in Satsuki's expression signified the extent of her surprise. She hadn't expected Ichigo to actually agree with her methods. Everything she knew about him indicated he was completely against her Raid Trip plan and would be a significant thorn in her side. For him to suddenly turn around and agree to help her temporarily threw her off guard, "Your change of heart surprises me, Ichigo. Before we begin tell me what brought about such a change in your demeanor? During the Sudden Death Runoffs you were nearly antagonistic to me yet now you're more than willing to offer assistance for my plans."

Ichigo felt rather than saw the mindscape around them shake but it was clear that Satsuki did not notice it whatsoever. Looking out the large windows taking up the entire wall to his right as storm clouds began replacing the pleasant midafternoon sky he grimaced and said, "I changed my mind because I realized doing so would allow me to help someone I care about. If I stand back and let her go off on her own than something bad is going to happen to her."

"Care about, you say..." Satsuki's face adopted a pensive look as she thought about Ichigo's words. While there was no reason for her

to find Ichigo's words overtly strange since he was most likely talking about Mato. Satsuki forced herself to ignore the feeling of déjà vu she was experiencing, "While I find myself intrigued by your relation to Mato I fail to see how my plans for the Kansai Region affect her. Without her Kamui she is just another human."

Satsuki's words worried Ichigo, "What happened to Senketsu?"

For a moment Satsuki looked surprised by Ichigo's question before she scoffed and looked out the windows, "I forgot you were busy at the time with saying your farewells to Orihime Inoue. Nui Harime intercepted Mato while you were occupied and managed to not only defeat her but destroy her Kamui. While I managed to stop the Grand Couturier before she could kill Mato I nevertheless collected the scraps of her Kamui in order to bolster my forces in preparation for the Raid Trip."

Ichigo ran a hand through his silver hair as he reminded himself that none of this was real. He had to wonder if things could have actually turned out this way if Nui hadn't killed Mako during the Sudden Death Runoffs. If Mako had not died then Orihime would not have been forced to heal her, which would lead to Nui forcing her to heal her eye. Without her eye getting healed Nui's vendetta against Ryuko would have continued unabated. Ichigo didn't know what else might have changed but simply thinking about how Mako dying would have been better than living greatly disturbed him.

"There is one last matter we need to discuss - our public relationship," Satsuki seemed to find merely saying those words irritating if the frown of annoyance on her face was any indication. As she watched Ichigo flinch back in surprise Satsuki continued, "My mother has been quite insistent that we assume a formal relationship. While I am adamant in waiting until after the pacification of the rest of the Japanese academies is complete it seems that we cannot wait any longer so I will give you this solution, Ichigo. In all public appearances we shall have the formal relation as boyfriend and girlfriend. Since you already live in the Student Council quarters our fellow students will not find such a notion unbelievable."

"Wait. What?" Ichigo coughed in embarrassment at Satsuki's rather forward declaration of being his girlfriend, "You can't be serious!"

If anything that comment made Satsuki's frown deepen, "Of course I am serious, Ichigo. Your ability to not only control Mugetsu but wear it for an indefinite amount of time is a sign of your immense mental fortitude. If there is anyone on Earth worthy of standing alongside me it would be you. Do you not agree?"

"I didn't say that!" Ichigo answered defensively as a flush of embarrassment adorned his face. Grimacing in annoyance as a picture of his dad egging him on came to the forefront of his mind Ichigo scowled and said, "And your reasoning for being my girlfriend is all wrong. It shouldn't be based on power or worthiness or whatever else you called it. Look... I don't have much experience with having a girlfriend so I'm basing everything on my dad's stupid advice and he's not the best source of reliable information about women."

"Then you have not heard my mother talk about him," Satsuki quipped seriously as a small smirk of amusement crossed her face, "I've asked my mother about her relation with your father and the only thing I was able to take away from it was that she once hoped to marry him."

"Are you serious?" Ichigo deadpanned as the look on Satsuki's face never changed. Great, there was another thing he had to ask his dad about when this was all over. Rubbing his face with his hand and muttered unintelligibly about murdering his dad Ichigo sighed and said, "Oh god, you are serious. That's just great. As for your offer... sorry but I'm not interested in a girl that basically wants to go out with me simply as part of some hidden agenda."

"I'm surprised by your disbelief, Ichigo," Satsuki uncrossed her legs as she folded her arms across Junketsu, "Is your opinion of me truly that low?"

Ichigo scowled and looked away from Satsuki, "I'm just going from what I know of you. You really haven't deserved the benefit of the doubt. Almost everything you've done since Ryuko and I arrived has been to further your plan to take down your mother."

Satsuki chuckled at Ichigo and allowed a mirthful smirk to grace her face, "I'm not some omnipotent being, Ichigo. While Matoi and your actions may have helped further my plans do you honestly think I could have gotten this far if Matoi had stopped to truly think about her father's murder? Most of my plans were based of Matoi's predictable reactions to vaguely worded statements and declarations. I knew that if I hinted at knowing the identity of her father's murderer she would stop at nothing to get to me. I was, as Inumuta heard you say, making it up as I go."

"What about trying to kill Ryuko after getting Junketsu?" Ichigo countered.

Before she answered him Satsuki reached forward and picked up one of the cups of tea that had spontaneously appeared on the table between them. Satsuki sipped at the hot and bitter liquid for a moment before answering, "I am not a murderer Ichigo. I had no intention of taking Matoi's life. The entire purpose of the fight was to force her to get over her childish self-worth issues and truly wear Senketsu. Did you know that a Kamui's full power is stunted if the wearer is embarrassed to wear them?"

Ichigo grimaced as he thought back to the first time he truly wore Mugetsu. Silently thanking Kisuke for not making Mugetsu anything like Senketsu and Junketsu he answered, "No I didn't. I never really encountered that particular problem."

"My intention that day was to help Matoi unlock the true power of her Kamui by realizing that she should not base her self-worth on what others thought," Satsuki finished her tea and stared at Ichigo sternly. She found it incredibly insulting that someone like Matoi, who never had to deal with a mother like Ragyo Kiryuin, had body self-worth issues. If she could push forward and wear Junketsu without issue

than Matoi should have been able to do so right from the beginning, "You could not imagine my disappointment when she failed to realize the only thing keeping her from matching me in combat was her own embarrassment. That is why I was glad when you arrived, Ichigo. Your interference allowed Matoi the time to get over herself and reach her full potential."

Ichigo scowled as he thought back and remembered saving Ryuko from being killed by Satsuki, "Am I to assume all the comments you made about sacrificing Mugetsu and me to Junketsu were lies?"

"It was nothing more than simple banter, Ichigo." Satsuki smirked and rested her chin on her hand, "I needed you to give it your all so I could test the extents of Junketsu's power. I had only put on Junketsu a couple of hours prior to the fight so I didn't know my own limits. I had intended to test them against Matoi but we both know how that turned out."

"I suppose..." Ichigo trailed off as he realized that he didn't have much time left. While the Satsuki in front of him didn't seem to notice anything wrong with the mindscape he could feel Satsuki's inner world slowly but surely collapsing around them. He didn't know why it was taking this long but he couldn't waste any more time on talking, "... listen Satsuki, I have a personal question for you. I've seen your mother but what happened to -"

"... my father?" Satsuki interrupted Ichigo without waiting for him to finish. With a scathing bite to her tone she explained, "He's dead. My mother ordered his assassination when I was five years old after he attempted to leave her. He had just found out about her true nature and decided he could not condone her plans any longer. From what I heard the person she chose to kill him was Kuroido. You can rest assured that I have a very special punishment in store for him."

The dark and predatory look on Satsuki's face worried Ichigo but he couldn't really blame her. If the real Kuroido was anything like the mental projection he fought earlier he didn't have a doubt in his mind that he would gleefully murder anyone, even Satsuki's father, if

Ragyo gave him the order. Scowling and running a hand through his silver hair, his mind trying to understand everything he's learned so far, Ichigo decided that they had talked long enough, "Satsuki... do you remember how Orihime healed Nui's eye?"

"What sort of question is that?" Satsuki asked in mild irritation, "Orihime Inoue is but a normal human who was sent by your father as moral support for you during the Sudden Death Runoffs. How could she have... healed... Nui...?"

Satsuki froze as memories of the true events that transpired during the Sudden Death Runoffs returned to her in full force. As he watched Satsuki regain her memories Ichigo noticed the lighting of the room shifting and upon looking through the windows saw the once pleasant day replaced by familiar storm clouds. Watching as an arc of blue lightning stretched across the now turbulent sky Ichigo turned his attention back to Satsuki when she began speaking, "None of this is real, is it Ichigo? Everything that I believed to be reality was nothing more than an illusion created by Junketsu to keep me placated until she could seize full control of my body."

As the illusionary room around them began to crack and splinter, beams of a familiar blue light shining through the gaps, Ichigo turned towards the pensive Satsuki and said, "If you remember everything than you know why I'm here. I can remove my Life Fibers from Junketsu but I don't think it will work unless you retake control of your body first!"

Satsuki didn't say anything as she stood up and took a deep breath. As she adopted a stern expression and looked outside Ichigo saw her body beginning to fade away, "What you say makes sense. Removing your Life Fibers from Junketsu will not make it relinquish its hold on my body. I know what I must do but... thank you for helping me, Ichigo."

"Don't mention it."

While Satsuki didn't say anything in response Ichigo didn't doubt that she heard him. As the familiar backdrop of light surrounded her, tinged by the blue light of his Life Fibers, Ichigo watched in awe as Satsuki took a single step towards the window and immediately the storm raging outside abated before disappearing entirely. Taking another step forward as more of her body faded away from existence, Ichigo was forced to cover his eyes to protect them from her backdrop's intensifying light. As he watched through barely open eyes as Satsuki's body faded away he saw her turn around and face him.

It took Ichigo a second to realize what he was seeing. As she looked at him with more than half of her body already gone, the corners of Satsuki's mouth curled up until a warm and wide smile had blossomed across her face. Staring in shock at the sight before he managed to regain his composure, Ichigo returned Satsuki's smile with a grin of his own as he watched her fade completely. As the last traces of Satsuki vanished Ichigo saw her inner world disappearing as well.

"Where am I now?" Ichigo pondered as he looked around the white expanse that stretched for as far as he could see. There had to be a way out of Satsuki's mind now that he rescued her from being consumed by Junketsu. The only problem he had is that his dad didn't exactly give him instructions on how this worked, "Wait a second... how the hell did he know I was a Life Fiber Hybrid?"

**" Hello Ichigo."**

Turning around at the familiar voice, this time lacking the psychotic and mentally unbalanced tones he had come to expect, Ichigo found himself standing face to face several feet away from the strangely colored version of Satsuki in her Kamui that had chased him into the castle. As he stared into the multihued eyes of the blonde haired Satsuki standing before him Ichigo's own eyes widened in realization as he instinctively knew who she truly was, "Hello Junketsu. Are you feeling better now?"

Junketsu gave Ichigo a soft smile as she held out her arm and opened her hand, allowing him to see the small ball of blue Life Fibers curled up within it. As the Life Fibers lit up her face in a pleasant blue light, Junketsu stared at the orb of Life Fibers dancing above her palm before muttering, **"You saved me, Ichigo. Even after I tried killing you and those other humans you still saved me. Why?"**

"Because I made a promise that I would save both you and Satsuki," Ichigo's answer caused Junketsu to look up at him with shock evident on her face. Scoffing as he folded his arms across his chest Ichigo continued, "I wasn't about to go back on my word because you tried to kill me. It wasn't like you were in your right state of mind, after all, so I don't think anyone is going to hold a grudge against you but an apology couldn't hurt."

**" I see..."** Junketsu allowed the Life Fibers to leave her hand and watched as the slowly pulsating orb floated towards Ichigo who caught it in his own hand. Watching as the orb slowly seemed to shrink to nothing as it was absorbed back into Ichigo Junketsu looked down and gave a miserable sigh as she saw her body beginning to disappear, **"Satsuki's regained control of her body. It seems as if I'm going to return to being nothing more than a caged animal under her thumb."**

Ichigo stepped forward and placed a hand on Junketsu's shoulder as he gave her a supportive smile, "I don't think that's going to be the case. Satsuki didn't know how much she was hurting you. I think if you give working with Satsuki a chance you'll find that she's not that bad. Sure she's a little annoying and never seems to smile but she's still a good person. She may not be able to hear your voice and understand what you want but she's smart. I'm sure she'll figure out a way to talk to you eventually. Besides, even if that never happens you still have Ryuko and me. I'm sure Mugetsu and Senketsu would like meeting the real Junketsu."

Junketsu returned Ichigo's smile as the last remnants of her body faded from the mindscape, **"I... suppose... thank you... Ichigo..."**



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The first thing Ichigo noticed upon leaving Satsuki's inner world was that he was laying on his back with Mugetsu transformed back into her normal uniform appearance. Groaning as he pushed himself into a sitting position Ichigo rubbed the back of his neck and looked around, which is when he noticed the second thing upon escaping Satsuki's mindscape. Sitting down on a piece of rubble, Junketsu torn and dirty but once more in her normal appearance, was Satsuki.

The Student Council President did not seem to notice Ichigo's return to consciousness as she stared into the distance with the sheathed Bakuzan resting between her legs. Even though her appearance was currently disheveled and she looked as if she might fall over from exhaustion at any second Satsuki still managed to project an aura of strength and power. Turning her head as she heard Ichigo push himself off the ground Satsuki narrowed her eyes momentarily before closing them, "While I am highly appreciative of the help, Ichigo, I must know one thing - how much of my mind did you see?"

Ichigo ignored the worried questions Mugetsu's was asking him as he grimaced and looked to the side, "... I saw enough."

"I need to know exactly what you saw in there, Ichigo," Satsuki's tone might have sounded forceful and demanding but for Ichigo there was no masking the desperate undertone carried on all her words. He knew exactly what she was asking and it bothered him that he had to answer.

"Look..." Ichigo rubbed the back of his neck as the proper words escaped him. This was a topic he never thought he would have to talk about and it was taking everything he had just to say something, "I'm not going to pretend I understand what you went through but what I saw... your mother... how could -?"

"Do not say it, Ichigo," Satsuki's venomous tone caused Ichigo to flinch and cut his questions short. Standing up, her legs shaking ever so slightly before she regained her balance, Satsuki began walking towards Ichigo with a slightly conflicted look in her eyes. Stopping just a few feet away from him and giving an uncharacteristic sigh she said, "You are most likely the only person fully aware of the unspeakable acts my mother has done to me. Please do not speak a word of it to anyone. Nobody must know the true extent of my mother's madness."

"... alright. I won't say anything," Ichigo felt that there should be something he could say to Satsuki to help her feel better but what the hell would it be? He had fought some terrible opponents during his time as a shinigami but nothing they did compared to what Satsuki's mother apparently did. Pushing himself off the ground with a tired grunt and brushing dust and dirt off Mugetsu, who gave a pleased sigh in gratitude, Ichigo bit his lip and tried to come up with something to say, "I may not ever understand what you went through but if you ever need someone to talk to I'm -"

"Lady Satsuki!"

Ichigo was cut off when Gamagori, Inumuta and Sanageyama appeared out of nowhere and landed on the ground between them with a resounding thump that nearly caused him to lose his balance and fall over. While he looked worse for wear after his clash against Yasutora Sado and his Goku Uniform was torn and dirty Ira Gamagori still managed to seem as if his body bristled with power and strength. Giving Ichigo one final angry glare before turning in worry to Satsuki Gamagori asked, "Are you alright, Lady Satsuki?"

"I am fine, Gamagori," Satsuki shifted back into her normal persona without any effort. Glancing at the three members of her Elite Four standing before her she frowned in contemplation and asked, "Where is Jakuzure?"

"I'm right here, Lady Satsuki."

Walking towards them with her Goku Uniform unbuttoned in order for the bandages wrapped around her chest to breathe was Nonon Jakuzure. Her memories after being betrayed by Lady Satsuki and nearly killed were hazy but she vaguely remembered being taken to a brightly lit room by a man with white hair before someone that looked a lot like Orihime Inoue began healing her. When she finally regained consciousness Nonon woke up to find that she was lying on a cot at Karakura General Hospital and left as quickly as she could. Noticing the barely repressed anger coursing through Gamagori, Nonon gave an exaggerated sigh and rolled her eyes, "What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with me? Do you not see how you are currently dressed?" Gamagori pointed a massive finger at Nonon, who simply folded her arms across her chest and rolled her eyes a second time.

"For your information I can't button up my Symphony Regalia because of the bandages," Nonon countered with a bite to her tone. Ignoring Gamagori's remaining complaints in order to take a look at Satsuki she mentally sighed in relief when once again saw the familiar blue instead of the alien multihued coloring belonging to Junketsu. Pushing past Inumuta, who requested she tell him who managed to injure her so greatly, Nonon stalked towards Ichigo and grabbed him by the front of Mugetsu. Pulling him down to eye level Nonon looked around before narrowing her eyes and whispering, "I don't like you but thanks for saving Lady Satsuki's life... Strawberry."

Upon hearing Nonon's familiar name for him Ichigo pulled down a lock of his hair and sighed in relief upon seeing its usual orange. Snorting at Ichigo's weird behavior before kicking him in the shin, Nonon turned to Satsuki, "What are we going to do, Lady Satsuki?"

Satsuki looked at Ichigo for a moment before turning around and placing Bakuzan's scabbard back on her hip. Pulling the flare gun out of Gamagori's pocket and firing it directly upwards into the sky Satsuki did not have to wait more than a minute before the new helicopter piloted by Elena appeared, "I am ordering a general withdrawal of all Honnouji forces. Giving your current states it is clear

that you have lost your respective battles. If we remain in Karakura Town any longer our defeat is all but certain."

As she jumped into the helicopter, where Iori and a severely enraged Riruka could be seen stared angrily at Ichigo, Satsuki turned around as a backdrop of blue-tinted light appeared behind her, "Be grateful for this day, Ichigo, for you have done what no other city has accomplished! Do not let this victory cloud your judgment for I shall be waiting for the day you let your guard down!"

Ichigo didn't answer as he watched Satsuki and her Elite Four fly out of Karakura Town and back to Honnouji Academy. Almost as soon as they were out of sight Ichigo collapsed onto the ground and gave a tired sigh, "Damn it, this has been one long day."

" ***It's not even noon yet, Ichigo,***" Mugetsu replied and Ichigo could hear the sarcasm in his Kamui's voice, "***By the way, what happened after you touched Junketsu? After you pressed your hand against Satsuki's chest the two of you didn't move for almost five minutes before you were thrown backwards and I was forced out of my activated state.***"

Ichigo took a large breath as he stared up into the sky. Every inch of his body felt as if he had just gone two rounds with Kenpachi and then fought Byakuya for good measure. Rubbing the bridge of his nose and sighing he answered, "Apparently what my dad failed to mention is that after I did that I would enter Satsuki's mind."

" ***Really?***" There was no hiding the excited tone in Mugetsu's voice. After everything he explained to her about his time as a shinigami while flying towards Junketsu the Kamui was excited to hear more about Ichigo's adventures, "***What was it like? What did you see?***"

"... I really can't talk about. I saw some of Satsuki's memories, talked to her for a while and then met Junketsu," Ichigo paused for a moment before adding, "You would like her when she's not trying to kill us. She's actually very nice even though Junketsu took on

Satsuki's form inside her mind. Seeing a happy smile on Satsuki's face was disturbing."

" ***I don't doubt that,***" Mugetsu grumbled jealously.

"Ichigo!"

Ichigo turned his head to the left and saw Ryuko and his friends running towards him. Grimacing as he forced his body to once again leave the comfort of the ground he winced and rubbed his shoulder before waving back. Skidding to a stop next to him Ryuko looked around for Satsuki before scoffing and kicking at a rock, "Damn it! That's the second time I lost to her!"

"Technically you fought Junketsu," Ichigo muttered before running a hand through his hair. His fight against Junketsu had been a lot tougher than the one against Satsuki and Ichigo had to wonder if they would get even stronger if Satsuki learned to work together with her Kamui. When Ichigo noticed that Ryuko's wounds were completely gone he looked around and asked, "Where's Orihime?"

Ryuko blinked owlishly at Ichigo before her eyes lit up, "Oh! My wounds weren't as bad as they looked. By the time your dad brought Orihime over most of the bleeding had stopped. Apparently Satsuki's sword just cut open my side or something. Still, it was an awful lot of blood for such a small scratch."

" ***Where is Junketsu?***" Senketsu's eye looked around in concern before it focused on Mugetsu, "***Did you manage to save her from Ichigo's Life Fibers?***"

" ***As a matter of fact we did,***" Mugetsu answered smugly while taking the opportunity to rub her superiority in Senketsu's metaphorical face. As she gave her fellow Kamui the equivalent of a haughty laugh she added, "***Ichigo saved the day while you were too busy getting your fibers kicked!***"

**" What? Come over here and say that to my face!"** Senketsu tried to pull himself off Ryuko to go teach Mugetsu a lesson but she quickly put a stop to that by grabbing hold of his lapels and not letting go. As her Kamui briefly struggled to free himself and teach Mugetsu a very valuable lesson he quickly stopped when he felt Ryuko's angry gaze focused entirely on him.

"What the hell's your problem Senketsu?"

Senketsu looked up at his wearer with a childish look in his eye,  
**"She mocked my abilities as a Kamui. She must pay."**

"What are you, five? Ichigo and Mugetsu were the only ones that could have saved Junketsu. All we were capable of was stalling for time," Ryuko scoffed before she remembered why she was there, "Oh, I almost forgot. That Armstrong guy wanted me to come get you. He said it was time we learned the true goal of Ragyo Kiryuin and Life Fibers. Apparently he's like the second in command of Nudist Beach or something stupid like that."

Ichigo had thought he would be forced to hunt his father down and beat the answers he needed about Life Fibers out of him. Actually getting the answers he wanted without having to go to hell and back was a surprising relief. Standing up and nearly falling over as a wave of exhaustion hit him Ichigo pulled Tournesol out of the road and rested it on his shoulder. He had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach that something bad was going to happen really soon.

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## **Kamui Tales #24 - Let's Switch Places!**

**" Welcome to the twenty-fourth installation of Kamui Tales!"**

Senketsu appeared in front of the screen before hopping away until he was standing next to the television with the remote held firmly in his sleeve, **"Despite the author having trouble coming up with**

***various omake and other things like that, he still manages to do it. Anyway the topic of this chapter's omake is Junketsu's appearance!"***

Pressing down on the remote with his sleeve Senketsu watched as the screen lit up with an image of the black-skinned and blonde haired Satsuki speaking to Ichigo, ***"When inside their wearer's inner world, mindscape or just their imagination a Kamui will adapt an appearance similar to their wearer but at the same time quite different. Hmm... I wonder what I would look like in Ryuko's inner world."***

As images of a dark-skinned Ryuko with an eyepatch and wearing a white version of his Kamui appeared in Senketsu's mind he found himself kicked across the room as Junketsu appeared from off screen. Catching the remote in her hand and looking at Senketsu's fallen form with mild amusement she fixed a bang of blonde hair that had fallen across her face upon her introduction, ***"You can dream all you want but without a body you are weak, Senketsu."***

***" Those are bold words coming from the Kamui that fainted the last time she appeared in one of these segments!"*** Senketsu countered and tried to take back the remote but found Junketsu's new body to be too powerful.

***" It appears I've taken on some of Satsuki's self-confidence along with her appearance,"*** Junketsu quipped as she held off Senketsu with only a single hand. Quirking an eyebrow as Senketsu attempted to bite her to make her give him the remote Junketsu spun around and threw the male Kamui across the studio until he crashed against the far wall and collapsed limply to the ground with a swirl replacing his eye.

***" Hmm... I can't say he didn't deserve that but he had a good point. Why are you the only one with a body?"*** The camera panned to the side to show Mugetsu lying across a couch with the top of her body hanging off the armrest, ***"Out of the three main***

***characters I was with Ichigo the longest. I should have a body first."***

" **True,**" Junketsu raised her arm as Senketsu came flying out of nowhere in an attempt to grab the remote, **"But this arc was about Satsuki's character development and her relationship with me. It is only fair that the author gave me a body first but there is a slight problem. I am female and Satsuki is female... the same cannot be said about your humans."**

Both Mugetsu and Senketsu thought about Junketsu's words before they shuddered in revulsion. They hadn't thought about having a body of the opposite sex. Having a body only worked for Junketsu and possibly Danketsu, but that bitch of a Kamui had refused to come to the omake under the excuse of 'vacationing in Hawaii.'

" **Hmm...**" Senketsu brought a sleeve up to his mouth as a seemingly brilliant idea came to him. Hopping over to Mugetsu he stopped by her head and said, **"Let's trade wearers!"**

Mugetsu nearly fell off the couch, **"What?"**

" **I said let's trade wearers!"** Senketsu replied with enthusiasm. Either ignorant of the growl coming from Mugetsu or simply deciding to ignore it Senketsu raised a sleeve in a mock salute and continued, **"I'm sure the author can switch our Kamui forms so that nothing disturbing is shown but I want a body and you want a body so let's trade places!"**

Junketsu watched with veiled amusement as Mugetsu launched herself off the couch and began trying to kill Senketsu. Sighing as she threw the remote over her shoulder she began walking away with a clear purpose in mind. Now that she had a body she could do the one thing she always wanted to do - learn how to dance.



# Tell Me Something Good

*I present to you Chapter 37 and with it the first part of the Great Culture and Sports Festival Arc. There is a lot going on in this chapter and much of which follows the events of Episode 16 up to a certain extent. That means the... bath scene... is here so if it bothers you I won't fault you for skipping it. I hope you enjoy the chapter and don't forget to leave a review when you are done!*

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## Chapter 37 - Tell Me Something Good

*" So this is what it truly feels to wear a Kamui..."*

As she embraced the feeling of being able to wear Junketsu's transformed state without having to clash against the Kamui's will Satsuki Kiryuin lamented the hypocrisy of her words to Matoi during their confrontation. She had retrieved Junketsu from its... her... sealed container with the sole purpose of being able to counter Mugetsu and Senketsu's power. Ichigo had already shown himself to be far stronger than the embarrassed Matoi and Satsuki considered it was only a matter of time until he became fed up with the system at Honnouji Academy and decided to stop her. At the time Satsuki hadn't bothered to consider whether forcing Junketsu to obey through sheer force of will was the proper thing to do. Satsuki was determined to rid the world of the monster that was Ragyo Kiryuin by any means and just a few days ago she considered doing anything it took to achieve her goals.

That hubris nearly cost Satsuki both her body and mind to a mentally unbalanced Junketsu.

Turning her gaze away from the window and the landscape passing by thousands of feet below Satsuki knew that the only reason she was able to think about her past actions was due to the intervention of Ichigo Kurosaki. As a Life Fiber Hybrid and the fact she used his Life Fibers to bolster Junketsu's power Ichigo was able to not only enter her mind and save her but also speak with Junketsu. Satsuki did not know what he spoke with her Kamui about but ever since leaving Karakura Town Junketsu has been much more cooperative. Closing her eyes and mentally asking Junketsu to shift back to her regular form as a uniform Satsuki was relieved when the Kamui did not hesitate before doing so.

Thinking back on Ichigo's words nearly twelve hours ago Satsuki leaned her head back and sighed wistfully, *"Ichigo was right. In my desire to see my mother pay for her crimes against humanity as well as what she did to me I had almost sunk to her level. What point would there be in saving the world if I become just like my mother?"*

As she reminisced on Ichigo's words last night Satsuki wondered exactly how much of her memories he'd seen. While she did not doubt he had been able to figure out what it was her mother was doing to her Satsuki privately worried about whether Ichigo had seen the true depths of her mother's depravity. Clenching a fist softly in her lap Satsuki wished that Ichigo had never found out about her private shame. She was a strong willed woman with the ability to inspire the masses into following her every command through charisma and fear and yet she wasn't able to stop her mother's 'purification' rituals. Still despite Ichigo possessing the knowledge of how much of a monster her mother was, Satsuki could not help but give a relieved smile.

*" He didn't look at me any differently..."*

Satsuki sighed softly and closed her eyes as she forced her mind to focus on more important matters. While she wanted to speak with Ichigo about what they discussed in the fathoms of her mind there would always be time for such things in the future. Right now she needed to focus on the end of the Raid Trip. After leaving the

perimeter of the Anti-Life Fiber shield and picking up an unexpected guest along the way, Satsuki had ordered Elena to touch down and let her Elite Four and Riruka off. While her friends understood Satsuki's reasoning for wanting to be alone Riruka had been quite angry and demanded that she stay on the helicopter. Satsuki, instead of threatening Riruka by placing the tip of Bakuzan at her throat, simply informed the magenta haired member of Xcution that she no longer possessed her raiment and was simply a human.

The lack of retort from Riruka as she quietly scurried away from the helicopter said it all.

"Your tea is ready, Milady."

Satsuki allowed a smile to grace her face as she allowed Soroi to refill the ceramic cup sitting innocently on the table in front of her. Picking up the cup and sipping the bitter tea that she had gotten used to enjoying over the years, Satsuki allowed herself to savor the familiar taste before speaking, "Thank you, Soroi."

"Your gratitude is appreciated," Soroi bowed politely upon hearing Satsuki's compliment. The elderly butler had been worried Satsuki was overusing Life Fiber Override and was risking her health but when she returned looking exhausted but otherwise fine Soroi had emitted a sigh of relief. Turning his head ever so slightly around towards the back of the helicopter Soroi leaned forward and whispered, "Please forgive my rudeness Milady but about our guest..."

Satsuki chuckled softly as she answered, "You need not worry about the Grand Couturier, Soroi. She is simply smarting from the loss of her purple Scissor Blade."

"You should really watch what comes out of your mouth, Lady Satsuki." Nui Harime tilted her head to the side and stared directly at Satsuki with a psychotic grin adorning her face. As her razor sharp teeth shone in the afternoon sunlight the Grand Couturier giggled menacingly and added, "It's not polite to speak about things you

don't understand, you know. It's really rude and might get someone into a lot of trouble."

Once she finished speaking Nui turned her eyes away from Satsuki and stared aimlessly at the floor. Despite the venomous tone in her voice Nui had no real intention of harming Satsuki or any of the humans she cared about. Lady Ragyo had great plans in store for Satsuki and if refraining herself from killing a few humans and acting as if she followed orders was all it took to keep Satsuki in line than Nui would do so with a cheerful smile on her face. The anger coursing through her body was directed at one man - Isshin Kurosaki.

*" How did he do it? What did he do to me?"*

Nui's blue eyes narrowed and her blonde hair cast her face in shadow as she tried to remember what happened after entering Karakura Town. The last thing she clearly remembered before waking up in Satsuki's helicopter was skipping down the road into Karakura Town. Everything after that was a grey blur full of nothing but half-recalled visions that gave Nui a headache the more she tried to remember them. When she woke up and saw that Satsuki was perfectly fine while Junketsu had reverted back to her old self Nui was ecstatic because that meant Ichigo was nearly at the same level as her and would soon join their family. That elation quickly turned to anger and finally to hatred when Nui noticed that something she valued more than anything else, her purple Scissor Blade, was missing.

The first thing Nui did upon discovering its absence was to ask, really demand, Satsuki tell her where the Life Fiber weapon was. When Lady Ragyo's daughter had declined knowing anything about the location of the blade it had taken all of Nui's self-control to not lash out angrily. A Life Fiber blade was more than just a sword or weapon in the hands of a hybrid. When someone such as herself holds such a weapon its Life Fibers take on her will and desires. Why else would the Scissor Blade, which was originally red, turn purple in her hands and Tournesol turn blue in Ichigo's? That,

however, was not the primary reason Nui was thinking of killing Isshin Kurosaki. In a normal situation she could have suffered the loss of the Scissor Blade but to have it stolen from her while unconscious was demeaning on so many different levels. That still did not compare to the level of humiliation she received from the note Satsuki said she found taped to her dress.

*Dear Nui,*

*By now I'm sure you've woken up and noticed the loss of your purple Scissor Blade (actually it's not so purple anymore). I'm sorry that I absconded with it without asking for your permission but you were sleeping and I didn't feel like waking you up. I have some extra-large letters to open and the normal scissors I have at home are far too small. I'll return it when I'm done.*

*Regards - Isshin Kurosaki*

*P.S. You owe me one chocolate cookie.*

*P.P.S. Say hello to Ragyo for me!*

"I'm going to kill him. He's going to die..." Nui giggled maniacally as she focused on thinking of ways to kill Isshin but no matter what plan she came up with she knew it would be an effort in futility. He was just as strong as Lady Ragyo and Nui instinctively realized trying to fight him would be suicide. He could kill her before she even knew what hit her and what was worse was that she couldn't even take hostages. She already tried that on him once and it wouldn't work a second time.

*" He took my Scissor Blade. It was mine and he took it..."*

Nui's blue eyes narrowed as she pulled her knees onto the chair and wrapped her hands around her pink boots. That Scissor Blade was one of the few things Nui truly owned. Everyone thought that as the Grand Couturier of Revocs Nui could buy whatever she wanted. Such a belief could not be further from the truth. The fact was that

Lady Ragyo bought everything that Nui owned with only a few exceptions. The pink Lolita dress she always wore, kept permanently clean and proper by the Life Fibers woven within it and her body, was one of them and it had originally come with a parasol to match. That was why when Kisuke Urahara destroyed her lovely parasol Nui had stopped trying to hold back as much. While it wasn't as important to her as the purple Scissor Blade the parasol had been one of the few true possessions she owned, *"I had that parasol for so long and he destroyed it. I only wish I was able to make Mr. Urahara suffer for eternity instead of leaving it to my clones."*

"I just wanted to speak to Amu for a bit. She's my sister and I wanted to talk to her..." Nui's soft whispers were just loud enough for Satsuki to hear. The youngest Kiryuin had initially been surprised by the Grand Couturier's single-minded focus on Ururu. For as long as she had been forced to bear Nui's childish antics and lack of morality Satsuki had never seen the Grand Couturier this determined about something. Nui's passions were akin to the seasons - short and brief before moving onto something else when she got bored or killed them.

"I didn't even get to see Ichigo," Nui tilted her head forward causing her blonde pigtails fell over her forehead, "Mr. Kurosaki is going to pay for ruining my fun..."

Before Nui could whisper any more threats directed at Isshin the intercom of the helicopter flared into life and Elena's voice came through a moment later, "Lady Satsuki, I just received a message from Rei Hououmaru."

Satsuki's body tensed at the mentioning of Rei. If she was contacting her that could only mean that her mother had something important to say. Placing the cup of tea in her hand down on the silver tray in Soroi's hands Satsuki leaned back in the chair and said, "What does my mother wish to speak about?"

Elena didn't respond for nearly a minute as she listened to Rei Hououmaru's voice over her headset. When she finally answered

Satsuki noticed a slightly more professional tone to the pilot's voice, "Lady Ragyo arrived at Kiryuin Manor an hour ago. She wishes to speak to you personally concerning the results of the Karakura Town Battlefield Trip."

"I see," Satsuki closed her eyes and thought deeply on the matter before turning her head and looking at Nui. From the new excited look on the Grand Couturier's face it was clear that Nui had come to the same conclusion why her mother would come home now of all times. As memories of Ichigo talking to her in the inner recesses of her mind came to the forefront of her memories Satsuki sighed and said, "Tell my mother that I will head home without delay. Soroi, inform Iori and the others and let them know that I will be returning a little later than I initially planned."

Soroi bowed his head, "Of course, Milady. Is there anything else?"

Satsuki paused in thought for a moment before nodding, "Yes. Tell them to remain vigilant until returning to Honnouji Academy. I would not put it past Nudist Beach to launch a counter attack. They must not assume victory until all opposition is crushed under our heel."

"Very well, Milady," Soroi answered and upon noticing the empty cup of tea on the tray inquired, "Shall I pour you another cup of tea?"

Satsuki looked at what remained of the bitter liquid in the cup and narrowed her eyes gently. She was not looking forward to seeing her mother by any stretch of the word and as much as she wished to decline she knew she couldn't. Glancing one more time at Nui Harime, whose mood had shifted upon the realization that she would be seeing Lady Ragyo, Satsuki muttered politely, "Yes please."

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Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

"Amen."

Snapping the bible in his hand shut with a soft snap the man stared solemnly at the simple gravestone in front of him bearing the name 'Masaki Kurosaki.' Pulling the grey cassock he was wearing tighter around his body as a stiff autumn wind kicked up through the graveyard the man stood silently for several seconds before crouching down. Pulling a lighter out of his pocket he lit the incense in front of the gravestone. Masaki might have been Catholic but Isshin had been adamant she receive a proper Japanese funeral. Fifteen years ago the simple thought of having a Catholic partake in such a tradition would have forced him into a frothing rage but now...

"It does not do a soul good to dwell on the past." Speaking in a thick Irish accent as he stood back up and turned around, the man took a look at the columns of smoke rising from Karakura Town just over a mile away and scoffed, "The wee lass sure did a number on the place."

He had rushed to Japan as fast as he possibly could as soon as the General sent the alert concerning Satsuki Kiryuin switching the focus of the Raid Trip from the Kansai Region to Karakura Town. While Nudist Beach had plans in place to deal with Honnouji Academy attempting to destroy their headquarters underneath Osaka, the sudden change in venue had thrown the General off balance and that was never a good sign. It was unfortunate that he arrived at Karakura Town mere hours after Satsuki Kiryuin's forces had retreated. He had been looking forward to testing the effectiveness of his Tailor Bayonets on an actual Kamui.

"Ah, well I suppose I can wait a few more days before hunting down the wee lass and destroying the unholy abomination she wears."



Kamui were an abomination and it was his job to destroy each and every one. He knew of the General's orders to leave Ryuko Matoi and Senketsu alone but the man would not be fooled. A Kamui was nothing more than Life Fibers and if given half a chance would betray the human wearing them. Kinue had been lucky ten years ago due to Isshin Kurosaki's magical device but it was only a matter of time until it stopped working. When that happened he would need to be the one to put her down once and for all. He owed Tsumugu that much. No brother should have to be the one to murder his sister.

"Senketsu... Fresh Blood... such an audacious name..."

The man quite frankly did not care what the Kamui was called. It had already gone out of control once before and would do so in the future. If Isshin's boy and his friend hadn't stepped in and interfered Ryuko would have died that day and he would be paying his respects to her grave as well. Thinking about Orihime Inoue caused the man to pause as he recalled Tsumugu's report of the incident. The younger Kinagase had claimed Orihime managed to not only heal Mako Mankanshoku's wounds but also bring her back from the dead after the Grand Couturier ran the Scissor Blade through her heart. As blasphemous of a claim that was the man had seen the uncut security footage of the fight. He had seen Orihime create some sort of barrier before Makanshoku rose from the dead. He had actually witnessed a holy miracle.

Sensing a presence walking slowly towards him the man looked down the hill and saw a fully clothed Aikuro Mikisugi walking towards him. Scoffing as he tucked his hands into his cassock and walked away from the grave the man asked, "You're actually wearing clothes? I'm just a wee bit surprised."

Smirking as he ran a hand through his blue hair Aikuro replied bombastically, "While I would love to do nothing more than expose my beautiful nude body for the world to see I'm afraid it is much too cold out on this fine autumn day! As a fellow commander of Nudist Beach you should be nude as much as possible in order to boost morale of the troops!"

"I boost morale every time I deliver righteous vengeance on those that wear Life Fibers," the man answered coldly as he walked past Aikuro and down the hill. Up until twelve hours ago he had been in Moscow tracking the movements of Moe Shishigawara. After Kinue took down Jackie Tristan in Paris the General had ordered him to head to Moscow after receiving a confidential report that the youngest and least experienced members of Xcution was stationed there. While no one in Nudist Beach apart from Kinue had managed to actually bring down a member of Xcution since the organization's founding he was one of the few that managed to survive long enough to retreat.

Aikuro chuckled, "There is more to life than fighting, Anderson."

Alexander Anderson, Nudist Beach Commander of Life Fiber Pacification and Elimination, did not hesitate to correct Aikuro and growled, "As long as a single Life Fiber remains on the surface of this planet I will not cease my righteous quest. I will not lay down my weapons until the day every single Life Fiber has been sent to the pits of Hell. Now why have ye come here?"

"There's been a development concerning Isshin's son," Aikuro knew from the slightly tensing of Anderson's face that the former priest knew what he was about to say. As much as he wished to keep it a secret Aikuro knew it would be better for Anderson to find out now than at a highly inappropriate time later on, "During the Sudden Death Runoffs at Honnouji Academy Nui Harime pulled out Ichigo's heart. It is as we thought - he is a Life Fiber Hybrid."

"So it has come to pass." There was a flash of light reflecting off metal as a black and green Tailor Bayonet slid out of Anderson's right sleeve and into his hand. After taking a moment to marvel at his Anti-Life Fiber blade Anderson began the long walk towards where he knew Isshin still lived, "We all assumed that monster's experiments might one day bear unholy fruit but deep in my heart I prayed to God that Masaki's boy would not take to the tainted Life Fibers."

Aikuro felt a bead of sweat drip down his face as he watched Anderson walk away from him. Shivering as a feeling other than the cold autumn air pierced through his body he asked, "Do you actually intend to kill Ichigo?"

"Ye ask me that question when you already know the answer, Aikuro," Anderson stopped and turned around with a calm and serene look on his face that lasted all of five seconds before it was replaced by rage, "Have you forgotten every single innocent soul Nui Harime has slaughtered in the name of Life Fibers? Ichigo is of the same mold as the Grand Couturier! It is only a matter of time before his humanity and soul are devoured by the Life Fibers in his body!"

"This goes against both the General and Major General's orders. You know she won't stand for your insubordination," Aikuro knew he was grasping at straws by this point but he could not let Anderson attempt to kill Ichigo. Not only would it forever leave a wedge in his trust of Nudist Beach but Aikuro didn't even think Anderson would get close enough to do the deed. Ururu Tsumugiya was Nui Harime's twin sister and it seemed she had extensive training. She would massacre Anderson if he even got close.

"It will be better for Masaki's boy to die as a human than live as monster," Anderson answered he stalked out of the graveyard.

Aikuro watched the former priest make his way towards Karakura Town and shook his head. Telling Anderson Ichigo was a Life Fiber Hybrid was incredibly risky but it was also the smartest thing he could do given the current situation. As soon as he was sure Anderson was out of earshot Aikuro pulled his phone out of his pocket and pressed redial, "Hey, it's Aikuro. There's a problem heading your way. I told Anderson about Ichigo and now he's heading straight for him... yeah, I know... I know. Just make sure to prepare for his arrival. It might get a little messy."

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In the aftermath of Honnouji Academy's invasion of and subsequent retreat from Karakura Town the secret training ground built underneath Kisuke Urahara's shop had been converted into a makeshift headquarters for Nudist Beach's operations. Unlike the training ground that Kisuke built in the Soul Society beneath Soukyoku Hill this one was created for multiple purposes besides simply training. It wasn't more than a few years into his exile from the Soul Society when Kisuke realized he needed a place to conduct his experiments without humans or the shinigami finding out about them. Using the knowledge he confiscated from the Soul Society Kisuke managed to build a second training ground underneath his newly acquired shop in a single day and night that was nearly eight times the size of the first one.

Tearing off his shirt and exposing the gathered teenagers to the wondrous essence that was his well sculpted body Alex Louis Armstrong flexed his biceps as he boisterously addressed them, "So you all wish to learn the truth of Life Fibers? If that is the case I feel I should warn you that what you learn may shatter the delusions you have of the world! Anyone that wishes to back out and live in the comforting embrace of an illusion can do so without any repercussions!"

"I think we deserve answers after getting our asses kicked by people wearing magical clothing!" Tatsuki Arisawa's wounds might have been healed by Orihime but her temper was shorter than normal. She did not like the fact that Uryu hadn't bothered to inform her about Sanageyama's Blade Regalia before she got her ass kicked. When she confronted him about the lack of details Uryu had calmly and annoyingly explained that the Elite Four other than Jakuzure had their Goku Uniforms destroyed, which is why he would be the one fighting Nonon.

"Please calm down, Tatsuki!" Orihime rapidly waved her hands in front of her body and gave a nervous chuckle as she attempted to calm her best friend down, "I'm sure Mr. Armstrong will explain

everything. Just don't do anything rash or you might hurt yourself again!"

"As much as I hate to say it, Tatsuki has a point," Uryu may have interned at Revocs over the summer but the amount of knowledge he had concerning Life Fibers was minimal at best. Even when he broke into the company and stole enough Life Fibers for Kisuke Urahara to run tests he still did not know much about them. In retrospect Uryu was extremely fortunate that both Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime were away on clothing-related business that day. If he had been caught the consequences would have been most dire. Closing his eyes and adjusting his glasses Uryu continued with his line of thought, "I may have briefly worked at Revocs but Ragyo Kiryuin is notorious for locking down information. That is why I stole Life Fibers and gave them to Kisuke. I hoped he would be able to figure something out about them."

"Wait a second," Ichigo scowled and turned to Uryu, "You were the one that gave Kisuke the Life Fibers that made Mugetsu?"

Uryu nodded as his expression fell, "Yes, but in my defense at the time I was unaware of Nui Harime's existence. If I knew what she could do I would have made sure to cover my tracks better. Perhaps If I had been a little more careful she would not have been able to track me back to Karakura Town."

Sitting between Ichigo and Mako, who was currently playing with a terrified Kon, Ryuko Matoi ignored the conversation taking place as she loathed her powerlessness. She had all of Senketsu's power and strength at her fingertips and yet it wasn't enough to win when it counted. Her first true fight against Satsuki Kiryuin had nearly resulted in her death if Ichigo hadn't come and saved her. When Tsumugu ambushed her she had barely been able to dodge his attacks before ultimately failing and when Nui Harime took Mako hostage all of her strength had amounted to nothing as she watched her best friend die right before her eyes. Why did she have all this power if she wasn't able to use it to make a difference?

**"Your pulse is erratic, Ryuko. Is something wrong?"** When Senketsu saw his wearer was ignoring him while looking mopey his single eye narrowed in annoyance. Turning his gaze onto Mugetsu, who was much more interested in watching Chad hold back Tatsuki from attempting to strangle Uryu for something he said, he gave the mental equivalent of a cough and said, **"Mugetsu! What can I say to make Ryuko feel better?"**

Scoffing without turning around Mugetsu replied, **"She's your wearer. How should I know what to do?"**

Senketsu was about to offer a snide remark of his own when an idea hit him. Taking a few seconds to gather his thoughts he took what sounded like a deep breath before speaking, **"Ryuko, it is true that our power hasn't been enough to win our fights but I don't care about that. While you may have initially worn me to fight Satsuki Kiryuin and I was originally worn by you so that I may drink your blood things have changed. Did you not say you wanted to wear me to avenge your father? I will stick by your side until the very end... as long as you always hand wash me. I never wish to experience the torture that is a dryer ever again!"**

For a second it didn't seem like Ryuko had heard him but when Senketsu saw a small smile appear on her face he sighed in relief. Wrapping her arms around her Kamui Ryuko muttered, "You're right, Senketsu. I -"

"You're all better, Ryuko!"

Mako's eyes gleamed in happiness when she saw that Ryuko was no longer upset. Throwing Kon into the air, the mod soul screaming girlishly until he landed some distance away, During the Raid Trip Mako had been sent to Ichigo's house for her own safety in case the Grand Couturier tried to kill her again but that was not what she was told. Pulling her aside during the initial stages of Uryu's plan Isshin had shown Mako a picture of Yuzu and Karin and said that she should go hang out with them. While Mako had been upset at not sticking with Ryuko she still had a great time! Who knew Ichigo's

sisters were twins? It was so much fun! They watched movies, dressed up Bostov in all kinds of cute dresses and ate almost as much candy as the time that truck exploded in front of their house and rained skittles throughout the neighborhood.

"Seeing you back to normal is great, you know!" Mako leapt through the air until she was standing in front of Ryuko with her arms crossed over her head. As Ichigo and the rest of his friends turned to see what was going on Mako began speaking, "After my mysterious blackout I noticed that you were super depressed about something. I wanted to talk to you about it but every time I tried my mom would interrupt me with random chores and other meaningless tasks that were certainly not suspicious in nature. Seeing that you, my best friend, is back to normal is wonderful and makes me really happy! Let's go shopping, Ryuko! I've never been to Karakura Town before and there must be lots of food and gift shops around with awesome stuff!"

"That was... interesting," Chad's deep voice cut off the tension left over from Mako's speech. Turning towards Armstrong he asked, "So what's the deal with Life Fibers? That Ira Gamagori guy was pretty strong. It took nearly my full power to defeat him."

"Indeed! Let's get started!" Armstrong snapped his fingers and several Nudist Beach operatives appeared out of nowhere and within moments had set up a projector system. Thanking the man who gave him the remote control Armstrong half-turned his body around and began explaining, "Out of all the species on Earth only one wears clothing - humanity. Now some of you might think that is simply due to evolution. Humans have evolved to become more intelligent and thus are less sturdy than our ancestors but the truth is far more insidious. Humanity did not make clothing - clothing made humanity!"

"Hold the phone!" Tatsuki angrily interrupted Armstrong's lecture and asked, "You're telling us that clothes made humanity? Are you crazy! How the hell can stuff made from wool and silk possibly do any of that?"

"Please wait until after the lecture is finished before asking any more questions," Armstrong ignored Tatsuki's interruption, causing the girl to gnash her teeth angrily before turning back to the presentation. As an image of space appeared he continued, "The reason I say that is quite simple, my friends! Life Fibers are not something native to this planet! That's right! They come from outer space!"

***" So that's what I am..."***

While both Senketsu and Mugetsu thought the exact same thing their reactions differed greatly. Mugetsu was easily able to pull herself out of the depressed state by remembering what Ichigo had told her about his adventures as a shinigami. Wishing she had the time to ask him about his battles in Hueco Mundo she was surprised when Ichigo spoke up, "I knew there was something strange about Life Fibers. Ever since my Life Fibers awakened, as Nui called it, I've felt something different about my body. I don't know what it is exactly but I think it's safe to say that I'm no longer human."

"Don't buy into it Ichigo!" Ryuko snarled at Ichigo before turning and glaring at Armstrong, "He's obviously making this all up. Everybody knows there's no such thing as aliens."

"Wait just a damn second!" Tatsuki turned towards Ichigo with a confused look on her face, "Did you just say -"

Before she could finish her question Tatsuki was thrown backwards as Armstrong lobbed the remote at just the right angle that it slammed into her forehead with enough force to send her crashing backwards against the ground. Catching the remote with style as it ricocheted through the air and back into his hand Armstrong took one last look at the fallen Tatsuki, whom Orihime was desperately trying to revive, and said, "Please refrain from asking any unnecessary questions that do not pertain to the lecture. If you pay close attention I will do my best to deliver the information you seek! I swear upon the Armstrong name that the answers you seek shall be given!"



Clicking on the remote as the more mature images appeared Armstrong ignored the gasps from the gathered teens as a picture of living lab rat appeared on the screen. Staring at the image with a steely expression Armstrong said, "It may be hard to accept but Life Fibers are an extraterrestrial lifeform that arrived on the Earth at least one hundred thousand years ago."

"One hundred thousand years?" Uryu was baffled by that piece of information. The Soul Society had only existed in its current state for a few thousand years at most. To know that Life Fibers, which were already organisms that defied comprehension, were far older than any shinigami currently in existence greatly worried the young Quincy.

"That's... kind of hard to believe," Chad muttered equally surprised before he thought of something, "Wait a second. If Life Fibers are aliens then they must still eat something."

"You are correct Yasutora Sado but not in the way you think. When Life Fibers reach a world they will seek out the native lifeforms. They will then parasitize the lifeform and breed by consuming the bioelectrical current of its nervous system. There is, however, a limitation on this," Armstrong's normally cheerful demeanor disappeared as he clicked on the remote. As the screen changed and showed the same lab rat convulsing for several seconds before finally dying he finished, "Life Fibers cannot directly enter a host's body. If they attempt to do so they will inevitably burn out the host within hours."

"What about Ichigo?" Ryuko pointed to Ichigo, who was listening to Armstrong's explanation with a pensive and tense look on his face, "He's a Life Fiber Hybrid. How is that possible when you just said it couldn't happen?"

"I don't know," Armstrong was truly at a quandary about Ichigo's existence. The only other hybrids that he knew about, Ururu Tsumugiyu and Nui Harime, weren't exactly born to a human mother as far as Isshin Matoi was able to discover, "Everything Nudist

Beach knows about Life Fibers came from either Isshin Matoi or Isshin Kurosaki but neither of them had any idea how or why a Life Fiber Hybrid could exist."

As Armstrong mentioned Ichigo's dad everybody turned to him but it was Uryu that asked, "Your dad... really? Although it makes sense that your father would willingly name an organization devoted to overthrowing Life Fibers Nudist Beach."

"Don't be like that Uryu." Orihime clapped her hands together and chuckled nervously, "I'm sure Ichigo's dad had a really good reason for picking such a... unique name."

Ichigo's scowl deepened as even Ryuko chimed in, "I always knew Nudist Beach was a weird name but I had no idea it came from your dad!"

"Actually it was Ichigo's mother who came up with the name," Armstrong's clarification not only stopped the argument but caused both Uryu and Ichigo to stare at him incredulously. Ignorant of the sudden and deafening silence Armstrong stroked his chin as he reminisced in the past, "Nudist Beach did not always have such a magnificent name! Long ago during its founding Masaki had been the one to suggest the name..."

Ichigo nearly fell over as images of his mother leading a brigade of naked warriors while completely naked herself entered his head. Grimacing as he directed all his disgust at what he just imagined into pure rage at his father he managed to pick himself up and ask, "If you say she was naked I swear to whatever deity exists that I will kill you!"

"Do you take me for some kind of pervert, young Ichigo? Nudist Beach is just a name or did you truly think we all strip down upon a moment's notice like Aikuro Mikisugi?" When he received nothing but blank stares from the gathered teens Armstrong looked down at his bare chest and frowned, "... point well taken but my message stands firm and tall! The full extent of my showmanship extends to my waist

so you can sleep content at night knowing my pants shall never come off!"

"Damn that hurt!" Tatsuki finally picked herself off the ground and growled at Armstrong, "I don't want to imagine Ichigo's mother naked anymore! Can you please explain what Life Fibers want you naked bastard?"

Armstrong flipped the remote between his fingers before moving the slideshow along until another rat was shown. Unlike the previous rats this one was entirely covered in Life Fibers, "Putting aside young Ichigo's impossible existence as a hybrid for the moment, Life Fibers realized that if they could not infest a host directly they would instead cover them. While the bioelectrical energy obtained through this method is barely one percent of the direct approach the host does not die."

"Question," Chad raised his hand and asked, "Why did they pick humans? Aren't there animals with larger nervous systems?"

"Life Fibers do not feed solely on bioelectrical energy," Armstrong crossed his massive arms and sighed, "They require hosts of a particular intelligence in order to breed. When they arrived one hundred thousand years ago Homo sapiens possessed the most developed cerebrum at the time but still it was not enough. The Life Fibers needed us to be smarter and so they helped us... evolve so to speak. Instead of evolving us physically the Life Fibers evolved us mentally and intellectually. They accelerated the process humanity would have naturally undergone so that we would multiply and spread across the planet until we stood on top of the entire ecosystem. When humanity reaches that point..."

"... they're breeding us like cattle. Everything we've accomplished since before recorded history has been because Life Fibers led us there," Uryu had always prided himself on his intelligence but at this moment he wished his mind hadn't been able to come to such a dire and nightmarish conclusion. He had thought hollows were mindless

beasts with no purpose other than to eat human souls but Life Fibers put them to shame.

" ***I-I'm eating Ryuko?***" Senketsu quivered nervously around Ryuko's body as he tried to come to terms with the revelation while Mugetsu was doing the same next to him. His scattered memories suggested that as a Kamui he was different than most, if not all, life on Earth but finding out he was an alien that would eventually eat Ryuko, one of the few people he cared about, bothered him tremendously.

Ryuko gently patted Senketsu in an attempt to calm him down before glaring at Armstrong, "If what Uryu suggested is the truth than why haven't Life Fibers eaten us by now? The only Life Fibers I've ever seen are in the Goku Uniforms at Honnouji Academy and Kamui."

"There are many theories as to why the Life Fibers have waited so long but your father believed it was because they went into hibernation not long after arriving. We don't know why they did this but one thing we do know is that the tendency to wear clothing was born soon after," Armstrong pressed a button on the remote and immediately a picture of Ragyo Kiryuin in her splendid rainbow glory appeared on it but what surprised everyone was that there was another picture of Isshin Kurosaki right next to her, "Roughly twenty years ago Life Fibers awoke when Ragyo Kiryuin and Isshin Kurosaki made contact with the Original Life Fiber."

Ichigo stared at the photo of his father and asked, "How is my dad involved?"

Armstrong looked at Ichigo with a weary look on his face, "We narrowed down the night Ragyo Kiryuin made contact with the Original Life Fiber from various eyewitnesses. That very night Rei Hououmaru arrived at your house, Ichigo, and informed your parents that something was wrong with Ragyo. Before you ask what happened I'm afraid we in Nudist Beach are in the dark about what happened after Isshin arrived at the Kiryuin Manor. Your father refuses to even talk about it."

Putting one more tally mark on the mental chalkboard in his mind of how many times he needed to kick his dad's ass Ichigo frowned as he felt Mugetsu's worry that she was feeding off of Ichigo. Lightly patting his Kamui on the shoulder Ichigo scowled, "So let me get this straight. Life Fibers woke up twenty years ago and are trying to devour humanity. Why have you waited this long before doing anything about it?"

"Do you have any idea of the power Ragyo Kiryuin possesses?"

Tsumugu Kinagase walked out from behind an outcropping of rocks and scoffed angrily, "From your vacant expressions I say you don't. Let me put it another way. Your supernatural powers may allow us to conquer Honnouji Academy and put down Satsuki Kiryuin but her mother... let's just say she could kill each and every one of us without trying. The only way we could possibly, and I mean *possibly*, kill her is if we take advantage of her arrogance but that will only work once."

"Come on!" Ryuko scowled and spat on the ground, "Satsuki's mom can't be that -"

"Let me give you two useful pieces of information Matoi," Tsumugu stalked forward until he was standing in front of the gathered teens, "The first is that your assumption that Nui Harime is the strongest challenger you'll face is dead wrong. Nui Harime and Ururu Tsumugiya's strength are leagues beneath Ragyo Kiryuin's. The second is that there is an entirely different level of opponents that you'll most likely run into - Xcution."

"Xcution?" Tatsuki narrowed her eyes and folded her arms over her chest, "That's a stupid name. It sounds like the name of a garage band!"

"Xcution is far more dangerous than anything you could possibly face at Honnouji Academy apart from Junketsu," Armstrong explained to a disbelieving Tatsuki. Clicking the remote several times before an image of Jackie Tristan in custody while wearing an

orange jumpsuit appeared Armstrong went on and said, "Satsuki Kiryuin's Regalia are made from between thirty and thirty-five percent Life Fibers. Xcution, on the other hand, are Ragyo Kiryuin's elite forces. Each one of them wears raiment composed of fifty percent Life Fibers. Their power is at least twice that of Satsuki's Elite Four."

"Just how powerful are these people?" Uryu was starting to get the feeling that he had stumbled into something much bigger than he could have ever dreamt about. He had struggled throughout his battle against Nonon Jakuzure and her thirty five percent Life Fiber weave to do any lasting damage. It had taken the use of Gezielt Sprenger to pierce her resistance to his Quincy powers and even then he hadn't done more than slightly injure her. Knowing that there existed people at least twice as strong as Satsuki's Elite Four caused a shiver to crawl up his spine.

"They are powerful enough that it would take the strength a Kamui to have any chance of guaranteed victory," Tsumugu mockingly explained as he gaze lingered over Ichigo and Ryuko as well as their respective Kamui. As much as he hated relying on using Life Fibers he had to admit that having Kamui on their side in the upcoming battles would be more helpful than detrimental.

"That is why Professor Matoi created Senketsu!" Armstrong announced enthusiastically as he stepped in front of Ryuko and pointed dramatically to her Kamui, "Somehow he predicted this day would come and that you would be one of the few people on Earth able to survive wearing such a powerful piece of clothing! I don't know how Senketsu was created by Professor Matoi but he said he used your DNA in order to complete it, Ryuko! Senketsu is as much a part of you as you are of him! That is why you are the only person that can draw out the full and pure power of Senketsu!"

"You're saying that Senketsu was made from my DNA?" Ryuko looked into Senketsu's eye with a mixed expression, "How is that possible?"

"Even though we were in your father's inner circle he never shared how he made a Kamui," Tsumugu sat down and crossed his legs before pulling out a cigarette. Remembering whose company he was in Tsumugu scowled as he put it away, "I'm sure you've had the pleasure of meeting Danketsu, the Kamui currently bonded to my sister. Professor Matoi made her in secret and only brought her out when Kinue was test fit her. So we're in the dark about how Senketsu was made as much as you are Matoi."

Ichigo frowned as he remembered the letter he found on Mugetsu when Kisuke was attacked by Nui, "Hang on a second. The note Kisuke left with Mugetsu when Nui went after him suggested he used my DNA to finish her."

"It seems both of your Kamui required genetic material to be completed," Uryu muttered as he raised his hand in front of his mouth. He knew that such a similarity could not be a coincidence. There was something inherent in Ichigo and Ryuko's DNA that was required for their Kamui to function. The only question plaguing his mind was what it could possibly be.

"It does not matter what was needed!" As Armstrong flexed his muscles and purple sparkles surrounded his head he gave Ichigo a powerful handshake and exclaimed exuberantly, "Ichigo and Ryuko! I must apologize deeply for keeping the two of you in the dark for so long! I was worried that you wouldn't be able to handle the truth but the determined looks on your faces suggest my fears were unfounded!"

"I'm still not totally convinced Senketsu is an alien," Ryuko countered with a scoffing tone, "But if half the crap you said about Ragyo Kiryuin is true than she needs to be stopped."

Apparently Tatsuki was of a similar mindset to Ryuko. Her experiences with the spiritual world and her near death at the hands of the arrancar caused her to train her ass off to become stronger. Even if she would never have the same level of power as Orihime and the others Tatsuki was determined to not be useless. Standing

up and glaring at Armstrong she said, "There's no way in hell that I'm going to let that woman turn humanity into food for glowing yarn! When and how do we take her down?"

"As the only one here besides Ichigo who's spoken with Ragyo Kiryuin it is safe to say she is the most dangerous person I've ever met," Uryu adjusted his glasses as he stared at the picture of Ragyo Kiryuin still being projected on the screen. He could never forget the feeling of fear whenever he was in her presence. It was almost as if his body was telling him that Ragyo can and will kill him without a moment's hesitation, "But one thing eludes me. Someone with her appearance cannot be human. After hearing about what happened to Ichigo when he found out he was a Life Fiber Hybrid I think it is safe to assume Ragyo Kiryuin is one as well. There is no way a normal woman, even if she was working for the Original Life Fiber as you said, would be able to control Nui Harime so thoroughly."

"You have quite the head on your shoulders!" Armstrong laughed loudly at Uryu managing to figure out the truth about Ragyo. Nudist Beach had managed to figure out that she was a hybrid years ago. All their research and development over the past ten years has been in order to overcome her great strength. As he watched Tsumugu pull his cell phone out of his pocket and walk away Armstrong scratched at his chin and said, "The bravery and strength you all displayed during the defense of this marvelous city cannot be ignored. You all put your lives on the line and gratitude must be given. Henceforth consider yourselves honorary members of Nudist Beach!"

Orihime blushed in embarrassment upon hearing that and began twiddling her fingers, "Oh... um... does that mean we have to fight naked?"

"I hope we don't because if we do..." Tatsuki cracked her knuckles menacingly as she stared at Armstrong with all the hatred she could muster.



"Nah, it's just Aikuro that likes to strip," Ryuko interrupted with an annoyed scoff as she leaned her head backwards. Staring up at the fake clouds in the secret training room Ryuko was about to ask Armstrong if her dad had said anything else when Tsumugu came running back with a worried look on his face.

"We have a problem." The younger Kinagase sibling looked at the Major General straight in the eyes and said, "Anderson's on the way. He knows about Ichigo."

Armstrong's blue eyes narrowed as he pondered the situation. Usually he was one of the few people that could rein him in but if what Tsumugu said is true than Anderson knows about Ichigo's status as a Life Fiber Hybrid. It was going to take a lot more to stop Anderson at this point, "This is a problem but as long as we can intercept him before he arrives we should have enough time to calm him down. Yoruichi and Tessai should be able to keep him out for the moment."

"That's the issue," Tsumugu might hate Life Fibers with a passion but he was at least willing to allow Matoi and Ichigo to use their Kamui in the fight against Revocs. Anderson, on the other hand, would rather destroy the two Kamui before even thinking about working with them, "Tessai took Ururu Tsumugiyu to Karakura General Hospital after retrieving Mankanshoku from Isshin's home while Yoruichi is guarding Isshin's kids in case the Grand Couturier tries to make a move against them."

Armstrong turned around and crossed his massive arms over his bare chest as he considered the situation. The absence of Tessai and Yoruichi for even five minutes will be all that Anderson needs to waltz into the Nudist Beach base under Kisuke Urahara's shop, "How much time do we have until he gets here, Tsumugu?"

Tsumugu frowned as the artificial lights above them flickered briefly, "Aikuro was in Karakura Graveyard when he met Anderson. I'd say it would take about seven for a normal person to get here... two for Anderson."

"I see before me unholy abominations. Cursed beings in the eyes of God..."

As the deep and gravelly voice of Anderson echoed from around them Ryuko leapt to her feet and pulled out her red Scissor Blade. Glancing back and forth for the source of the voice she turned to Armstrong and growled, "Who the hell is that?"

"This must be Anderson," Uryu stood up and summoned his spiritual bow around his hand. As he carefully examined every nook and cranny around them Uryu focused his senses on picking up the sounds of Anderson's movement. While tracking spiritual energy would normally be easy Uryu was finding it increasingly annoying that people like Armstrong possessed some form of inherent power that was frustratingly hard for him to track. Even when Armstrong was standing in front of him Uryu was unable to get a bead on the man's considerable and strange spiritual energy, "Tell me something. How strong exactly is Anderson?"

"He can take down a Three-Star Goku Uniform with relative ease in straight out combat," Armstrong nodded to Tsumugu who began to immediately relay orders to their fellow nudists. He needed to pull back all personnel in order to minimize the collateral damage sustained, "Do not underestimate this man. Anderson is a brilliant tactician despite whatever he may say or do."

"God will not save ye from this fate!"

The flickering of the artificial lighting against metal was the only warning anyone had before a veritable deluge of tailor bayonets began raining out of the sky. Out of all of Ichigo's friends Chad was the first to react. Summoning his Brazo Derecho de Giganta while running towards Orihime and Tatsuki he managed to cover the two girls and himself with the shield on his arm just before the tailor bayonets slammed into the ground. While Uryu was the fastest of Ichigo's friends he barely managed to leap out of the way of the initial wave of bayonets to avoid being skewered before he was forced to use several bursts of hirenkyaku.

"What the hell is wrong with this guy?!"

As memories of watching Mako getting stabbed by Nui Harime passed through her mind Ryuko burst up from her chair and slid in front of Mako. Drawing her red Scissor Blade from the pouch on her hip and willing it to expand to its full size, Ryuko let out an aggravated shout as she rapidly swung it through the air in front of her body. Deflecting the bayonets that were aimed at Mako with her Life Fiber weapon Ryuko growled angrily as she tried to spot the bastard attacking her. As her eyes scanned her surroundings for any sign of Anderson she noticed a shadow falling through the air before a man wearing a grey cassock slammed feet-first into Ichigo.

Once he was sure Ichigo's friends would not interfere with his righteous mission Anderson made his move. Jumping off the plateau he had been standing on and using the artificial lighting to keep his form hidden from any unwanted eyes Anderson drew two of his last nine tailor bayonets from inside his sleeves and fell towards the unsuspecting Ichigo. Passing over the head of a black haired girl who had unluckily turned the exact opposite way from him Anderson slammed his feet directly into Ichigo's face. As the orange haired hybrid bounced along the ground Anderson threw one of his tailor bayonets at Ichigo, piercing through the flesh of his right hand and pinning it to the rock behind him.

"Now ye cannot summon your unholy power, abomination!" Anderson grinned fanatically as he stalked towards the pinned and struggled Ichigo. It was a shame that Ichigo had to die. Anderson realized that when he finally passed into the Lords domain Masaki would punish him severely for what he was about to do. But as long as he prevented another monster like Nui Harime from arising Anderson was content. Reversing his grip on the tailor bayonet as he nearly reached Ichigo Anderson raised the weapon up into the air and shouted, "Pray before God that your end be swift, monster!"

"Santen Kesshun!"

Anderson's eyes widen in rare surprise as a translucent orange barrier shimmered into existence in front of his body. Looking in shock as his tailor bayonet literally shattered into shards of glinting metal as it hit the barrier Anderson muttered, "What in God's name?"

His question would go unanswered as Alex Louis Armstrong appeared behind him and smashed a fist into his chin hard enough to send him flying into the air.

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"I shall see to it that Junketsu is ready when you are finished."

Satsuki steeled her expression as she began removing Junketsu from her body without complaint. As she felt her naked body shiver from the cold air of the manor Satsuki held the limp form of Junketsu in her hands in front of her body and stared momentarily into the Kamui's eyes. Thinking briefly over the revelations of the morning Satsuki turned around and handed Junketsu into Rei Hououmaru's outstretched arms. The dark skinned secretary of Ragyo Kiryuin nodded her head politely at Satsuki before she placed Junketsu on a specialized hanger and waved with one arm towards the large and majestic doors several meters to her left, "Lady Ragyo apologizes but she will be a few minutes late. She will meet you in the Grand Bath as soon as possible."

"Thank you Hououmaru," Satsuki stared stoically as Rei moved in front of her and pushed the doors open with an almost gentle effort. As she walked into the steam-filled room with her arms folded across her chest in modesty Satsuki heard the doors close behind her as Rei left to examine any issues and problems with Junketsu.

Taking a deep breath as she closed her eyes and prepared for what was to come Satsuki stepped into the steaming water of the Grand Bath and submerged her body until the water was just barely able to lap against her chin. With her blue eyes gazing into the turbulent and

chaotic surface of the bath Satsuki was surprised at the lack of pain she felt. The first two times she had bathed in the Grand Bath after donning Junketsu Satsuki had been unable to keep in the winces of pain. The distinct lack of pain was just another thing she had to thank Ichigo for when she had the chance. Submerging herself even further until her nose was just barely above the surface Satsuki truly wished to know how Ichigo had managed to quell her Kamui's insatiable lust for blood. She knew he could speak to Kamui due to being a Life Fiber Hybrid but Satsuki figured there was something else she was missing. If she could just figure out a way to communicate with her Kamui like Matoi and Ichigo can then perhaps...

"I am truly surprised," Satsuki's thoughts were cut off as a bright rainbow light began filling the entirety of the Grand Bath. Looking up as the far doors opened with a dull echo and the light continued to intensify Satsuki heard her mother's voice continue speaking to her, "I thought you would be overexerting yourself but it seems that is not the case. Tell me, what's the cause of this exciting development?"

"Hello mother," Satsuki averted her gaze as she heard her mother enter the bath. With a tone to her voice brought about by years of practice Satsuki looked at her mother straight in the eye and lied, "Junketsu has simply realized it was futile to attempt to overpower my will. There is nothing more that needs to be said."

Ragyo had a predatory grin on her face as she heard her daughter lie directly to her face. She had to admit Satsuki had not given anything away in her expression as she lied about what transpired in Karakura Town. If Hououmaru had not been keeping her updated on what was happening in Karakura Town during the Raid Trip Ragyo would not have been absolutely certain about her daughter's lie. There was one thing that Ragyo wished to know - the sudden lack of enmity from Junketsu towards Satsuki. Many years ago she wove her Life Fibers into Junketsu to make the Kamui more pliable to her orders. Even if Ichigo had managed to save Satsuki from the fate

she deserved Junketsu should not have stopped attempting to devour her.

"You say that and yet your body tells me otherwise," Ragyo stalked through the stomach-high water until she was standing in front of her daughter. Gently caressing Satsuki's cheek sensually she leaned forward with a glint evident in her maroon eyes, "This water is saturated with specialized medicines meant to boost your harmonization rate with Junketsu. You may have begun to actually wear Junketsu but your body is still stressed and damaged from the strain. Soak yourself in the water and allow it to permeate your body."

"Yes, mother."

As she trailed her fingers up Satsuki's face Ragyo briefly paused she felt something missing from her daughter. Thinking over what it could be for barely a second Ragyo's eyes widened in momentary surprise before the grin on her face returned. It seemed that Ichigo's successful attempt to rescue her useless daughter's mind and body had accomplished far more than she hoped. In any other case Ragyo would have been mildly irritated that the rainbow Life Fiber she implanted in Satsuki's mind when she was five years old was destroyed.

"You have such lovely skin, my dear daughter," Ragyo's hand moved lower on Satsuki's body as she moved closer to her, "Give yourself to me so that I may conduct the ritual of purification..."

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"Damn..." Bazz-B cursed as he stepped onto the roof upon leaving the shadow portal temporarily connecting the world of the living to the Silbern. Placing his hands inside the pockets of his Wandenreich uniform and walking towards the edge of the roof he stared at the rising columns of smoke dotting the city around him and asked to

nobody in particular, "This is Karakura Town? It looks like a damn war came and kicked everyone's ass!"

Unclasping his cloak and tossing it away Bazz-B adjusted the collar of his trench coat and thought back on the first objective of the mission. Jugo had been quite insistent that he and the three Sternritter he picked out make contact with Ichigo Kurosaki as soon as possible to limit the risks of Ragyo Kiryuin discovering their presence in the world of the living. Quilge had barely escaped back to the Silbern after intercepting Ichigo nearly twelve hours ago and Bazz-B did not want to find out what would happen to him if the Life Fibers caught him. He would rather blow his own head off than be taken prisoner.

"So where the hell is this bastard anyway?" Bazz-B looked around Karakura Town but he couldn't sense Ichigo anywhere. The Daten His Majesty possessed on the orange haired teen ended just after Ichigo lost his shinigami powers. Without any spiritual energy to track Bazz-B would be forced to hunt down Ichigo the old fashioned way, which really pissed him off.

"Did you expect a mission of this magnitude to be easy?"

Bazz-B didn't bother turning around as Lille Barro appeared from the shadow portal. The X-Axis looked across the surrounding landscape with his only open eye before he took off his cloak emblazoned with a six-sided black star and threw it back through the portal. When Bazz-B had initially come to him with the premise of asking for his assistance Lille had refused. He was one of His Majesty's elite guards tasked with the eventual goal of destroying the Royal Guard. To debase his power and skill in what at first seemed like a simple mission insulted him. Surely Life Fibers could not be dangerous enough to threaten His Majesty's life?

At least that was what Lille Barro thought until Bazz-B showed him the limited Daten Jugram Haschwalth had given him permission to see. As the X-Axis watched Nui Harime decimate dozens of armed and well-trained humans while regenerating from their bullets he had

decided that such beings were an immediate danger to His Majesty and needed to be dealt with post haste. The Wandenreich could not afford to be on the losing side. If that happens the Wandenreich would not be able to react fast enough to counter Ragyo Kiryuin's immense power.

Leaning his massive and powerful reishi rifle against his shoulder Lille Barro looked up at the sky and muttered, "Can you feel that Bazz-B? There is a barrier of Life Fibers surrounding the entire city."

"I felt it as soon as I got here," Bazz-B scoffed before sniffing, "The damn thing is irritating my nose to the point where I feel like I need to sneeze. Why don't you stop talking and just take it out already?"

Lille Barro sighed at Bazz-B's tone as he shifted his rifle until the stock was placed against his shoulder. As he stared through the scope of the rifle he took aim at the invisible barrier before firing a massive heilig pfeil at it. The two Sternritzer watched as the bullet-shaped spiritual energy shot through the air towards the shield but to their shock it failed to destroy it. Lille Barro stood in shock as his bullet slammed into the shield with nary a noise before simply disappearing and causing the shield to momentarily shimmer brightly before settling back down to invisibility, "What's going on? That bullet had enough power to pass through a mountain. It should have been able to shatter the Life Fiber barrier with ease!"

"You can't use brute force to destroy Life Fibers, idiot!"

Bambietta Basterbine stepped out of the shadow portal with an irritated look in her blue eyes. Giving the self-proclaimed 'deadshot' a scoffing roll of her eyes she pointed with a gloved hand at the sky, "You were so gung-ho about destroying Ragyo Kiryuin that you forgot that our powers are weak to Life Fibers. If you don't give it everything you have from the start you're going to die."

Lille Barro looked away before bringing his rifle back up once more. Placing one foot on the edge of the roof for support he looked



through the scope and said, "You are correct. This time I shall fire the strongest bullet I -"

"Don't be an idiot!" Bazz-B twisted around and smacked Lille Barro's rifle downwards before he could fire it, "Who knows what the hell that barrier does! You already shot one bullet at it and it didn't work. Do you want to find out what happens if you shoot another? I don't want to die knowing I was eaten by fucking clothes!"

Bambietta didn't bother chiming in her opinion as she sat down on the roof and leaned her cheek onto her hand. While she was certainly surprised that Bazz-B had chosen her for the mission she could understand why. If His Majesty needed the Sternritter to stay below the radar to avoid the attention of the Soul Society than those that Bazz-B could depend on were quite limited. While Bambietta didn't doubt some of her fellow Sternritter could certainly start the mission with stealth in mind once the fighting started all bets were thrown out the window. Casting her eyes up at where she could sense the Life Fiber barrier surrounding the city Bambietta snorted and asked, "So where is Ichigo Kurosaki, Bazz-B?"

"What are you looking at me for?" Bazz-B growled rhetorically before scoffing and walking away from her across the roof. Closing his eyes and trying to sense Ichigo Kurosaki's spiritual energy Bazz-B's brow creased in irritation as he failed once again. He was a Sternritter, dammit! Sensing spiritual energy should have been as simple as looking through a window to see what the weather was like outside. As he was about to give up in order to try a different approach Bazz-B felt something faint prickle across the edges of his senses. Focusing everything he had on this new presence he nearly recoiled at what he felt.

"God damn it!" Bazz-B quickly stopped trying to sense the spiritual energy as he stumbled back like he was just hit in the face, "What the fuck is that?"

Every spiritual being had different colors and characteristics to their spiritual energy when a Quincy sensed it. That was why Bazz-B

could easily pick out a shinigami, hollow, arrancar and a fellow quincy even if he couldn't see them. The energy he just felt, however, was not only different but it also scared the piss out of him. He could still see the glowing blue and red monstrosity made out of flames and Bazz-B would swear it was looking directly at him. Nothing that strong should be capable of hiding so thoroughly and yet Bazz-B had not been able to sense it until he put everything he had into looking for it. Turning around and noticing the confused and amused expressions coming from Lille Barro and Bambietta respectively Bazz-B scoffed and said, "It's about half a mile to the north. Tell me that doesn't bother you!"

Lille Barro narrowed his eye as he followed Bazz-B's directions and focused his senses on the spiritual energy described. Upon feeling it a bead of cold sweat dripped down his face as he took a step back, "That's... I feel it but you're mistaken about one thing. While there is no doubt in my mind that the spiritual energy you felt belongs to Ichigo Kurosaki you failed to account for another."

"What the fuck?" Bazz-B asked incredulously, "There are two of those things?"

"That thoroughly awful spiritual energy is actually coming from two similar beings within close proximity to each other," Lille gazed through the scope of his rifle in order to try and spot Ichigo Kurosaki. When he was unable to find any trace of the orange haired youth he rested the barrel of his rifle on the roof and shook his head, "From the difficulty I had in detecting them separately I would hazard a guess that Ichigo Kurosaki is within fifty feet of someone just like him."

Bambietta didn't bother trying to sense the spiritual energy. If both Bazz-B and Lille Barro were reacting to it so badly than she certainly didn't want to feel whatever the hell was out there. Drumming her fingers along the length of her leg she tried to figure out whether her reishi bombs would work against someone like Nui Harime or really anyone wearing Life Fibers. Sure Nui Harime could regenerate but

could she come back from being blown to atoms? Bambietta didn't know but she was more than willing to find out.

"That spiritual energy certainly feels awful. Life Fibers are really nasty things after all."

Meninas McAllon stepped out of the shadow portal as it snapped behind her with a soft hiss. As she looked around Karakura Town and the destruction evident from Satsuki's earlier attack Meninas moved a strand of pink hair out of her eyes and promptly tripped over Bambietta. Regaining her balance with a hop and fixing the bow around her neck she gave the irritated Bambietta a half-sincere apology, "I'm sorry Bambi but I didn't notice you down there. You can't be tired already. We just got here after all."

"Bite me, Meny!" Bambietta snarled before getting back onto her feet before Meninas could make any more snide remarks. Briefly fixing her miniskirt before giving Meninas one final glare as if to dare her to try anything else Bambietta flipped her black hair around and asked, "Now that we're all here can we go? His Majesty wanted us to make contact with Ichigo Kurosaki right away."

"So you're looking for Ichigo? That's a surprise. I didn't know he had this many friends."

The four Sternritter turned around in shock to see Isshin Kurosaki standing behind them with his hands in his pockets and a pondering expression on his face. Upon noticing that he had their undivided attention Isshin gave a nervous chuckle and said, "That shadow portal thing was pretty cool! I've never seen anything like that before. I guess you learn something new every day."

Without preamble Bazz-B spun around and began summoning his reishi flames to deal with the unexpected threat. His Majesty's mission was of the utmost importance and while Bazz-B felt a little guilty about having to kill a human he would do so if it meant protecting their cover. Extending his arm towards the still defenseless Isshin Bazz-B's eyes narrowed as a burst of fire

concentrated around his finger, "Sorry about this, man, but His Majesty does not like witnesses. Burner Finger One!"

The narrow beam of fire shot out from Bazz-B's finger towards the junction of Isshin's neck and chest with enough power to pierce through a shinigami as powerful as a captain. When Isshin not only caught the Burner Finger One but squashed it out of existence using only the palm of his hand with nary a burn on his skin Bazz-B's arm fell limply to the side. He knew Burner Finger One could be stopped by the more powerful captains but without even a burn? That was impossible.

"That was quite rude," Isshin dusted off his palm before he scratched at the back of his neck, "Attacking me while my guard was down doesn't really help to make first impressions. Why don't we start over and introduce ourselves. My name is Isshin Kurosaki and I'm here to have a long talk with you four about your plans for Ichigo."

"We don't have to explain ourselves to a shinigami like you." Appearing behind Isshin's still undefended form using Hirenkyaku Meninas snapped her leg out with the intent to sever his neck from his body. Every Sternritter was given Daten about the captain and lieutenant class shinigami as well as their respective techniques, powers and zanpakuto. Isshin Kurosaki was a former captain of the tenth division and a shinigami on par with that of Sosuke Aizen. Dealing with him before he could use Engetsu was paramount to achieving victory.

"Hang on just a minute," Isshin's arm snapped up as he blocked Meninas's enhanced kick with the back of his forearm. Giving the surprised pink haired girl a goofy grin as he easily blocked a kick that could kill most opponents Isshin shifted his arm and allowed Meninas to leap away before said, "A woman should not just throw herself at the first man she sees. You have to introduce yourself and then take things slowly from there."

Bambietta took a step back as she watched Isshin stop Meninas's kick with almost a lazy effort before her trepidation turned into

annoyance. Holding her arm out and gathering reishi Bambietta prepared to use The Explode on Isshin Kurosaki, damn the consequences. If he was strong enough to not only stop Meninas's attack but act as if it was something simple she would need to be serious. No talking, no gloating and no time for Isshin to think of anything. Bambietta was going to hit Isshin with enough reishi bombs to turn his body into a smear on the roof. Pulling out her sword in the shape of a Chinese dao and coursing her reishi through it until the metal glowed blue-white Bambietta shouted, "Die you dumb shinigami!"

"Hmm..." Isshin stared at the four Sternritzer preparing to attack him with mild worry not for his health but for the surrounding neighborhood. Even if all four of them used their respective Vollständig, Isshin needed to thank Ryuken for helping him pronounce that correctly, he would walk away without a scratch on his body. Deciding that he needed to teach them a lesson before things got out of hand Isshin clapped his hands together and said, "Four on one isn't very fair."

Appearing in front of Isshin with her arm cocked back and her hand clenched into a fist Meninas gave the former captain a cold stare as she went to punch him, "Being fair to a shinigami is quite stupid, don't you agree?"

Before she could hit Isshin Meninas was sent spiraling through the air as someone or something slammed into her with the force of one of her own punches. As the super-strong Sternritzer bounced along the roof Bazz-B quickly reacted and appeared in front of her using Hirenkayku and managed to catch her before she could fall over the edge. Letting Meninas down, who was more embarrassed than injured, Bazz-B was just about to let his reishi flames explode out of his body when he saw the purple Scissor Blade held in the newly arrived girl's hand, "Oh fuck. How the hell did we stumble across Nui Harime so damn quickly?"

"My name is Ururu Tsumugiya. Do not call me Nui Harime," Ururu's sandals touched down on the roof in front of Isshin with barely a

sound as she held Nui's former purple Scissor Blade in a reverse grip. She was surprised when Mr. Kurosaki had given it to her barely an hour ago. When she asked why he was giving her Nui's weapon Isshin had smiled and said to consider it a late birthday present since she was at Honnouji Academy in September. Focusing her sapphire blue eyes on the Sternritter in front of her Ururu held the Scissor Blade in front of her and allowed the sunlight to glint off the purple surface before continuing, "Please surrender. I don't want to have to kill you."

"Screw you!" Bambietta shouted as she swung her dao towards Ururu. Watching in sadistic glee as the wave of reishi collided with Ururu before detonating in a massive explosion that created a column of smoke similar to the dozens rising throughout the city Bambietta turned to Isshin and grinned, "Now that she's dead why don't you just let us kill you already, former captain?"

"I'm sorry... but were you trying to kill me?"

Bambietta could not hide the look of utmost shock as Ururu appeared from the smoke without a single scratch on her body. Even the girl's clothing was prim and proper. As she looked at the individual Sternritter's expressions Ururu turned to Isshin and asked, "They tried to kill me and they're going after Ichigo. Should I eliminate them?"

"Now there's no need for that Ururu. I'm sure Yhwach didn't send them here to kill Ichigo," Isshin took a single step forward and promptly caught the reishi bullet Lille Barro fired at his head in the palm of his hand. Staring at the vibrating casing of spiritual energy for a moment before crushing it he looked at the shaken marksman and chuckled, "I'm not one to brag but I'm far stronger than any of you so why don't we start over? I'm Isshin Kurosaki and you are...?"

Bazz-B may be a hothead but he knew a losing battle when he saw one. Isshin Kurosaki had outright *tanked* attacks from Meninas, Lille Barro and him using nothing more than his left arm. If they had any shot of killing the former shinigami captain they would need to use

their Vollständig and Bazz-B doubted that would be enough to stop him. Grimacing as he placed his hands in his pockets in order to not do anything stupid he stepped forward, mindful of Ururu constantly watching him, and said, "Fine. You seem to be in the loop and I don't think His Majesty would appreciate us killing Ichigo's dad. The name's Bazz-B and the epitaph His Majesty has given me is H for The Heat."

Shouldering his rifle and giving Isshin a concerned look Lille Barro nevertheless followed Bazz-B's example, "Lille Barro. My designation is X for The X-Axis."

"Damn it..." Bambietta felt fear for the first time since Giselle had tried to 'heal' her several months ago after an accident where one of her reishi bombs accidentally detonated against her body. She never wanted to see Giselle's creepy and unnerving smile again, "Fine! I'm Bambietta Basterbine and I'm E for The Explode."

"I'm Meninas McAllon and His Majesty gave me P for The Power!" Unlike her three compatriots Meninas's introduction was far more enthusiastic. She knew Isshin Kurosaki was the enemy but it had been quite a long time since someone was able to overpower her strength. She had enough power to lift city blocks above her head and yet Isshin had blocked one of her kicks with nothing more than his arm. Finding someone she could actually hit and not immediately turn into a bloody pulp was too interesting for her to ignore.

"Are the other letters of the alphabet involved here or did Yhwach just send you four?" From the tensing of the Sternritzer's shoulders at the casual mentioning of Yhwach Isshin was fairly certain that they were the only ones he sent. He might hate the propagator of the Quincy for what he did to Masaki and Kanae Katagari but Isshin had to admit the man was pragmatic. Sending some heavy hitters to support Ichigo was something Isshin knew Yhwach would do when a significant threat to his power appeared.

"Since no one else is going to say it let me be the one to ask," Lille Barro strapped his reishi rifle to his back and crossed his arms, "You

seem to be familiar with His Majesty. How?"

Isshin rolled his eyes and laughed at the question before his expression darkened considerably, "His use of Auswahlen nine years ago killed my wife and my children's mother. If Masaki hadn't already been slowly dying at the time I think I would be more than a little pissed off right now. I'm willing to let that slide as long as Yhwach realizes that if he does anything to harm the rest of my family there will be nothing to stop me from coming after him. I will break through the shadows surrounding the Silbern, track him down to his throne and kill him."

"You dare threaten His Majesty?" Bambietta may have been unnerved by Isshin's power but hearing him insulting and threatening His Majesty was enough to sever any form of self-control she had. As she began swinging her dao through the air towards Isshin with the sole intent of murdering him Bambietta was stopped when she felt the edge of the purple Scissor Blade pressed against her throat. With the tip of the Scissor Blade tearing through her blut like it was paper Bambietta felt her body break out in a cold sweat, "But how -"

"If you try to hurt Mr. Kurosaki I won't hesitate to kill you," Ururu explained in an emotionless tone. Stepping away from Bambietta and allowing the Sternritter to collapse to the ground. Ururu watched Bambietta rub her neck as she took a single step before vanishing and reappearing next to Isshin with the Scissor Blade held behind her back once more.

"Good job Ururu," Isshin patted the girl on the head with a smile on his face before his expression hardened, "But you might want to take a few steps back. I need to exchange some harsh words with these people and it might not be good for you to stand so close to me. Understand?"

Although slightly suspicious of the way Ururu leapt away from Isshin before landing on the water tower on the other side of the roof the Sternritter had no time to think as Isshin's body began to glow with an intense rainbow aura. As his hair bled to silver and his eyes



maroon the Sternritter took a few steps back in fear as Isshin's appearance seemed to regress nearly twenty years with the slight wrinkles and grey hair signifying his forty-eight year old appearance disappearing in less than a second.

"W-What's going on?" Bazz-B collapsed onto the roof as he felt rather than sensed the overwhelming aura of Life Fibers from the man in front of him. His Majesty's Datan said Isshin Kurosaki was a former shinigami captain. It never said he was made of fucking Life Fibers.

"I-I don't feel so good..." Meninas was desperately trying to keep herself from throwing up from being in such close proximity to Isshin. Unlike Lille Barro, who had leapt away as far as he could upon noticing Isshin transforming and was thus the least affected, she was the closest and felt her body seizing up.

"So here's what's going to happen," Isshin massaged his neck as he released his disguise for the first time in nearly seventeen years. After that night twenty years ago Isshin had gone home and saw to his horror that his mere presence was enough to visibly sicken Masaki. Since the effects of Life Fibers scales proportionally to a Quincy's power and Masaki was one of the strongest Quincy in the world his new body had nearly killed her before Isshin managed to mask his power under a disguise.

As he looked around to the four Sternritter and saw that they were experiencing the effects of being in the presence of a true Life Fiber Hybrid Isshin reined his power back in and said, "I know that Yhwach sent you to support my son in the fight against Ragyo. I am perfectly fine with that but let me lay down a couple of ground rules. I know what Yhwach has planned and I just want to make it clear that you are not to try and recruit Ryuken's son or anyone else into your little army. And if under any circumstances you threaten either Yuzu or Karin I will demonstrate to you that Ragyo is not the only one that can make COVERS."

Bazz-B swallowed nervously but managed to keep a cool façade as he stood back up. Turning his head to the side and scoffing in an attempt to look like he hadn't been affected by Isshin's show of power he spat on the roof and said, "Why the hell would we go after your other kids? His Majesty sent us here to help take down Ragyo Kiryuin. Pissing off someone that could kill us isn't high on my list of shit to do."

"His Majesty's word is law and must be followed to the letter," Lille Barro added as he chanced getting closer to Isshin now that the man was keeping his power from leaking out. Glancing worriedly at Isshin before looking at the still recovering Meninas he added, "As long as your suggestions do not conflict with His Majesty's directives I do not see a problem with agreeing to your terms. Having someone like you on our side in the battle against Ragyo Kiryuin can only bolster our odds of victory."

Isshin let go of the seriousness in his expression and chuckled heartily, "I guess that's the best I'm going to get out of the lot of you, isn't it? I can see that you really are here to help my son stop Ragyo from eating the world. You can find him in Kisuke's shop to the north and I expect you to be on your best behavior because if not... I'll know..."

"Damn man, we're not stupid enough to go against someone like you." Bazz-B helped the almost recovered Meninas to her feet before heading north using Hirenkayku with a scared Bambietta and a pensive Lille Barro following close behind him. The power he felt from Isshin Kurosaki was almost equal to His Majesty's and Bazz-B wanted to be the last person to piss him off. Treacherous thoughts aside but if His Majesty ordered him to assassinate Ichigo's sisters Bazz-B would probably try to fake his death or something. He did not want to face a pissed off Isshin Kurosaki under any circumstances.

Back on the roof Isshin watched the Sternritter leave with approval. Isshin was certain the threat alongside his display of power was enough to make sure they didn't try and pull anything behind his back. He wasn't bluffing when he told them he could break into the

Silbern. Being friends with a quincy of Ryuken's power did have its upsides. The moment Yhwach made a move against his family Ryuken would be ready to open the shadow portal and send Isshin to go... negotiate with the father of the quincy.

"Hmm... Now that I'm done here I should go check up on Ichigo," Isshin remembered when he told Ichigo how to save Satsuki and Junketsu and knew his son would want answers. The only problem was that Isshin was completely incapable of giving the answers no matter how much he wanted. It was a good thing Armstrong and Tsumugu were on hand with most of the information Ichigo was looking for. The only problem, and it was a big problem, was how he would explain to Ryuko what exactly she was. Souichiro believed it took DNA to make a Kamui work and Isshin had been content with the man assuming that was correct, "Damn... I need to think of a way to get the point across to Ryuko that she's a hybrid like Ichigo. If I know Ragyo as well as I think I do I'm sure she'll figure who Ryuko is soon enough. That girl doesn't need that complication added to her life."

"Umm..."

Isshin blinked childishly when he felt Ururu tugging on his sleeve tore him out of his thoughts. Turning down to the perpetually shy Life Fiber Hybrid he asked, "What is it Ururu?"

At first Ururu wanted to ask why Mr. Kurosaki's hair and eyes were like Ragyo Kiryuin's but when she saw that he was still the same nice man she realized it wasn't important. Gripping the purple Scissor Blade tightly in her arms she asked, "Umm... your hair is still glowing like a rainbow Mr. Kurosaki."

"What?" Isshin looked and saw that, sure enough, there was still rainbow light emanating from his head, "I thought I put my disguise back up! Thanks for looking out for me, Ururu. It would have been awkward if Anderson saw me... like... this..."

Ururu tilted her head to the side as Isshin's expression fell into almost the same blank look she had on her face. After a moment of wondering what he was thinking about Ururu was nearly blown backwards as Isshin shouted, "Oh god, I forgot about Anderson!"

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As Ragyo Kiryuin led her daughter down through the secret passageway beneath Kiryuin Manor she could not help but reminisce on how everything was coming together. Satsuki's failure to capture Karakura Town was tragic but in a way Ragyo wanted Isshin to win that skirmish. She knew that the organization her former husband founded would help defend the city and when they won, which they did, they would come after Satsuki at Honnouji Academy.

"*La vie est drôle*," Ragyo could not wait to reconnect with Isshin after so many years apart. She had felt a sudden burst of Life Fiber energy from Karakura Town half an hour ago and immediately realized that Isshin had shed that ridiculous disguise of a human he always wears. If she did not love him with every fiber of her being Ragyo didn't know how she would put up with Isshin's antics. When he confronted her during the Great Culture and Sport Festival Ragyo made a mental note to strip him of his disguise. Seeing the looks on his allies faces as Isshin is exposed for the magnificent man he is almost made Ragyo chuckle in amusement.

"We have arrived," Ragyo reached out of the full length cloak covering her naked body and pressed a hand against the ancient doors in front of her. Feeling a familiar pulse of thrum through her body upon making contact she closed her eyes and gently pushed them open.

Unlike twenty years ago when the entrance to the Fiber Palace - Forbidden Room was at the bottom of a barely lit and damp staircase the current entrance was much more grandiose and beautiful. Not long after making contact with the wonderful Original

Life Fiber Ragyo had commissioned several of the best architects she could find to tear down the unsightly hallway and rebuild it with a glory that was befitting of what lay behind the doors in front of her. A white marble staircase replaced the old metal one and high quality rainbow-tinted lights dotted the ground on either side of the hallway. When it came time to pay the architects Ragyo had of course paid them but used Mental Refitting for the first time to erase the memories they had of Kiryuin Manor.

As she stepped into the Forbidden Room, her bare feet softly walking across the carpet of Life Fibers covering the floor Ragyo sighed as she connected directly with the Original Life Fiber hovering before her. Feeling the will of the Original Life Fiber course through her mind, pleased with the rate at which things were now progressing, Ragyo smirked when she heard Satsuki gasp, "This is where everything began?"

"Indeed it is," Ragyo's maroon eyes gazed fanatically upon the Original Life Fiber as every Life Fiber in her body began to resonate with the magnificent creature hovering before her. Feeling the Original Life Fiber responding to her demands Ragyo watched as part of the creature began to twist and distort as she continued, "This is the source of everything and everyone - the Original Life Fiber."

Satsuki had known about the Original Life Fiber for years but she never dreamed it was anything like this. Ever since his recruitment into her forces, Inumuta had secretly searched for the source of Life Fibers all across the globe but to know that it was literally right under her feet the entire time stunned Satsuki. Taking a moment to calm her raging emotions Satsuki let out a small sigh as she gazed up at the Original Life Fiber. Every nerve in her body was telling her that she was looking at something that defied logic and human rationale and it took Satsuki's immense self-control to keep her voice steady as she said, "It is an honor to be shown this, mother."

Ragyo knew her daughter was scheming behind her back but she appreciated the blatant pandering. Watching as the Original Life Fiber began sectioning off a piece of itself into a small glowing

sphere of red and orange Life Fibers Ragyo smirked and held her hand up in the air, "Humanity's fate to serve clothing began the instant this magnificent ball of thread landed on Earth. When Isshin and I first discovered the Original Life Fiber twenty years ago we were entranced by the beauty and power it held."

This time Satsuki could not hide the look of shock evident in her eyes. There was only one Isshin her mother could be talking about - Isshin Kurosaki. The fact that Ichigo's father had discovered the Original Life Fiber alongside her mother was surprising to Satsuki but it helped to clear many things that had been confusing her for some time. If Ichigo's father was truly like her mother it explained both his method of sneaking into Honnouji Academy without getting caught as well as how her mother could slap him but do nothing more than leave his cheek slightly sore. It also resolved how Nui Harime lost the purple Scissor Blade upon leaving Karakura Town.

"Life Fibers are destined to cover the planet."

Ragyo smiled in satisfaction as she caught the ball of Life Fibers in her hand. Forcing her will through her body and into the Life Fibers she watched as they morphed into a paper-thin white business suit with a glowing red tie. As Ragyo mentally moved it into place along the walls surrounding the Forbidden Room she mused on the fact that the COVERS were modeled after Isshin's own sense of fashion. Limited as it may be but when the man concentrated and focused on picking out his own clothes he could be surprising. When she saw Isshin wearing the very suit the COVERS were modeled after during the Parent Student Day Ragyo was once again reminded of the annoying fact she lost him to Masaki.

Lowering her arm as soon as the COVERS was in place and connected once more with the Original Life Fiber Ragyo turned to her daughter and sighed wistfully, "The Life Fiber beings hibernating all around us are COVERS and only one man in the world can stop what is about to happen."

Satsuki quickly filled in the blanks and said, "Isshin Kurosaki."

The slight tightening of her mother's eyes was the only sign of Ragyo's displeasure at the name, "Yes, Isshin Shiba is the only man in the world capable of halting the COVERS. Despite his rejection of my love and affection he is just as strongly connected to the Original Life Fiber as I. That reminds me... my precious Nui said that one of Isshin's COVERS appeared during Parent Student Day in the form of a plushie lion named Kon. The Grand Couturier was quite surprised when she found what looked like one of Revocs's toys made out of pure high-quality Life Fibers."

Ragyo didn't allow Satsuki any time to ponder her words as she turned around and left the Forbidden Room with Satsuki close behind her. As much as she wished to stay with the Original Life Fiber there were things she needed to do. With the Great Culture and Sport Festival beginning soon Ragyo made sure all living members of Xcution were to return to Japan to welcome the nudists that would no doubt show up. Letting the robe covering her body to fall to the ground as she took the dress Hououmaru was holding while Satsuki once again wore Junketsu Ragyo said, "While I would have been more satisfied if every academy in the country was conquered I suppose I cannot fault your failure in Karakura Town. Your progress before being repelled exceeded my wildest speculations. Tell me something Satsuki. Have you learned anything from your first failure in life?"

Satsuki stoically walked behind her mother as they returned to the main floor of the Kiryuin Manor, "Yes, mother. Ichigo's former classmates possessed abilities equal to that of a Three-Star Goku Uniform. Gamagori and Jakuzure were taken out by Ichigo's associates while Sanageyama was beaten by a Nudist Beach Commander called Alex Louis Armstrong."

"Armstrong... my, that's a name I haven't heard in quite some time," Ragyo chuckled in amusement as she recalled the failed coup sixteen years by the first generation of Xcution. It was ironic that the same organization that existed to spread Life Fibers across the world was once designed to contain them. Olivier Mira Armstrong was a

woman that Ragyo admired for her ability to focus on the mission at hand while leaving trivial emotions like love and attachment on the wayside. Sixteen years ago Olivier had trained the Revocs security force into one of the most powerful private armies in the world and yet she didn't think twice of setting off a series of bombs in their barracks at the start of the coup.

"Losing to an Armstrong is an honor, Satsuki," Ragyo slowly shook her head and sighed wistfully, "If this man was anything like Olivier than beating one of your Elite Four should have been easy for him. It is foolish to underestimate an Armstrong. They are quite tenacious and I would dare to say it would require the full use of Junketsu's power to put one down."

Satsuki pondered quietly as shattered memories of Junketsu fighting Armstrong pierced through her mind. The time from when she first started losing control of Junketsu to Ichigo saving her was a blur but there were a few things she could remember. Fighting a man with enough physical strength to stand up to Junketsu and her Bakuzan was one of the few she could recall, "Forgive my intrusion mother but I seem to recall Olivier Mira Armstrong being part of Xcution however all records of her disappear around a year after my birth. What happened to her?"

The presence of Xcution was always something Satsuki had to consider for her plans but the concept of a first generation drew her attention more than anything. All she could find out, even with Inumuta's prodigious assistance, was that there were six members but only two of which continued to work at Revocs - Rei Hououmaru and Kugo Ginjo. Hououmaru was still loyal as a dog to her mother and Ginjo had betrayed Revocs only to barely escape the Grand Couturier with his life. As for the other four members Satsuki searched for any information on them but it was almost as if their existence was erased from the face of the planet.

"Oh nothing much," Satsuki saw a sadistic smile stretch across her mother's face as she answered, "Olivier and some of the other members of Xcution thought it would be a good idea to assassinate



me. I simply showed them the error of their ways and returned the favor."

"I see..." Satsuki did not say anything else as she thought over the fact she was not the first to betray her mother. Judging from the information her mother had inadvertently admitted it seemed the first generation of Xcution was not as fanatically loyal as the current one. For two-thirds of them to rise up and rebel against her mother meant they had seen the monster Ragyo was years ago and tried to put an end to her only to fail.

"Let us not dwell on such fond memories. There is a more important matter I wish to discuss," Ragyo stopped in mid-stride and looked over her shoulder at Satsuki, "With most of the country's academies conquered I think it is time to move the Honnouji Academy experimental city into stage two."

"Stage two?" Satsuki pursed her lips as she thought about what that meant. Her forces were not nearly as ready as she would have liked them to be and she still needed to acquire a few things in order to limit the chances of her mother countering her plans.

Ragyo hummed softly for a moment at her daughter's surprise before asking, "Hououmaru, is everything ready?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Rei Hououmaru subtly adjusted her aviator sunglasses as she pulled out her PDA. Tapping the screen a few times until a live feed of Honnouji Academy appeared she said, "I commissioned the construction of the Ragyo Stadium this morning. As of an hour ago it is complete and ready for your arrival. All other preparations for the festival are finished as well."

Turning to her daughter Ragyo smirked as the rainbow light from her hair intensified, "Satsuki, it is time to begin the Great Culture and Sports Festival."

Satsuki's heart skipped a beat before she managed to calm down. Even though her forces were not as prepared as she would have

liked this was still the moment of truth. It would at the festival where her mother would be at her most vulnerable. Satsuki was counting on Ragyo to not bring more than one or two members of Xcution with her. Such a lapse in security would allow Satsuki's forces to overwhelm and kill her mother. She only hoped that Ichigo and Matoi took the bait and returned to Honnouji Academy, "Of course, mother."

Ragyo felt the shift in Satsuki's pulse and was amused at her daughter's attempt to hide it, "What are your -"

"Lady Ragyo! Lady Ragyo!"

Running towards the three women with a light sheen of sweat on his portly face was Takiji Kuroido. Stumbling to a stop as he reached them he took a few seconds to catch his breath before saying, "There's been a breach of security! Someone's locked themselves in your private study and is currently downloading confidential Revocs files!"

Satsuki never even saw her mother leave her side before Ragyo was racing through the halls of the Kiryuin Manor towards her private office. Ragyo did not fault Kuroido for coming to her instead of dealing with the problem himself. The walls of her office were saturated with high density Life Fibers that prevented anything short of an anti-tank shell from penetrating and to open the door required being able to overcome several thousand pounds of force pushing against them. The only question her enraged mind had was the identity of the perpetrator. It could not be Isshin since she would have detected him the minute he stepped foot in the manor even with his disguise in place.

Racing up the grand staircase in less time than it took a normal human to blink Ragyo sped towards the door to her office at the far end of the hall. Pushing it open with barely an effort on her part she was just about to kill whoever was inside when she froze upon seeing the man typing away at her computer, "You -!"

"Hold on a second. Trying to crack the password on these damn files is annoying as hell."

Sitting behind the desk and typing furiously on her keyboard was the long presumed deceased head of General Security and Interrogations - Batou. Back when Ragyo hired the man as part of the first generation of Xcution she had been curious about the lack of a full name. When she brought it up Batou had simply stated he had no last name. Maroon eyes watched as the grey haired man pressed one final key before pulling the flash drive out of the computer and stuck it in his pocket. Swiveling in her chair with his hands clasped behind his neck Batou gave Ragyo a wide grin and said, "Heya boss! It's been quite a while, hasn't it? I'm sure you're wondering how I survived being thrown out your window."

"As a matter of fact I'm not," Ragyo grinned sadistically as she walked across the spacious office towards Batou, the hollow clicking of her heels the only sound she made.

The past sixteen years had been overly kind to the former member of Xcution but Ragyo vowed to make sure that changed. The fact he survived falling to his death did not annoy her. What was causing Ragyo to experience a rare burst of anger was that he was stealing her private files. Once she was done dealing with Batou and his body was strung up as an example to those nudists showing what would happen if they tried anything Ragyo would task Hououmaru to track down how he survived.

"I knew I should have searched for your corpse after burning Genesis and Motoko's remains," Ragyo stopped on the other side of the desk and held her hand out in front of her body. As she watched the surprised and shocked expression on Batou's face as a Life Fiber Needle, glowing with the colors of the rainbow from the Life Fibers composing it, spun into existence in her hand, "La vie est drôle."

"So what are you going to do now?" Batou didn't look worried as he stared down death in the face. Swiveling the chair around and

pointing to the open window behind him he said, "By the way, that's how I got in here. You really need to tighten up the security in this place. A stranger could just waltz right in and stumble across all kinds of secrets."

"Your suggestion has been noted, Mr. Batou," Ragyo knew Batou hated to be called that but since he was going to die very soon she decided to at least get a little enjoyment from annoying him. Gazing momentarily upon the Life Fiber Needle in her hand Ragyo mentally noted to give it to her precious Nui once she was done murdering Batou. She had been so busy preparing the COVERS that she forgot all about her precious Nui's birthday last month. Ragyo was confident that the Grand Couturier would love the new weapon to replace the one Isshin took from her. The loss of the purple Scissor Blade was indeed tragic but her former husband's blades were a pale copy of the true Life Fiber weapon in her hand.

"I thought I told you the name's just Batou. Mr. Batou makes me sound old as hell," Batou grunted as he stood up and popped a few joints back into place. As he rubbed a crick in his neck from sitting down for too long he stared into Ragyo's eyes and asked, "This is the part where you kill me, right?"

"How very astute of you, Mr. Batou," Ragyo ignored Batou's suggestion before laughing viciously at the annoyed expression on his face, "But it seems I've changed my mind. I'm far too interested in how you survived falling to your certain death to just kill you. I'm sure my precious Nui will be more than happy to take the information from your mind. She's always wanted to test her interrogation skills against the illustrious Mr. Batou. I'm sure a man experienced as you are in enhanced interrogation can appreciate the value of hands-on training."

"You're never going to let me live that down, are you?" Batou scowled before letting out a large sigh, "Well, since you're going to kill me can I just say one last thing?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Batou. I know you far too well to allow that," Ragyo knew better than to allow Batou to stall for time. As an original member of Xcution he was well versed in on the spot planning and long term strategies. She could not allow him to pull off anything like that.

"Oh, but you're going to love this," Batou grinned in a familiar manner as he pointed to the carbon fiber harness previously hidden under his jacket. Tossing a small sphere at Ragyo while kicking the chair away he shouted, "... now!"

Ragyo rushed forward through the flash grenade Batou threw at her and just barely missed skewering him with her Life Fiber Needle before he was pulled out the window by a helicopter bearing the Revocs emblem. Angrily watched as the helicopter and Batou flew away into the afternoon sky Ragyo was just about to go after them when Satsuki and Hououmaru appeared outside her office. Stabbing the Life Fiber Needle into the floor of her office Ragyo turned to Hououmaru and asked, "Who do we have on retainer today, Hououmaru?"

Rei looked at the PDA in her hands and frowned before answering, "We don't have anyone, ma'am. All pilots have no scheduled flight times today. Whoever that pilot is they are not one of ours."

"I believe I know the identity of the pilot," Satsuki stepped forward and briefly glanced at the Life Fiber Needle stuck in the floor. She had never seen her mother wield a weapon before but Satsuki could instinctively tell it was just like her Bakuzan if not better. Stoically closing her eyes and clearing her mind Satsuki said, "Her name is Elena and if I recall correctly she had shoulder-length blond hair and blue eyes much like my own. From the inflection in her voice that she tried to hide it is clear she was a military woman at some point in the recent past."

As she processed the description of the woman the rest of Ragyo's anger evaporated into nothingness. Pulling the Life Fiber Needle out of the floor with barely an effort she walked across her office and

chuckled softly, "It appears I am paying for the follies of my youth. Only someone of her caliber could have infiltrated the Revocs mainframe to such an extent without being caught. No one else could come up with such brilliant plans and strategies aside from me after all..."

Satsuki noticed the change in her mother's tone and asked, "I take it Elena was not her true name?"

"It is like I said - it is foolish to underestimate an Armstrong," Ragyo said as she strolled out of her office and pulled the door closed behind her. With all the rats coming out of the woodwork she needed to make a few calls.

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## **Kamui Tales #25 - The Job Interview**

### *Nineteen Years Ago*

Batou was completely bored out of his mind as he sat in the expansive lobby of Revocs. Leaning his head back against the leather chair as he flipped through one of the magazines that had pictures of things he could never afford he mumbled, "Why did I agree to come here?"

When Motoko told him she was working at Revocs in the security division known as Xcution Batou had been more than happy for her but in hindsight his celebration was a bit premature. It was only after he offered to visit that Motoko told him Olivier was also working at Revocs but by then it was too late to change his mind. Batou still remembered Olivier as the harsh and heavy-handed commander of his division during the South American skirmishes. He didn't want to go anywhere near that woman but he couldn't tell Motoko he had a change of heart. If he did Batou knew Motoko would tell Olivier and then Olivier would pay him a visit.

Olivier scared him six ways to Sunday and so Batou found himself sitting alone in the lobby of Revocs waiting for Motoko to come down. There had been a few more people about ten minutes ago but they had left in a hurry upon getting one look at him.

As he looked at his watch, wondering why Motoko was late, three masked gunmen burst through the front doors of the lobby and fired their weapons briefly into the air, "Everybody down on the ground now! Anyone that tries to move will be shot!"

Without even thinking about it Batou rolled out of his chair and ducked behind it. Reaching for the empty pistol hidden in the back of his belt Batou smirked in relief that Revocs security hadn't bothered to check the soles of his military boots for the hidden magazine. If there was one thing South America taught him it was that you never go anywhere without a weapon. Trekking through the damp rainforests with his friends and colleagues getting taken out by snipers left and right taught Batou that not carrying a weapon was the same as holding up a sign that said 'kill me now. I'm unarmed.'

" *These guys aren't messing around,*" Batou peered out from behind his cover as one of the gunmen took the receptionist hostage. Quickly looking over the armor and weapons they were carrying Batou narrowed his eyes as he recalled the specific model of assault rifle being outright banned in most countries, *"From their coordination these guys aren't some amateur thugs looking to kidnap a CEO for profit. They're either working for a government or sponsored by one and judging from their accents I'd say Russian or eastern European."*

Snapping the magazine into the pistol with a soft click Batou noticed the bathroom straight ahead and came up with a crazy idea, *"Damn. Here goes years of military training out of the window."*

Leaping out from behind his cover and sprinting straight towards the bathroom Batou aimed at the gunmen and managed to get off several rounds before they could retaliate. Smirking as he watched one of the gunmen collapse as a bullet clipped their jugular Batou

managed to reach the bathroom just before the remaining two recovered their senses and opened fire on him. Keeping his head low to the ground as the walls were destroyed by the rain of automatic fire Batou looked at his gun and grimaced, "Five rounds left, huh? I need to make them count."

When Batou heard the two remaining gunmen speak in what had to be Russian he quickly leapt to his feet and hid deeper in the bathroom. If he knew terrorists and hired gunmen as well as he did than either one of two things were about to happen. If they were really smart they would both come in after him to make sure the job was done. If they were stupid, and judging from the one pair of feet he could hear slowly approaching the bathroom, they would come in one at a time. Smirking as he hid behind the wall separating the entrance from the rest of the bathroom Batou waited until the gunmen stepped inside before aiming the pistol right at his forehead. Grinning as he saw the man's eyes widen in horror Batou pulled back on the trigger and said, "... hi!"

Batou watched stoically as the gunman's head snapped back and a spray of blood coated the wall behind him. It always seemed that close range kills were the messiest and Batou was just glad that this time the blood didn't get on his favorite coat. Pursing his lips as he counted four rounds left Batou was just about to see what the last gunman was doing when he heard a man scream loudly before it was cut off as a choking gasp. Carefully making his way towards the entrance of the bathroom he was surprised to see a rather tall woman with silver hair and a rainbow glow holding the dead gunman up in the air with a single hand. As he noticed her maroon eyes turn to him Batou put his pistol on the ground and raised his hands into the air, "Don't worry I'm not with these guys."

"I know," Ragyo Kiryuin allowed the dead gunman to fall to the ground before she turned to the shaken receptionist, "Why don't you take the rest of the week off? I think you've earned it."

Batou watched the woman give Ragyo a deep bow before turning his attention back to her, "I take it you're Ragyo Kiryuin? Sorry about the



mess."

"As long as nobody died I don't care about property damage," Ragyo noticed her security forces finally arrive and sighed miserably. Why was she paying these men and women to keep Life Fibers from the rest of the world if they were always going to be a few minutes late? Rubbing the palm of her hand against her face she sighed once more before turning back to Batou, "You seem to have handled yourself quite well, Mr...."

"Batou."

"... Mr. Batou," Ragyo finished.

Batou looked away in annoyance as Ragyo inadvertently called him by the one name he hated, "Actually it's just Batou. Mr. Batou just makes me sound old."

"Very well then, Batou," Ragyo gave Batou a pleasant smile as she held her hand out, "After seeing that performance I don't think we need to have the job interview, don't you agree?"

For a moment Batou had no idea what Ragyo was talking about but as he recalled the various men dressed in fancy suits being put off by his appearance. At the time Batou thought it was because he was a gruff military man while they were all pampered and rich assholes but now he realized they were nervous because they thought Batou's presence meant they had no chance at getting the job. As he was about to tell Ragyo he wasn't here for the job Batou realized this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Ever since leaving the military it had been difficult for him to find employment. This might be the only chance he had of permanent employment so with a smile he took Ragyo's hand and shook it, "That's fine by me. I was never good with the formal stuff anyway."

"Welcome to Revocs, Batou," Ragyo let her arm drop to her side before looking around, "While I would have been the one to show

you around unfortunately I have to remain here and deal with this mess. I'll allow Olivier to give you the tour instead."

"Olivier?" Batou's blood ran cold, "Oh, you don't need to -"

"Mr. Batou!"

Batou subconsciously snapped to attention as the voice of his former commander echoed through the lobby. Stalking towards him with her hands behind her back and the symbols of Revocs and Xcution stitched on her jacket was Olivier Mira Armstrong. Casting her angry gaze over her former soldier Olivier snapped a salute to Ragyo before pointing down the hall, "You expect to work for Lady Ragyo while looking like you just stepped off the street? Move! Hopefully we can find you something less appalling to wear!"

"Yes, Ma'am!" Batou saluted Olivier before following after her. God damn it... why hadn't he just said no to Ragyo when he had the chance?

# School's Out

*So here is Chapter 38 and just off the bat I'm going to tell you that there is NO omake this chapter. It is not because I couldn't think of one. I did, in fact, have one lined up. It is just that the impact of the chapter would be lost if I had an omake. So I apologize to anyone that had been looking forward to the next installment of Kamui Tales.*

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## Chapter 38 - School's Out

Alexander Anderson snarled as his body was slammed against an outcropping of rock for the fifth time. Feeling a burst of pain radiate up his left arm as his shoulder became dislocated Anderson realized he would never be able to kill Ichigo. His entire plan had been predicated on distracting Ichigo's friends and his fellow nudists long enough to deliver the fatal blow. He never expected for his bayonet to be shattered by a holy shield conjured into existence by the same girl who performed the miracle of raising the dead. As the world suddenly became blurry, courtesy of the lenses in his glasses shattering into hundreds of shards, Anderson let his last two Tailor Bayonets fall to the ground, "Ye have me beat, Armstrong."

"Forcing you to surrender was never my goal, Anderson."

Alex Louis Armstrong stood several feet away from the injured former priest but did not have a single scratch on his flawlessly sculpted body, "As your superior officer I am commanding you to leave Ichigo Kurosaki alone. I am not naïve enough to think you will simply learn to live with him. I am simply asking that you allow him a chance to prove himself."

Anderson barely winced in pain as he popped his shoulder back into its socket and gave his surroundings a cursory glance. Even with his vision as poor as it currently was Anderson could tell Armstrong had purposely forced their fight away from the children and judging by the lack of interference most likely asked to be left alone. Smirking as a trail of blood escaped from the corner of his mouth Anderson answered, "If ye think I will allow an abomination to live than ye must be daft in the head. Life Fiber Hybrids are inherently evil and crave nothing more than death and destruction. It is merciful to kill the boy before he loses what remains of his humanity before it is too late."

Armstrong stared at the Nudist Beach commander before sighing and looking in the direction of Ichigo and his friends. He knew it would not be long, perhaps a minute or two, before they would disregard his orders to come investigate. Steeling his expression while turning back towards the injured Anderson Armstrong folded his arms across his massive chest and said, "You may have a point. From general experience all hybrids have been either insane psychopaths or psychotic megalomaniacs with dreams of genocide on a massive scale. Perhaps it is only a matter of time before Ichigo falls and becomes a threat but we cannot live our lives on presumptions, Anderson. If Isshin thought his son was a threat do you think he would allow him to meet with us?"

Anderson didn't answer as he pondered Armstrong's question. Everyone in Nudist Beach knew the only reason the organization managed to grow to its current size was because of Isshin Kurosaki. Nobody knew what the man had on the Kiryuin matriarch but whatever he had was enough of a threat to keep Ragyo not only away from Karakura Town but from the entire Kansai Region. For several years after joining Nudist Beach Anderson had futilely tried to figure out what Isshin held on Ragyo Kiryuin with the singular goal of harnessing whatever it may be to finally kill her.

"Perhaps ye have a point."

Armstrong's expression softened in relief as he watched Anderson grunt as he picked up his two Tailor Bayonets and slide them back

into his gray cassock. The simple fact that Anderson would willingly sheath his weapons meant he was sincerely giving up trying to kill Ichigo for the moment, "I take it we have come to an accord. I will allow you to keep an eye on Ichigo but you are forbidden from doing anything unless he makes the first move. Understood?"

"Ye have my word that I will not touch the lad," Anderson grunted while forcing his bruised body to move. Catching Ryuko talking to Ichigo in the distance, the annoyance clearly visible on her face, Anderson scoffed and asked, "Has it already been thirteen years?"

Twenty-three years ago Anderson had been promoted to director of the church's orphanage and boarding school in Kobe after the previous director embezzled most of the orphanage's finances. Although the first few years were rather difficult, due in part to the financial situation even with substantial donations from the local population, Anderson always managed to find a way to keep food on the table and the lights on. It was six years later, long after the scandal with the previous director passed and a pleasant monotony settled over the orphanage, when Masaki Kurosaki appeared at his office with a small bundle wrapped in her arms.

After nearly an hour of questioning Masaki explained that Isshin Matoi, Ryuko's father, was in dangerous and couldn't watch over his daughter without putting her own life in danger. When he asked Masaki why she came to him, especially given the fact Ryuko wasn't Catholic, Anderson had expected her to come up with some form of excuse. He was surprised to know that the person Isshin Matoi feared was the illustrious Ragyo Kiryuin. After listening to Masaki's entire story, as well as her plea for him to allow Ryuko to stay at the orphanage for several years, Anderson had expressed his sympathies but declined. He wouldn't risk the other orphans if Ragyo Kiryuin, whether he believed her story or not, discovered where she was.

When Masaki offhandedly asked about the orphanage's dire state and how much money it would take to fix everything Anderson had grown livid and demanded she leave. His rage evaporated just as

quickly when Masaki pulled out a check signed by the CEO of Ishida Pharmaceuticals and gave it to him. While the check was enough to keep the orphanage open for two years, which puzzled Anderson, Masaki promised that if he took in Ryuko the orphanage would never need to worry about money again.

Following Anderson's gaze Armstrong muttered, "I know you wish to speak with Ryuko but I must ask that you refrain from doing so at the moment. She is currently unaware Professor Matoi sent her to an orphanage for part of her childhood."

Anderson grimaced, his green eyes narrowed in disgust, upon remembering the night Isshin Matoi came for his daughter. The former priest hadn't joined Nudist Beach until two years after it was formed but from what he knew those first few years were truly a nightmarish time. Somehow Ragyo Kiryuin had discovered the organization and sent everyone and everything she had to destroy it. Assassins, mercenaries and the Revocs private security force were not only sent after Nudist Beach but also their friends and family. Dozens of innocent people, many of them children, had been killed before Nudist Beach went underground and Ragyo Kiryuin could not longer find them.

Anderson coughed harshly as specks of blood coated the front of his cassock, "Now if ye will excuse me I need to find a doctor before I keel over."

"Don't be absurd, Anderson! Why would you go to the doctor when we have the best healer in the world right here?" Armstrong laughed boisterously as he clapped Anderson on the shoulder and causing the injured man to nearly fall to the ground. Turning towards Ichigo's group Armstrong raised his other hand to his mouth and shouted, "Do you mind coming over here, Ms. Inoue? My comrade is in need of your services!"

Armstrong watched as Orihime looked up with a start before quickly making her way over to them despite protests from Ryuko and Tatsuki. As she ran towards the two commanders of Nudist Beach

Orihime thought back to just a few minutes ago when she nearly saw Ichigo get killed. After Armstrong had punched his comrade away and left to go deal with him Chad had rushed over and pulled out the bayonet pinning Ichigo's hand to the wall in one go. She had immediately gone to heal him but saw Ichigo's wound glowing blue before the blood disappeared back into his body and his injury vanished entirely. It was only when Ichigo explained to the stunned group, apart from a knowing Ryuko and an oblivious as always Mako, that he was a Life Fiber Hybrid that Orihime's memories of the Sudden Death Runoff and Nui Harime pulling out his heart came rushing back to her.

When Orihime finally reached Armstrong and Anderson she touched the tips of her fingers against her hairpins and said, "Souten Kisshin!"

Anderson had heard about Orihime's powers but experiencing them was something entirely different. He watched as his wounds healed in front of his eyes before nary a trace of damage could be seen on his body. Even his glasses that had been shattered during the fight were fully restored and rested on the bridge of his nose once more. Clenching his hands gently Anderson turned to Orihime, "Ye must an agent of the Lord to work such miracles."

Orihime blushed in embarrassment at the compliment but was stopped from speaking when Tatsuki grabbed her shoulders and pulled her away from Anderson before stepping in front of her. After watching the man nearly kill Ichigo she was not about to let him get anywhere close to Orihime or any of her other friends, "Why did you go and heal this bastard, Orihime? He nearly killed Ichigo!"

"Well..." Orihime looked away from Tatsuki's piercing gaze and mumbled quietly, "... because Mr. Armstrong asked me too and he's really strong. I knew that even if I healed him Mr. Armstrong could beat him up again if he did anything."

As Tatsuki stared at Orihime in disbelief at her logic the rest of her friends managed to catch up to them. While most of them were

weary of Anderson and prepared to fight him off now that they knew what to expect it was Ryuko who stormed up to him and pointed her red Scissor Blade at his face, "Why the hell did you attack Ichigo? Tell me, damn it!"

Anderson saw the angry scowl on her face and immediately remembered a three year old Ryuko doing the exact same thing when she didn't get her way. Without saying a word, much to Ryuko's frustration, Anderson adjusted his cassock and walked past her towards the exit to the underground training chamber. He was conflicted about the Kamui she was wearing and needed some air to clear his head. As much as he saw her for the girl that spent the first four years of her life in his orphanage Anderson could not get past the fact she was wearing Senketsu and needed to leave before he did something rash.

"Watch yourself, lad," Anderson gave Ichigo a hardened expression as he passed him. Locking eyes with the orange haired teen Anderson growled and said, "I'll be watching your every move. The first time you step out of line I will end your existence. I will not allow another Nui Harime to come into being on this planet even if it kills me."

Ichigo watched Anderson stalk away and vanish around an outcropping of rocks before he even considered letting his guard down. As he clenched his right hand, the same one that minutes ago had been pierced clean through by a bayonet, he heard Mugetsu's feminine voice ask, **"Are you alright, Ichigo?"**

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Ichigo answer must have not satisfied his Kamui because when she spoke again her voice was full of sarcastic wit, **"You don't sound fine at all, Ichigo."**

"Hey Uryu," Ichigo ignored Mugetsu's sputtered at being ignored and turned towards the young Quincy, "When you worked at Revocs you met Ragyo Kiryuin, right?"



"Once or twice," Uryu answered evenly as he tried to figure out where Ichigo was going with his line of questioning. Adjusting his glasses and sighing he added, "Although I met her a few times it was not until I returned a month ago with my father that I actually spoke with her."

Ichigo seemed to ponder Uryu's answer for a moment before asking, "This may sound stupid but did you ever try and read her spiritual energy?"

Uryu paused before answering as the rest of their friends began listening in on the conversation, "Yes but only once. When I first saw Ragyo Kiryuin I was quite curious about the source of her rather unique and flamboyant appearance since people don't just naturally emit rainbow light. My initial assumption was some sort of technological apparatus but as soon as I tried to get a read on her I realized how much I was wrong. What I felt made me nearly throw up. There is something... wrong for a lack of a better word... about her spiritual energy. It wasn't until I stole the Life Fibers from Revocs for Kisuke that I realized Life Fibers had the same spiritual energy, albeit on a much smaller scale, as Ragyo."

"Does that mean Ragyo Kiryuin is a hybrid like Ichigo and Nui Harime?" Ryuko stabbed her red Scissor Blade into the ground as she chimed in with her own thoughts. Ichigo and his friends had given her and Mako a summary on spiritual energy and other supernatural things on the way to Kisuke's shop. A month or so ago Ryuko would have laughed her ass off and dismissed them as delusional but after watching Uryu, Chad and Orihime use abilities without Life Fibers she had to admit there was something to them.

"Most likely," Uryu conceded as he grimaced in frustration, "I don't know what happened to you, Ichigo, but right after the Winter War your spiritual energy started changing. I know it was supposed to vanish after defeating Aizen but over the course of about ten days your spiritual energy dropped to nearly nothing before rebounding. I tried to figure out why it might be doing that but I was immediately repulsed by what I felt."

"That's strange," Chad added as he thought about it, "I sensed Ichigo's spiritual energy a few months ago and it didn't feel any different. Maybe it felt a bit strange but nothing like that."

"Damn it," Ichigo spat out in frustration. It seemed like the more he learned about what was going on the more it felt like he didn't know anything. Nui Harime had always called him her cousin, which meant she knew he was a hybrid from the very beginning. If Nui knew that then it was more than likely that Ragyo knew it as well and judging from the complicated relationship between his dad and Ragyo it was likely he knew about it as well.

"So what if you're a hybrid?" Ryuko scoffed in annoyance as she turned away from Ichigo. Pulling her Scissor Blade out of the ground and collapsing it down before tucking it in the pouch on her waist she kicked at the ground before huffing and turning back around and glaring at him, "This doesn't change a thing! You're not insane like Nui Harime or weird and creepy like Satsuki's mom. You're the most normal person I know at Honnouji Academy."

Senketsu listened to Ryuko try to cheer Ichigo up before dryly commenting, ***"You just insulted yourself, Ryuko."***

"Shut it, Senketsu!" Ryuko growled as she pulled on her Kamui's lapels.

Senketsu scoffed at Ryuko's actions before turning his attention to Ichigo, ***"Despite what she said Ryuko has a point, Ichigo. I don't know how but somehow I felt you were slightly stranger than the other people at Honnouji Academy and that's saying something considering who you and Ryuko hung out with."***

Ichigo's eyebrow started to twitch in annoyance, "Can you get to the point?"

" **Yes,**" Senketsu looked straight at Ichigo as he said, ***"Even if you're a Life Fiber Hybrid does that actually change anything?"***

***It's just like Ryuko said. Out of all the people at Honnouji Academy you are by far the most normal... Ryuko included."***

"What did I just say, Senketsu?!"

As Ryuko began arguing with Senketsu while Mako stood on the sidelines cheering Ichigo was conflicted about what he should do. He had promised Satsuki that he would not breathe a word of what he saw in her mind to anyone and he intended to keep that promise but the same could not be said about her plans. There was too much at stake to be keeping something like that a secret, especially with Ragyo Kiryuin threatening every single person on the planet. Taking a deep breath and preparing for the immediate fallout that was coming Ichigo said, "There's something about Satsuki you guys don't know about."

"What?" Tatsuki looked away from Orihime with a sly grin on her face, "Is she your girlfriend?"

"What? No!" Ichigo sputtered out before shaking his head and regaining his composure.

"Are you sure, Ichigo?" Orihime had a quizzical look on her face as she stared into the air, "From what I heard it's almost like you and Satsuki have some unresolved tension. You two really need to figure out a way to work through your problems."

Ichigo wouldn't have been nearly as embarrassed if Orihime hadn't been so clueless about what she just said. Gritting his teeth angrily as both Tatsuki and Ryuko broke out into laughter he kept a tight grip on his anger as he asked, "Who told you that?"

"Why, I saw it of course! It was clear from the limited interactions I saw that you both have feelings for each other but are unable to express them." Ryuko actually fell over from laughing too hard as Orihime still did not understand the double entendre she just said. Cocking her head to the side and adopting what appeared to be an

intellectual pose she added, "Anyone with two eyes could see Satsuki Kiryuin sneaking glances at you all the time, after all."

"That's not what I was going to say!" Ichigo let out an exasperated sigh as he rubbed his temple to keep from shouting again. Why did everyone have to assume that he and Satsuki was a couple? It had been odd the first few times he heard it but now it was just pissed him off. What made things worse was that he couldn't even tell Orihime to shut up since she wasn't trying to make fun of him. After taking a calming breath he said, "What I'm trying to say is that you're wrong about Satsuki's motives. She's not trying to help her mother - she's trying to kill her."

"Are you absolutely certain?" Armstrong appeared in front of Ichigo before he could so much as see how his friends were taking the news.

"Satsuki told me after I became her Vice President," Ichigo looked past Armstrong and saw that Ryuko had stopped laughing and was looking at him in a mixture of shock and surprise. Mentally sighing as he knew Ryuko would want an explanation about why he kept this from her for so long he turned back to Armstrong and explained, "Apparently everything she's done so far has been nothing more than a ruse to kill her mother."

Armstrong stared at Ichigo for any signs of deception but when he saw the honesty on the boy's face he hummed thoughtfully, "It seems you are indeed telling the truth, Ichigo. If everything you just said is to be taken as fact then Miss Satsuki has concocted the most convoluted scheme I have ever heard. She not only put herself on a pedestal as a villain but she also purposely alienated every potential ally. Such an elaborate plan bears the hallmarks of genius but Satsuki is also taking an incredible risk."

Satsuki shook her head in confusion, "Huh? It seems pretty cut and dry to me. Satsuki's just pretending to be an asshole to get close to her mother, right?"

"It's risky because it depends on Ragyo Kiryuin *not* knowing about it," Uryu scratched at his chin as his mind worked on trying to figure out what this all meant. He knew Satsuki was intelligent but knowing she was capable of a long term plan like this put the debates he had with her in an entirely different light, "Ragyo Kiryuin is likely aware of Satsuki's plan. What bothers me is why she has not tried to stop Satsuki. What motive does Ragyo Kiryuin have for feigning ignorance and lulling Satsuki into a false sense of security? It can't be as simple as a trap. We're missing something vitally important."

**" *There's something Ichigo did not tell you, Ryuko.*"** The somber tone in Mugetsu's voice drew Ryuko's attention away from Uryu, **"*Nudist Beach already told you what Ragyo Kiryuin has planned for the world but what Armstrong does not know is that Honnouji Academy is to be the testing ground. Every single person in Honnou City is going to be sacrificed as food for Life Fibers.*"**

"That means Mako's family is in danger!" Ryuko sputtered out in shock.

"Why's my family in danger, Ryuko?" Mako turned away from staring at a particularly pretty rock and tilted her head to the side in confusion, "Did my dad forget to pay his taxes again? He sometimes does that and we have to go into hiding for about a week."

"No, it's nothing like that," Ryuko fumbled for the right words that could get the point across the Mako and easily and clearly as possible, which was much easier said than done. Mako may be her best friend but she was sometimes a little too dense so instead of telling her and hoping Mako understood Ryuko turned to Armstrong, "Mugetsu said Ragyo Kiryuin is going to test out the plan for Life Fibers to eat humans at Honnouji Academy."

Armstrong's eyes lit up in realization as he pondered what Ryuko told him, "We always assumed that Ragyo Kiryuin would need to test out her plan on a small scale to iron out any flaws but knowing Honnouji Academy is the location will make things much easier."

Once we are done here I am going to make a few calls. By this time tomorrow there will be several dozen of our finest undercover operatives constantly keeping an eye on Honnou City and Satsuki Kiryuin."

**" You knew about this and didn't tell us earlier?"** Senketsu's voice had a hint of betrayal as he gave his fellow Kamui the fiercest glare he could, **"You knew about Satsuki Kiryuin and her plans for more than two weeks and you didn't tell us? Did you not trust Ryuko?"**

**" Would you have believed Ichigo or me if we told you?"** Mugetsu scoffed and rolled her eyes but her tone was completely serious, **"What would you have done if Ichigo said to Ryuko that Satsuki Kiryuin was trying to stop her mother from destroying the world? Ryuko would have probably stormed up to Satsuki and the Elite Four while shouting about the plan all along the way. Satsuki trusted Ichigo enough to confide in him because she knew he wouldn't tell anyone until the moment is right."**

Senketsu's eye narrowed, **"Why you -"**

"Mugetsu's right, Senketsu," Ryuko ran a hand through her hair and let out a large sigh. She hated to admit it but Mugetsu was right on all counts. She may have matured greatly during her time at Honnouji Academy but when she first transferred she was loud, rude and prone to getting into fights against people she couldn't beat, "I probably would have charged straight at Satsuki back then if Ichigo told me but we have more important things to worry about. We need to go back to Honnouji Academy and stop Ragyo Kiryuin's plan!"

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Tatsuki did not like sitting around doing nothing when the fate of the world was at stake. Grinning at the thought of actually helping to save the world she asked, "But if Ragyo Kiryuin is really this strong what can we do to stop her? As much as I want to just charge in and kick her ass I don't think that's going to work."

"It's not so much a matter what we can do so much as it is what we are able to do," Armstrong answered as he thought deeply on the matter. Sending a large force of nudists at Honnouji Academy was the first thing that came to mind but he knew Satsuki would engage them in battle if it meant trying to keep her mother from finding out her true allegiance. What he needed to do was come up with a way to let Satsuki know her mother was fully aware of her plans.

"Staying in Karakura Town and waiting for Ragyo Kiryuin to come to us is not going to help," Uryu reluctantly admitted as the basis of an idea came to him. It was a long shot but it was the plan he could think of, "My Quincy powers might not work as well as I hoped against Life Fibers but I'm not going to just sit around and let the Earth get destroyed. If we're going to devise an effective strategy to neutralize Ragyo Kiryuin we first need to deal with her allies. She's strong enough on her own but our chances of victory drop to zero if we cannot remove Nui Harime and Xcution from the equation."

"Ururu should be more than strong enough to keep Nui Harime occupied," Ichigo said as he began to understand where Uryu was going with his plan, "She should be capable of stalling Nui for at least five to ten minutes but Xcution is going to be far easier to take down."

Ryuko's eyes widened as she remembered the man in the past when she confronted Satsuki and Riruka Dokugamine, "I almost forgot about that Ginjo guy! Didn't he tell you he was a former member of Xcution? That means he must know all of their powers and weaknesses. I just hope there aren't too many of them."

"You can count me in," Chad stepped forward and clenched his hand into a fist, "Ichigo, for the last ten months I've trained and practiced so when you recovered your powers I would not be a burden. After I defeated Ira Gamagori and helped to save Karakura Town I realized I was wrong about something my abuelo told me a long time ago. Using my power only to protect my friends is good but my abuelo would be disappointed if I stood back and allowed Ragyo Kiryuin to hurt innocent people."

"I'm glad you're all happy about going to war because things are about to get a lot worse."

Standing on top of an outcropping of rocks with a scowl on his face was Tsumugu Kinagase. As he chewed on the end of an unlit cigarette he counted the number of teenagers and mumbled, "I see Anderson failed to finish what he set out to do. I'm actually surprised."

Ryuko spat on the ground and glared up at Tsumugu, "Did you come here just to annoy us you Mohawk bastard?"

Tsumugu ignored Ryuko's outburst as he turned to Armstrong, "I've received word from the General. Her mission was a success and she was able to acquire the necessary information from Ragyo Kiryuin's private computer. The date for the Great Culture and Sports Festival has been moved up considerably. Instead of couple of months it is taking place tomorrow. We have less than a day before Ragyo Kiryuin puts her plan to devour humanity into action."

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As he sat on the roof of Kisuke's shop and stared into the afternoon sky Kugo Ginjo knew his presence in Karakura Town was not exactly welcome. Isshin Shiba might know the truth of his past but most shinigami, exiled or not, saw him as a murderous criminal who killed dozens of shinigami in the pursuit of power and nothing would change their minds. He may have been innocent but upon defending himself from the Onmitsukidou he broke the ancient laws of the Soul Society and would need to forfeit his life.

Sighing as he sensed a familiar presence touch down behind him Ginjo looked over his shoulder at Yoruichi Shihoin, "I suppose you think I'm up to something, don't you?"



Yoruichi folded her arms and glared at Ginjo, "I ran into Isshin on the way back. He explained what he knew about your past and while I don't exactly buy what he said it does make sense. I don't know why the Onmitsukidou were to assassinate you when you were willing to stand trial. Such missions are only supposed to be given if the defendant is a flight risk. What happened to you goes against everything I taught Sui-Feng."

Ginjo smirked as he felt Yoruichi's hostility lessen. While she was still somewhat suspicious of why he was helping them Yoruichi was at least willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, which was something he was never given by the Soul Society. As an unfamiliar sensation prickled on the edges of his mind Ginjo turned to the south and quickly stood up before reaching for Ragnarok on his back, "Is it just me or are there several rather powerful Quincy coming directly towards us?"

Yoruichi refused to answer Ginjo's question in order to get a better read on the strength of the Quincy approaching them. There was no doubt that they were strong, perhaps even as strong as a captain, but the better question was why they were here. Their arrival hours after Satsuki Kiryuin's failed invasion could not be a coincidence. They must have taken the damage to Karakura Town as a sign of weakness and moved in while the city's guard was weakened. Amber eyes narrowing as she was finally able to count the number of Quincy rushing towards them Yoruichi said, "There are four in total and each of them possess at least low captain strength."

"We can't take them with just the two of us. Even if we're stronger they outnumber us. If they're actually competent they will use their numbers to flank us," Ginjo's body tensed as he was encompassed by a rainbow flash of light. Appearing clad in his Sauvegarde Raiment once more he hefted the massive form of Ragnarok onto his shoulder and took a steadying breath, "I was listening to what Uryu Ishida said about his fights against Junketsu and Nonon Jakuzure. For some reason Quincy attacks aren't that effective

against Life Fibers. My raiment should be strong enough to buy you time to get reinforcements."

"That may be true but we don't have time," Yoruichi's head snapped to the side as her sensitive hearing picked up four sets of feet only a block away, "They're here."

Ginjo and Yoruichi spun around and braced themselves as four Quincy clad in white military-like uniforms appeared on the street in front of Kisuke's shop using Hirenkyaku. For a few seconds not a single word was exchanged between the two groups but eventually Bazz-B broke the silence. Taking a step forward and giving Ginjo and Yoruichi a predatory grin he said, "Damn, we've only just got here and already the big shots are coming out to play. You shinigami must really be dying to roll out the red carpet for us. I'm actually honored and all that crap."

"Aren't you the confident little brat? You get a little power and suddenly you feel like you can take on the world," Yoruichi returned Bazz-B's grin with a cat-like smirk of her own as she vanished using shunpo before reappearing in front of Kisuke's shop. Despite her cheerful demeanor Yoruichi was analyzing the four Quincy for any possible weaknesses. The one with the Mohawk appeared to be the leader of the group, which meant that he was most likely the one giving them orders, but she was not about to ignore her instincts saying that the other three were just as dangerous as Bazz-B. Watching as Ginjo jumped off the roof and landed on the ground beside her Yoruichi's smirk fell off her face, "What do you four want?"

Bazz-B snorted and shook his head before turning around to Meninas McAllon, "We don't have time to shoot the breeze. Deal with them so we can get on with our mission and be sure not to kill them."

"Holding back so I don't kill a shinigami?" Meninas sighed as she began walking towards Yoruichi and Ginjo while adjusting her frilled gloves, "I suppose there's a first time for everything."

Yoruichi and Ginjo's eyes widened in surprise as Meninas slammed her foot against the road before the pavement literally buckled and shattered. As they were forced to jump away Ginjo cursed when he saw a shadow descending through the air towards him. Gritting his teeth and bracing his feet against the upturned pavement he took a step forward and swung Ragnarok through the air just as Meninas cocked her arm back and through a punch packing enough power to send him flying through at least one building. In a burst of light Ginjo's Life Fiber enhanced greatsword slammed into Meninas' fist accompanied by a sonic boom that shattered every window on the street.

"That's some punch you got," Ginjo commented sarcastically as he pushed back against Meninas's fist. Adjusting his grip on Ragnarok as he slowly began overpowering Meninas Ginjo asked, "Correct me if I'm wrong but aren't you Quincy all about using bows?"

"You must really be clueless if you think firing heilig pfeil is all we can do," Meninas quipped rhetorically as she pushed more power into her fist just to be able to keep even with Ginjo. She might have seen the Daten provided by His Majesty but experiencing the effects of Life Fibers was an entirely different matter. Even using three-quarters of her power without going into Vollständig she wasn't able to do more than match Ginjo blow for blow. What surprised the physically strongest Sternritzer the most was the lack of environmental damage. Usually when she used this much of her strength she could level an entire city block but not only was Ginjo blocking her punch but the ground beneath his feet had barely cratered downwards.

"That's good to know," Ginjo smirked before releasing more of his Sauvegarde's power. It was foolhardy to hold one's power back when fighting an opponent as powerful as Meninas McAllon but Ginjo needed to know what she was capable of doing. He needed to make sure she wasn't somehow able to use his own strength against him. As the outpouring of power from his raiment forced Meninas back Ginjo quickly let go of Ragnarok and rushed forward before

delivering a punch that sent her soaring back towards her compatriots.

Bambietta Basterbine massaged her temple and sighed in annoyance as she watched Meninas crash into the building behind them from Ginjo's punch. His Majesty may have ordered them to keep as low a profile as possible but if they continued to fight Yoruichi and Ginjo they risked jeopardizing the entire mission. Drawing her dao and allowing her spiritual energy to course through it Bambietta cautiously walked towards Yoruichi while wearing a psychotic smirk on her face, "This won't kill you but I'm sure it'll hurt like hell, shinigami."

"That's cute but I'm afraid this fight is already over," Yoruichi's confident response angered Bambietta and caused the Sternritter to swing her dao while releasing an invisible wave of spiritual energy. Smirking as she dodged the spiritual energy using shunpo Yoruichi reappeared in front of Bambietta and kicked her with enough force to send her crashing into Lille Barro. Frowning at the lack of damage she inflicted on Bambietta due to the girl's blut Yoruichi leapt back as a large and imposing man landed in the street in front of her.

"Way of the Holy Arts Number Three!" Tessai Tsukabishi clapped his hands together without preamble as his glasses shone with a menacing light. Without daring to wait for the Sternritter to try and counter or dodge his spell Tessai thrust his right palm forward and shouted, "Hakudan Keppeki!"

Tessai let out an exhausted sigh after he successfully cast Hakudan Keppeki and wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead. Watching as Bazz-B attempted to use Burner Finger One to pierce through the translucent barrier alongside Meninas and Lille Barro's own attempts Tessai huffed and explained, "Hakudan Keppeki is one of several Anti-Quincy spells I've devised in case of an emergency. By using spiritual energy from a volunteering Quincy I was able to create a barrier that completely negates any Quincy techniques and abilities from those trapped inside."

"Nice work, Tessai," Yoruichi landed just outside the Hakudan Keppeki and glared at Bazz-B. Locking eyes with the pissed off Quincy she asked, "Now are you going to tell us why you came here or do I have to make you talk?"

"What is this?"

Yoruichi and Tessai turned around as the front door to Kisuke's shop slid open harshly as Alexander Anderson stepped out of the darkness and into the afternoon sunlight. As the light glinted off his glasses and momentarily hid his eyes the former clergyman sneered as he noticed the uniforms of the four Sternritter trapped within Tessai's Hakudan Keppeki barrier. Flicking his wrists as his last two Tailor Bayonets slid out from the sleeves of his cassock Anderson's footsteps were heavy and with determined purpose as he stalked towards Yoruichi, "This is turning out to be quite the day."

Alexander Anderson?" Ginjo knew of Anderson from his time in Xcution and was thus immediately aware of the danger he represented. It was quite telling of Anderson's skill and power when someone like Ragyo Kiryuin prohibited anyone other than herself, Nui Harime, or the members of Xcution from engaging him in battle.

"Well now... this day is full of surprises," Anderson's grin stretched across his face as he noticed Ginjo standing off to the side with one hand holding Ragnarok in front of his body. Smiling and allowing his white teeth to be clearly seen Anderson asked, "It pleases me to see ye seeking atonement for your sins."

When Ginjo turned his head away instead of saying anything Yoruichi took the opportunity to ask, "Who are you and how did you get inside Kisuke's shop?"

If Yoruichi expected Anderson to answer with the same tone of voice he spoke to Ginjo with she was dead wrong. In the space of less than ten seconds Anderson's voice began slightly less gravely and the growl permeating most of his words nearly disappeared, "The same way that anyone enters a building - through the front door.

Please forgive my rudeness, ma'am. I am Alexander Anderson, Nudist Beach commander in charge of Life Fiber Pacification and Elimination, at your service."

Yoruichi frowned at Anderson's admittance of his ties to Nudist Beach but she was more worried about how he slipped inside Kisuke's shop so easily. She couldn't have been gone for more than five minutes, "So I take it you work with Armstrong and Tsumugu. Tell me something. What are you doing out here?"

Anderson hummed softly to himself as he walked past Yoruichi with a pleasant smile on his face. Stopping just as he reached the Hakudan Keppeki he tapped one of his Tailor Bayonet's against the translucent white barrier before answering, "I decided to get a bit of fresh air after failing to kill Masaki's son."

Seven sets of shoulders tensed at Anderson's causal confession of attempting to murder Ichigo and failing. While Tessai was focused on keeping the Hakudan Keppeki at full power and was thus unable to move Ginjo and Yoruichi were not as handicapped. As Ginjo gripped Ragnarok's hilt with both hands in preparation for a fight Yoruichi's amber eyes narrowed angrily as she asked, "What the hell did you just say?"

Anderson did not answer Yoruichi's question as he gazed at the four Sternritter trapped within the Hakudan Keppeki. Tapping a Tailor Bayonet against the barrier once more while marveling at the apparent strength of the supernatural barrier Anderson's voice became pleasant and warm as he turned and addressed Bazz-B, "What are ye names?"

Bazz-B didn't know why everyone was afraid of Anderson. He could sense the man's spiritual energy even from inside the barrier and while it was quite large for a human it still paled in comparison to any of the Sternritter. Folding his arms and kicking at the barrier in frustration he glared at Anderson and asked, "Why the hell should I tell you anything, old man?"

"We don't have time for this," Lille Barro grabbed the rifle off his back and began gathering spiritual energy. The Hakudan Keppeki might be strong enough to contain them but every barrier has a weakness. Every second he could feel the barrier weakening and in only a few minutes it would shatter completely. If he could fire a bullet at just the right time he could pierce through the weakened barrier and take out Tessai Tsukabishi before he could reinforce it, "We cannot fail when Ichigo Kurosaki is just within reach."

Anderson's demeanor changed as soon as he heard Lille Barro mention Ichigo's name. He may want to kill Ichigo but that was only because he needed to spare the world from a second Nui Harime. Tightening his grip on his Tailor Bayonets as he took a step away from the barrier he quickly came to the conclusion that the four people currently trapped within it could not be allowed to reach Ichigo no matter what it cost him, "Is that so? Tell me yer names so I have something to put on ye gravestones when I am done with ye."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Bambietta shouted in a mixture of confusion and annoyance, "Just a second ago you were all cheerful about trying to murder Ichigo but now you're upset that we're here to see him? You must be insane!"

"Someone like ye does not have the right to argue," Anderson's voice deepened until it was nothing more than a growl once more. Ignoring the indignant sputtering from Bambietta Anderson turned towards Tessai and asked, "I take it ye are the one keeping this barrier intact?"

"I am..." Tessai answered slowly and reluctantly. He knew exactly what Anderson was actually asking him about and he refused to release the barrier no matter what the man did to him, "... and I will not release the Hakudan Keppeki no matter what you may say or do."

Tessai watched as Anderson grew enraged but was saved from whatever the man might have done when Ururu appeared out of nowhere in front of him. Coincidentally holding the purple Scissor

Blade behind her back exactly as Nui Harime was prone to do when she was relaxing Ururu gave Tessai a short bow and said, "Sorry I took so long to get back, Mr. Tessai. Mr. Kurosaki took me out for ice cream and we ran a little late."

"You had ice cream this early in the day?" Tessai hummed in parental disappointment at Ururu's apparent lack of responsible judgment. He was fine with her having ice cream but he knew for a fact that Ururu did not have lunch and having dessert before having a meal was poor dietary judgment. As disappointed as he was Tessai was more focused on the purple Scissor Blade in Ururu's hands, "Where did you get that interesting purple blade, Ururu?"

"Oh, this?" Ururu cocked her head to the side as she held out the purple Scissor Blade in front of her body, "Mr. Kurosaki gave it to me for my birthday."

Tessai did not seem convinced, "It's the middle of October, Ururu. Your birthday was on September 9th."

"I know," Ururu nodded her head and added, "Mr. Kurosaki said that he forgot to get me something for more than a month."

"That does sound like something Isshin would do," Tessai pondered what to do. He may not have liked Ururu having a sharp weapon like the Scissor Blade but Tessai knew she was responsible enough to make sure she never hurt herself or anyone else, "Alright I'll let you keep it for the moment but you should be careful to not run while holding it. I do not want you to poke your eye out or -"

"Nui Harime!"

Gnashing his teeth together as his knuckles bled white from how tightly he was gripping his Tailor Bayonets Anderson stared at Ururu with as much hate as he could muster. He recognized both the purple Scissor Blade as well as the voice of the person claiming to be Ururu as none other than Nui Harime. Reversing his grip on his bayonets Anderson prepared to rush forwards towards Ururu when



he felt a pair of hands grab his wrists before his arms were pulled around his back and he was forced down to his knees.

"I think that's enough out of you," Yoruichi kept a tight grip on Anderson's wrists as she got a good look at Ururu. While she was happy to see Kisuke's daughter as much as anyone else she was more than curious about why Ururu had Nui Harime's purple Scissor Blade. If she took Ururu's explanation to be the truth than Isshin had been the one to take it from the Grand Couturier, which only raised the question of how he did that in the first place. Shaking her head as questions continued to pile up in her mind she turned to the trapped Bazz-B and said, "I think we need to clear some things up. I take it you're not here to kill Ichigo?"

"When did we ever say that?" Bazz-B shouted, sarcasm thick in his voice, but before he could say anything else, and most likely piss Yoruichi off, Lille Barro held an arm in front of his comrade.

"I apologize for Bazz-B's crass demeanor. His aggressive and direct personality tends to lead to misunderstanding," Lille Barro gave Yoruichi a polite nod of his head despite what the Wandenreich thought of shinigami. Enemies they may be but Yoruichi Shihoin was actively working towards Ragyo Kiryuin's defeat, which made them unlikely allies until the battle was over. Shouldering his rifle to show he was sincere about his actions Lille Barro continued, "While it is true we seek Ichigo Kurosaki it is not to kill him. Our leader has deemed Ragyo Kiryuin to be a significant threat. We have been sent to offer Ichigo Kurosaki assistance in stopping her. Will that be a problem?"

"What's going on out here?"

Yoruichi turned around, amber eyes narrowing in surprise, as Ichigo and Ryuko walked out of Kisuke's shop. As he noticed everyone was looking at him, Ichigo sighed and ran a hand down his face, "Do I even want to know what this is all about?"

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As Rei Hououmaru walked into the darkened office she could not help but feel slightly worried about the news she was delivering. While she may be the commander of Xcution as well as Lady Ragyo's personal assistant that did not mean she was exempt from punishment. Rei was still human and thus no matter how much she may strive to better herself she would never be as magnificent as either the Grand Couturier or Lady Ragyo herself.

Taking note of the seven spools of different colored Life Fibers on Ragyo's desk Rei clicked her heels against the floor and adjusted her aviator sunglasses. She could not remember the last time Lady Ragyo brought out her specialized Life Fibers and it could only mean that she was nearly prepared for the events that were to transpire at the Great Culture and Sports Festival, "I apologize for the late update, Ma'am, but we were unable to track Mr. Batou after he escaped from the manor. We did manage to locate the hijacked helicopter in an empty lot approximately fifty-eight miles south of Honnouji Academy but it was rigged to explode if anyone wearing Life Fibers approached it. Eight employees were injured and two killed in the subsequent explosion."

"A pity but nothing we cannot recover from," Ragyo's voice did not have a hint of sadness in it as she absentmindedly played with the spool of green Life Fibers on her desk. The loss of her men was tragic only in the sense that they might have died with valuable information about Batou's current location. She had intended for Batou to escape so that she could track him down once he returned to whatever hole he crawled out from but this setback complicated things. She would need to think of an alternative plan to neutralize Batou and Olivier before they could do anything to interfere with the COVERS invasion.

"Shall I send a team to comb over the wreckage?"

"There would be no point since Olivier was careful to not leave anything behind," Ragyo ran her fingers over the green Life Fibers and sighed sensually at the feeling of the specialized Life Fibers.

Life Fibers in their natural state were always vibrant red and consistently glowed from energy collected after centuries of gestation inside the Original Life Fibers. While they could be artificially tinted different colors it was only in Life Fiber Hybrids and Kamui that Life Fibers adapted a permanently different natural coloring. The Life Fibers in Ichigo, for instance, were a bright blue in color while those dwelling inside Nui and Amu were purple. As she carefully placed the spool of green Life Fibers next to the other six Ragyo rested her cheek on her hand and continued, "While Batou and Olivier may have managed to elude my grasp for the moment it seems their victory was a much a testament to their skills as it was to the lack of security at the manor. Don't you agree, Hououmaru?"

"I do," Rei bowed her head before writing something on the clipboard in her hands. It was anathema that Lady Ragyo's security could have been broken so easily and quickly with the perpetrator able to escape. She personally remembered the ingenuity and skill both Batou and Olivier possessed. While they were more than capable of eventually breaking into the Kiryuin Manor they should not have been able to do it so quickly, "Shall I order Kuroido to be punished for his failure?"

"Yes... but let us hold off on that for the moment, shall we?" Ragyo smirked as an idea came to mind, "Perhaps Kuroido shall manage to redeem himself. Besides, it is not easy to find someone that so willingly wants to be devoured by the Original Life Fiber. It would be a shame to kill him now."

Laughing as she stood up and bathed her office in rainbow light Ragyo stepped towards the massive screen that showed which parts of the world were covered by Life Fibers and sighed in mild disappointment. The darkened areas covering most of Western Europe and most of North America were due to the increasingly militaristic actions of that annoying organization her former husband

created. Ragyo lamented how easy it would have been to destroy Nudist Beach if they were filled with people like Souichiro but not only did that have several of the brightest military minds running the organization from the shadows but they also had a Kamui with a power equivalent to both Junketsu and Mugetsu in their employ. Ragyo had seen the footage Satsuki collected of Danketsu's human fighting Amu and it only helped to increase her desire to hold the Kamui.

As much as Ragyo wished to discover the secrets held within Danketsu's Life Fibers she forced her mind to focus on the matter at hand. The original COVERS invasion was supposed to occur when more than ninety percent of humanity wore Revocs clothing but the various setbacks over the last few weeks had dropped that percentage down to barely above seventy-nine percent. As much as she wished to accelerate her plans for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet Ragyo needed to be cautious and careful. She had already lost two members of Xcution due to underestimating Nudist Beach and a third member to treachery. She could not afford to lose any more due to arrogance. Perhaps it was time to take a page out of Isshin's book.

"Hououmaru, has Satsuki returned to Honnouji Academy?"

Rei nodded, "Yes, Ma'am. She touched down at Honnouji Academy nearly two hours ago."

"Good..." Ragyo closed her eyes and smirked, "And tell me something else... is her little friend still actively monitoring Revocs's servers and satellites?"

Even though she did not understand what Ragyo was leading towards Rei nevertheless nodded her head once more, "Yes but we have managed to isolate most of his programs. Currently he is sifting through several terabytes of junk data in the hopes of discovering something about COVERS."

Ragyo didn't say anything for several seconds before she turned around and sat back down once more. With maroon eyes gazing at the screen, her face glowing with a soft green, she said, "It would be a shame for his persistence to not pay off. I want you to purposely upload a file containing the relative strength of COVERS to Satsuki's Goku Uniforms and make sure that he finds it."

It took Rei a moment to fully understand the breadth of Lady Ragyo's plan but when it hit her she could not help but let out an amazed gasp, "That is truly brilliant, Ma'am. Purposely allowing Satsuki to so easily obtain data on the COVERS will force her to assume it was false."

"And people claim I'm not a good mother," Ragyo sighed wistfully before her mood became more serious, "Satsuki may think her plans and contingencies are brilliant but they will amount to nothing more than temporarily delaying the inevitable. No matter what she may do tomorrow the COVERS will awaken and humanity will be guided towards their true destiny as food for Life Fibers. The one thing I must prepare for is Isshin's arrival at Honnouji Academy during the Great Culture and Sports Festival."

Rei wrote something on the clipboard before asking, "Shall I prepare a proper welcome for him?"

Ragyo chuckled at the rhetorical question before responding, "Anyone other than me would not stand a chance against Isshin. Even the Grand Couturier cannot do anything to him if he were to fight seriously but it was his kidnapping of Amu that has made Isshin the only one to truly set my plans back. The creation of Shinra Koketsu was to begin two years ago but I'm afraid my little Nui cannot do anything without Amu at her side. It is a good thing I have something in play to lure Amu back to her true family."

Rei knew bringing Amu back into Ragyo's grasp would be difficult. Mentally Refitting a hybrid, especially one with equal power to the Grand Couturier, took time and she was certain Isshin would do everything in his power to stop Ragyo, "That is only if Isshin gives

you the opportunity, Ma'am. From his actions it is clear that he knows of Amu's importance in the creation of Shinra Koketsu. Attempting to isolate Amu long enough to bring her back into the fold without drawing Isshin's attention will be difficult."

"That is why I've had the Great Culture and Sports Festival moved to tomorrow," Ragyo mused victoriously as she spoke, "I'm sure Isshin has plans in place to stop me but I'm counting on that. Isshin may seem like a complicated man to most people, Hououmaru, but he is delightfully simple for me to read. The second he sees any sign of COVERS he will come running to Honnouji Academy."

"Gosh, everyone seems to be talking about who's coming to Satsuki's festival. Who cares if that annoying old goat shows up?" Ragyo closed her eyes and smirked as Nui Harime appeared on the edge of her desk to her left. With her feet kicking playfully in the air Nui stuck out her tongue and said with an excited tone to her voice, "What's really interesting is that Ichigo is going to be there! I can't wait to see him and catch up on everything I missed!"

While Rei bowed her head respectfully to the Grand Couturier's arrival Ragyo simply gave Nui a bemused look, "Is Ichigo the only one you truly wish to see? Has your interest in Matoi's daughter vanished now that your left eye is restored once more?"

"Gee, nothing gets by you, Lady Ragyo!" Nui clasped her hands behind her back and puffed out her cheeks reminiscent of a child. With her eye healed and her body restored to perfection Nui had no vested interest in doing anything to Ryuko, which meant Matoi's daughter can go die in a fire for all she cared, "But I'm not interested in speaking to Ryuko! She's really boring and even with that ugly Kamui she doesn't know how to have fun. I mean, she lost control after I killed only one human. Ichigo and Satsuki would have surely lasted through a least a dozen."

"Say what you will but Matoi's daughter continues to interest me," Ragyo tapped her finger on her desk and the screen in front of her shifted from the map of the world to various clips from Ryuko's fight

against Junketsu earlier in the day. As her maroon eyes widened in interest at Ryuko's increasing power Ragyo continued, "A normal human might be able to wear a Kamui without being devoured but one that can access advanced configurations is truly remarkable. After all, Satsuki could only use Zenkan due to Ichigo's Life Fibers coursing through Junketsu."

Nui cocked her head to the side as she watched enraptured when the digital image of Ryuko shifted Senketsu between Senkou and Shippu without much effort as she fought Satsuki and then Junketsu. Smiling as she watched Junketsu nearly kill Ryuko with Bakuzan Nui's sapphire eyes noticed the seven spools of Life Fibers on the desk and wondered why Lady Ragyo would decide to use them. Blinking and dragging her gaze back to the screen Nui rested her chin on the palm of a hand and nodded her head, "I wish I could have seen Zenkan with my own eyes, Lady Ragyo. The pictures you showed me of Junketsu were really beautiful, you know."

"You always know what to say, my precious Nui," Ragyo reminisced on the first time she wore Junketsu and the way the infant Kamui had tried everything to please her. As much as Ragyo had adored the feeling of being worn by Junketsu it was the interested stares Isshin that had so desperately tried to hide which she remembered most of all, "Junketsu is truly beautiful. It is a shame that Satsuki is forcing her to be worn. Such a wondrous piece of clothing cannot truly be worn by humans."

"That's why I can't wait to see you wear Junketsu!" Nui's smiled broadened as she tucked her knees up and lay on her stomach while lazily kicking her feet in the air, "It would be bad of someone were to crash the big event tomorrow. Do you want me to go finish off Ryuko, Lady Ragyo?"

"Hmm..." Ragyo's eyes narrowed as she appeared to notice something before she dismissed it with a wave of her hand. As the screen turned dark with a momentary blaze of static Ragyo turned around and stared at Nui, "I know how much you wish to please me

but Matoi's daughter is to be left alone for the moment. I wish to see Senketsu with my own eyes so that I may judge its aesthetic beauty."

"Aw," Nui pouted momentarily before perking up, "Alright, Lady Ragyo! There are lots of other things I can do to have fun before tomorrow!"

"Have as much fun as you like," Ragyo stood up and began walking towards the doors to her office. As a bright rainbow light filtered into the room from outside and caused even the normally immune Nui to squint her eyes Ragyo looked over her shoulder and said, "I expect you to dress yourself appropriately for the festival tomorrow. Amu will most likely be there. It would be rude for her sister to not look her best, don't you agree?"

"Yep!"

Nui had a wide smile on her face as Ragyo and Rei left to go prepare for the Great Culture and Sports Festival but as soon as she was alone it was quickly replaced by a look of mild irritation and annoyance. As her normally light sapphire eyes shifted to a darker blue Nui sat up before tucking her knees to her chest, "How could Amu hurt me? It should have been impossible without the Scissor Blades and yet she could do it. Why?"

Hopping off the desk while landing perfectly on the floor Nui took a moment to fix her pink dress as she began trying to think of a reason how Amu was able to hurt her. Due to recent events Nui had been far too busy to think about such things but now she couldn't keep her mind from continuously wandering back to it. Walking back and forth across Ragyo's office with her cheek puffed outwards Nui tried thinking of a reason but gave up after several minutes of fruitless effort.

Sitting down in Ragyo's chair and tucking in her legs Nui huffed and said, "I won't be hurt a second time. I'll just make sure to hurt Amu before she can hurt me."



As memories of nearly being defeated coursed through her mind Nui stared in annoyance at the Life Fiber spools on the desk, the collective rainbow light illuminating her face, as she switched topics and attempted to figure out her most recent annoyance - how Isshin was able to steal her Scissor Blade.

After several minutes with nothing to show for it Nui gave into temptation and once again reached into her pink Lolita dress and pulled out the letter that had been left behind for her. She had originally wanted to toss it out Satsuki's helicopter but for some reason she had decided to keep it. Lady Ragyo always talked about Isshin's cunning and intelligence so Nui kept it in case he had left a secret message for her. Reading over it once more and finding nothing Nui was just about to toss it into the trash when something in the deepest recesses of her mind stopped her hand once more.

"Humph," Nui tucked the letter back into her dress and stood up. Once she was certain her hair and dress were both prim and proper with not a speck of dust on them Nui began skipping towards the door to Ragyo's office, "Who even cares about what Mr. Kurosaki wrote in his letter anyway? I'm much more interested in Ichigo and Mugetsu!"

She could not wait to meet up with him and find out how much stronger he's gotten but Nui reminded herself that she needed to be careful. Ichigo was strong enough on his own but with Mugetsu's power he could very well manage to surprise her. He was already fast enough to hit her when her attention was on other things, as their first fight demonstrated. As long as she fought seriously Nui was confident she could avoid everything Ichigo threw at her.

"Gee, it's such a shame I won't be able to relax and enjoy myself tomorrow," Nui mused sagely to herself as she stepped into the elevator and began humming to the music playing on the speaker, "But I suppose that's a good thing! After all, it would be really bad if Ichigo's power surprised me and I lost an arm or something! That would really ruin my day!"

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The smell of chilled sake permeated the air of the Student Council chambers as Soroi Mitsuzou calmly and carefully poured the alcoholic beverage into six saucer-like cups. As his careful and practiced hands failed to spill even a single drop of the expensive liquid Soroi's darkened eyes drooped as he recalled the expression on Satsuki's face upon departing from the Kiryuin Manor not several hours ago. While Satsuki's abstruse personality may manage to fool even her closest comrades Soroi had always been able to tell what she actually thought. Thirteen years of raising her from a sweet girl into an independent and confident young woman allowed Soroi to pierce the veil Satsuki placed on her emotions and feelings. The anger and hatred she felt for her mother as they departed for Honnouji Academy had been as transparent as the sake in his hands.

Satsuki Kiryuin calmly watched Soroi pour the sake, her eyes focusing on the clear liquid, before she let out a placid sigh and turned her attention back to her Elite Four and Iori, "Have all preparations to welcome my mother been completed?"

"Yes, Lady Satsuki," Nonon Jakuzure gave a curt bow in order to not antagonize her wounds any further than she already had, "The Ragyo Stadium is ready for the Great Culture and Sports Festival."

Satsuki gave Nonon an appreciative nod before shifting her attention to Gamagori, "Have you finished allocating the ceremonial dress uniforms?"

"As of ninety minutes ago the last batches of uniforms were handed out to the families of the No-Star students," Gamagori clasped his hands together behind his back as he stood at attention. Unlike the rest of the Elite Four, who sported wounds and bandages signifying their hard fought battles in Karakura Town, Gamagori had come out of his fight with Yasutora Sado with relatively negligible injuries, "There were several complaints from Mankanshoku's family about

their daughter's whereabouts but I managed to placate their concerns with promises of free catering tomorrow."

"I've been keeping an eye on the naked apes but so far I've seen no sign of large scale mobilization," Inumuta answered loudly but his voice came out heavily muffled so with an exasperated look in his eyes reached up and manually unzipped the collar of his Probe Regalia. The damage to his Goku Uniform had been quite severe even though he managed to escape the concurrent blasts with only a few minor injuries. Until Iori had a chance to patch up his Probe Regalia Inumuta was unable to either activate it or automatically unzip his collar whenever he wanted to speak.

Known to only those currently in the Student Council chambers was the knowledge that Satsuki was counting on Nudist Beach to appear at the Great Culture and Sports Festival. Even if her final conversation with Ichigo before the School Raid Trip had been less than amicable Satsuki knew with absolute certainty that he was aware of the dangers her mother posed. Their methods on dealing with her mother may differ but Satsuki was confident Ichigo would see no other choice but to inform Nudist Beach of her true motives and thus allow the organization to assist her with little difficulty.

"Your sake is ready, Milady."

"Thank you, Soroi," Satsuki picked up one of the saucers on the sterling silver tray in Soroi's hand and allowed the sake's aroma to fill her mind. She was never one to imbibe in alcohol. It was the drink of those unable to control their minds and impulses, after all, but this was a special occasion. Tomorrow at the Great Culture and Sports Festival she would finally rid the world of the monster disguised as her mother. Forcing her mind to bury the memories of what only three people in the world were aware of Satsuki waited until Sanageyama picked up his sake before speaking.

"Tonight we stand on the precipice of change," Satsuki's voice was even and confident as she raised the saucer of sake above her head, "The failure to subjugate Karakura Town is indeed tragic but it

shall help us herald in a new world. Let this be a toast to the success of the Great Culture and Sports Festival!"

As a collective shout of 'Ma'am' reached her ears Satsuki tilted her head back and drank the sake in a single swallow. Ignoring the burning sensation in her throat from the alcoholic liquid Satsuki's blue eyes stared at her hazy reflection in the ceramic saucer before tossing it to the ground where it shattered into myriads of shards and pieces. As the sound of ceramic shattering against the floor sounded several more times Satsuki steeled her expression, "Let me give you all one final parting message. It is highly likely that my mother is a Life Fiber Hybrid of equal or greater power to Nui Harime and Ichigo."

Satsuki ignored the mixture of surprise and astonishment as she turned on her heels and made her way towards the nearby wall. As she pressed her thumb against a junction in the mahogany paneling until she heard two consecutive beeps Satsuki could not dissuade herself from the notion that relying on what lay inside the safe was admitting she would fail. The plan that her five year old mind had concocted and was subsequently revised and edited over the last thirteen years had always ended the same way - her mother impaled with her head removed. Not once in all those years had that wavered or changed. She had wanted her victory over her mother to be absolute. Relying on something like this, even if it did lead to her mother's death, left a bitter taste in Satsuki's mouth.

Staring at the silver case in her hands, the metal still lustrous even after all this time, Satsuki turned around and carefully placed it on a table Soroi hastily set up. Undoing the two latches with barely any effort Satsuki opened the case and brought out a device that was nearly the same size as her hand. Holding the dark green object aloft in the air, both the physical and metaphorical weight of the object apparent to all those present, Satsuki lowered her eyes towards her Elite Four and said, "This is a specially modified M34 Grenade designed to burn at nearly 6,000 degrees Kelvin. If I have learned

anything from Ichigo and Matoi it is that only fools assume guaranteed victory!"

After allowing her Elite Four and Iori to take one of the five grenades, including the one held in her hand, Satsuki slammed Bakuzan's scabbard against the floor with a reverberating echo and raised her voice, "If the worst comes to pass and I am unable to deal the finishing blow to my mother I am relying on you, my chosen few, to finish the job that I started! My mother may be a hybrid but not even she can survive the temperature of the surface of the sun!"

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Ryuko watched the moisture in her breath dissipate into the air as the last traces of sunlight disappeared from Karakura Town. As the unreasonably warm day quickly gave way to night, a brisk and crisp wind kicking up as the temperature dropped, Ryuko was thankful that Senketsu somehow managed to keep her warm. Ryuko didn't understand how it was possible but her Kamui prevented her from feeling the cold already seeping into the city. Subconsciously rubbing her hands together before crossing them across her chest, Ryuko tilted her head upwards and stared at the stars beginning to twinkle in the darkening sky, "Do you think they were lying to us?"

Ichigo's hands curled into fists inside Mugetsu's pockets as he contemplated the Sternritter's message. The man who introduced himself as Bazz-B claimed they were there to help take down Ragyo Kiryuin but Ichigo had been hesitant to accept the Quincy's offer. He didn't get to where he was in life by blindly trusting people and Uryu's frozen reaction upon seeing the Sternritter told Ichigo there was a lot more going on than he could see, "I don't know. They may want to take down Ragyo Kiryuin but they were holding something back. Uryu seemed to know who they were but that bastard vanished hours ago."

Ryuko locked her fingers together against the nape of her neck and watched the florescent lamps lining the street flicker to life, "I don't trust those guys but if Ragyo Kiryuin is really as strong as everyone says we can use all the help we can get."

"I still want to know how Uryu knew them," Ichigo muttered deep in thought before stopping and looking around.

The damage to the city from Satsuki's attack was extensive but it took him only a second to recognize his location. Crossing the rubble-filled streets without saying a word, Ichigo ignored Ryuko's confused shouts as he saw the shattered flower vase scattered along the sidewalk next to a particular street light. Kneeling down and carefully pulling the intact flowers from the shards of jagged glass Ichigo reached over and gently placed the flowers back against the light. It wasn't the same as the vase but Ichigo knew the spirit of the young girl would appreciate it. As the memory of Quilge Opie's cryptic answer came to mind Ichigo glanced down the street but lowered his gaze when he saw nothing but the encroaching darkness of the night.

***" Who are you looking for?"***

"There was a young girl that died here a few years ago. I used to leave her flowers," Ichigo muttered to his Kamui as he stood back up and dusted Mugetsu off. As the flowers gently blew in the cold air, his gaze tightening as they quickly fell back onto the ground, Ichigo let out a defeated sigh before running a hand through his hair.

***" Did you know her?"***

Ichigo didn't miss the curious tone in Mugetsu's voice. As he heard the Ryuko crossing the street after him, her sneakers echoing loudly in the eerily quiet neighborhood, Ichigo placed his hands back in his pockets and waited for her to finish crossing before answering his Kamui's question, "A couple years ago there was a major accident. A lot of people were hurt but only one person, a young girl, actually died. I didn't really pay attention at the time but a few weeks later I

noticed her soul wandering around the street. I didn't know anything about shinigami back then so I thought I could help her pass over if I talked to her and left her flowers."

Ryuko's eyes fell down onto the flowers scattering in the wind, "So these are your flowers?"

"No. Someone else must have continued leaving them for her after I left for Honnouji Academy," Ichigo shook his head and looked around one last time for the young girl's soul. When he couldn't see any trace of her Ichigo craned his head up and stared at the night sky, "I became pretty famous in town for being the orange haired punk that could see the dead. I can't remember the number of times I beat up inconsiderate assholes who disturbed memorials like this one."

"That's something I would pay to see," Ryuko said between chuckles of amusement.

Glancing up as the street light as it flickered briefly before resuming illuminating the street in a fierce yellow glow Ryuko realized that it was getting quite late. The Great Culture and Sports Festival was supposed to start at nine in the morning and while Karakura Town was less than an hour's drive from Honnouji Academy simply driving there would be too easy. Clapping her hands together, the Seki Tekko muffling the sound, Ryuko gently slapped Ichigo's arm to get his attention, "It's getting late. We should probably get back to your house."

Ichigo scowled as he thought of what awaited when they got back. Rubbing the bridge of his nose and letting out an aggravated sigh he said, "If my dad asks one more time if you're my girlfriend I swear I'm going to kill him."

Ryuko grinned as she listened to Ichigo complain about his dad's childish and idiotic behavior. Despite his more outlandish behavior she found Isshin Kurosaki very funny, "So what if he says I'm your girlfriend? As long as it's not true it shouldn't be a problem, right?"

"You don't understand how my dad thinks," Ichigo stared at Ryuko with a haunted look in his eyes. This was not the first time his dad had tried something like this and if he didn't deal with it now there would be hell to pay in the near future, "If we don't stop him now he's going to tell everyone he knows we're dating."

"I still don't see a problem with it," Ryuko said as they walked past an overturned car, the metal chassis cracked and deformed from the earlier battle. Rolling her eyes at Ichigo's blank stare, pointedly ignoring the scathing look he was giving her, Ryuko began tapping her fingers against her forearm, "Hey Ichigo... do you think Nui Harime will be at the festival tomorrow?"

"Probably," Ichigo answered with a small shrug of his shoulders.

Ryuko looked away from Ichigo as she was reminded of the anger and despair she felt when Nui Harime plunged the purple Scissor Blade through Mako's heart. As she remembered the final moments of her father, blood pooling on the floor next to his dying body as he desperately tried to tell her something, Ryuko clenched a fist in anger. Nui Harime needed to pay for everyone she hurt but Ryuko doubted she could do it, "Am I strong enough to kill Nui Harime?"

Ichigo's face scrunched up in thought for a moment before answering, "That's a difficult question. Are you strong enough to hit Nui Harime? I would have to say yes but she'll probably just regenerate from the damage."

"Damn it! I forgot she was a Life Fiber Hybrid," Ryuko angrily folded her arms across her chest and kicked at a rock on the sidewalk. As she listened to the rock skip across the pavement several times before hitting a car accompanied by a reverberating echo Ryuko huffed in anger. Ururu had claimed that her father had been the one to tear out Nui's eye but Ryuko had no idea how he could have done that. Pulling the miniaturized Scissor Blade out of the pouch attached to Senketsu and expanding it back to its full size with a simple flick of her wrist Ryuko stopped walking and stared at her reflection on the



permanently polished red metal, "Ichigo, why isn't Senketsu's strength enough?"

Two and half pairs of eyes looked at Ryuko but it was her Kamui that spoke, ***"Is something bothering you, Ryuko?"***

As Senketsu attempted to calm her down Ryuko ran a hand through her hair and sighed, "It's just that... I've lost every major fight since I put you on, Senketsu. Ichigo had to save us from Satsuki when I was too embarrassed to wear you and a few weeks later I lost control of my anger at Nui Harime. I would have died if Orihime hadn't been there to save Mako." Ryuko's voice quieted into a whisper as she turned her back to Ichigo and looked at the ground, "I would have died today if Armstrong and Jakuzure hadn't distracted Junketsu. It just feels that nothing I ever do is good enough."

***"Ryuko..."*** Senketsu's voice quivered as the Kamui tried to think of something he could say to cheer her up.

Ichigo rubbed the back of his neck as he fumbled for the right words. He could relate, perhaps better than most people, to Ryuko's plight. As Ichigo recalled lying in a pool of his own blood while Byakuya and Renji took Rukia back to the Soul Society despite his best efforts to stop them he steeled himself and said, "Ryuko... sometimes you fail when it counts but that just means you get back up and keep on trying. You're not alone, Ryuko, you have Mako, Ururu and me to help you."

When Ichigo saw Ryuko's shoulders relax he thought his advice must have gotten to her. He had never been good with sappy advice like that. Usually when he had a problem he forced himself to work past it. That was why he was caught off guard when Ryuko turned around towards him, an annoyed scowl on her face, and jabbed her finger at his chest, "That was really stupid advice Ichigo."

Ichigo flinched back, shocked by Ryuko's response, before he quickly recovered. With his own angry scowl forming on his face

Ichigo leaned forward and shouted, "What exactly was wrong with my advice?"

"It was really good advice but it's just really weird coming from you!" Ryuko huffed and turned away from an astonished Ichigo. As she began tapping her red Scissor Blade against the sidewalk out of annoyance Ryuko remembered that she needed to ask Ururu about the purple Scissor blade. Ryuko didn't know how Ururu managed to steal the other blade from Nui Harime but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

As his eyebrow began twitching, a telltale sign that he was becoming increasingly annoyed with the entire situation, Ichigo growled, "What do you mean it was weird?"

"I expected you to say I needed to get stronger or something!" Ryuko bit out and leaned forward until she was almost in Ichigo's face. Jabbing her finger into his chest once more, this time with enough force that Mugetsu began complaining about stretching her Life Fibers, Ryuko narrowed her eyes and glared at Ichigo, "You should know that I'm not the kind of person that likes sappy advice, Ichigo! If you wanted to make me feel better, you should have tried to complain about how weak I was."

"Why the hell would something like that work on you?" Ichigo countered back angrily. He would never admit, least of all to Ryuko, that he only decided on the 'sappy advice' because it felt more personal. Usually Ichigo would use his normally heavy-handed advice when dealing with a situation like this but he hadn't thought it was appropriate for Ryuko. He had heard the pain in her voice and had figured a more delicate touch would be better. Ichigo wasn't about to make that mistake again.

" ***You're being inconsiderate, Ryuko,***" Senketsu, unlike his wearer, thought that Ichigo's advice was most sound. In the days after he first forced her to wear him Ryuko had been embarrassed by his released configuration. He tried giving her advice, if advice could be called telling Ryuko to not be embarrassed to wear him, but she had

required nearly dying to Satsuki Kiryuin and Junketsu for the advice to be beaten into her skull, ***"I tried giving you similar advice about wearing me. You ignored me then and look how that turned out..."***

"Whose side are you on, anyway?" Ryuko glared at Senketsu, who returned the accusatory stare with his single eye, before scoffing. Placing her hands on her hips, the red Scissor Blade safely jammed into the sidewalk next to her, Ryuko motioned with her head to Ichigo, "Besides, I thought after all this time Ichigo would know exactly how I felt about things!"

Ichigo opened his mouth to speak but was beaten to the punch by Senketsu. Staring at his wearer with a knowing gaze in his eye Senketsu asked, ***"And just HOW was he supposed to know?"***

"Well... I-I thought he would just know," Ichigo was shocked into silence as he saw Ryuko actually blushing. He stood with his mouth slightly agape as Ryuko shifted from angry and pissed off to blushing in embarrassment in less than a minute. At least it looked like she was blushing from what Senketsu said. When Ryuko blinked owlishly and noticed both Ichigo's flabbergasted expression and Mugetsu's extremely surprised look she quickly scowled and turned away, "T-The point is you should have known what I needed to hear, Ichigo. You're my friend so something like that should be simple to you!"

It took Ichigo's mind a moment to process Ryuko's answer. As the anger and frustration bled from his mind until he was simply feeling greatly confused Ichigo closed his eyes, mentally counted to five, and asked, "How does that make any sense? It's not like I can read your mind."

"You're still the best friend I have besides Mako!" Ryuko countered with frustration tinging her voice, "And she always knows what I'm thinking whether I want her to or not!"

Mako's apparent telepathy notwithstanding Ichigo begrudgingly admitted that Ryuko had a point. After two months of hanging out,

talking and generally doing their best to piss off Satsuki Kiryuin he should have realized Ryuko wasn't someone that needed a soft touch. In hindsight he probably should have taken a page out of his dad's book and simply smacked Ryuko on the head until she was too annoyed at him to worry about her problems, "Ignoring Mako's ability to read your mind for the moment I still don't see how -"

Ichigo paused when the nearby box hedges started rustling. At first assuming it to be nothing more than the wind Ichigo strained his ears when he distinctively heard the sound of someone whispering from inside it. Closing his eyes as a familiar feeling of annoyance grew in his mind Ichigo turned to face the hedges, "I know you're in there, Kon. Get out here before I tear the stuffing from your body. You have until the count of three."

"Screw counting! That stuffed pervert is going to die!"

As much as she hated the modsoul Ryuko was secretly thankful that he showed up before things became even more awkward for her. It wasn't going to change what she would do to him though. Tearing the red Scissor Blade out of the sidewalk before sprinting across the street towards the hedges, a slightly psychotic grin adorning her face, Ryuko was just about to run in swinging when a high pitched and distinctive feminine voice shouted, "Wait!"

Skidding to a stop, nearly tripping over her feet in the process, Ryuko stared incredulously as a bird plushie around the same size as Kon wearing a hooded blue coat with a red bow tie hopped out of the hedges and landed on a nearby wall. Ryuko blinked slowly, her head cocked slightly to the side as her mind tried to understand what it was seeing, as the plushie brushed down her fake feathers before twisting around and pointing an accusing hand at her, "Just who do you think you are? Attacking a poor defenseless plushie is grounds for arrest, you know!"

Ryuko watched the bird plushie walk across the wall, her miniature blue boots squeaking with every step she took. As the plushie gave

her what could only be a scathing look Ryuko rubbed one hand against the back of her neck, "Um... I'm sorry for attacking you?"

" ***Why are you apologizing?***" Senketsu gave a mental huff as he shifted his attention from the plushie to Ryuko, "***That thing was hiding from us so it must be up to no good. Also, I can sense Life Fibers inside it.***"

Upon hearing Senketsu's voice the plushie immediately jumped back and nearly fell off the wall. After regaining her balance she pointed with one arm at Senketsu and shouted, "Did that uniform just talk?!"

" ***Yes. I did,***" Senketsu didn't appreciate being talked down to like that, "***And I have a name - Senketsu. That was quite rude of you.***"

"Well, I'm not going to apologize for being scared!" The plushie gave an indignant scoff as she hopped off the wall and landed gracefully on the ground. Turning towards Ryuko and Ichigo, who had come over as soon as he saw what could only be another modsoul, she spun around before giving them a polite bow, "Allow me to introduce myself! My name is Ririn and I carry the title of Seiryu of the East!"

"You're a modsoul," Ichigo pointed out before closing and rubbing his eyes to stave off a headache. When that failed to work he groaned and asked, "Did my dad send you here?"

"How did you know - I mean yes," Ririn's feathers actually seemed ruffled. After taking a moment to straighten them while adjusting her blue hooded coat, Ririn turned and began walking away, "Mr. Kurosaki sent me here to come get you guys. He said it was getting late and was worried you two were up to no good and it was a good thing I showed up! Who knows what two young and impressionable teenagers could have done if I hadn't been following the entire time?"

" ***Ichigo, can we please kill her?***" Mugetsu's voice was full of venom as she glared at Ririn, who straightened with a start and

began running away in the direction of his house.

"Well, I guess my dad is looking for us. This is why you have to knock sense into him before it's too late," Ichigo groaned tiredly to Ryuko as they began the relatively short trek back to his house.

With a mischievous grin on her face Ryuko chuckled and said, "I still don't see a problem with it."

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Satsuki Kiryuin watched the residents of Honnou City eat their exquisitely prepared meals with a passive expression. With the sounds of the festivities drifting up from the ground below, the Marching Band Club working to bring the Great Culture and Sports Festival as close to perfection as possible, Satsuki briefly wondered where Ichigo and Matoi were before squashing such thoughts before they could devolve into unnecessary worry. She was more than confident they would show up. After all, Satsuki knew from personal experience that Ichigo would never allow her mother to succeed.

When Inumuta gave her a curt nod, signaling it was time for the festival to truly begin, Satsuki felt a pang of guilt over what she was about to do. As Ichigo's words from before the School Raid Trip were brought to mind, causing her to look down into Junketsu's eyes, Satsuki began walking towards the podium, her heels clicking against the polished surface, while the sounds from the crowd died down until she could hear nary a sound apart from her own footsteps.

Taking one last step as she reached the podium, Satsuki slammed Bakuzan's hilt against the ground in front of her as a backdrop of white light tinged with blue shone throughout the stadium. As her eyes drifted across the crowd Satsuki took a deep breath and scowled, "Citizens of Honnou City! This is the moment you have been waiting all this time for! Now stand on your feet and respectfully

welcome Honnouji Academy's founder and director of the school board - Ragyo Kiryuin!"

The moment Satsuki announced her mother's name every source of lighting and illumination in the stadium was overpowered and replaced by an even fiercer rainbow light as Ragyo Kiryuin threw open the doors leading from Honnouji Academy into the stadium. With Rei Hououmaru standing silently at her right, the wide aviator glasses she wore preventing her from being blinded from the rainbow light shining forth from Ragyo's silver hair currently styled into twin horns, Ragyo looked over the gathered crowd of humans eagerly clapping for her and smirked, "Shall we go greet them, Hououmaru?"

As her heels, hidden by her extremely form-fitting pure white dress that ended just about the ground, clicked across the runway Ragyo allowed a pleasant smile to adorn her face. She had originally intended to wear something more flamboyant and exotic for the festival. It was, after all, the day of Satsuki's coup and Ragyo wanted to make sure her daughter felt special one final time before all her plans went to ruins but remembering that Isshin would undoubtedly show up caused her to change her mind. She needed to look her best for Isshin and what better way was there to express her adoration than wearing the first dress Isshin ever gave her?

Walking past Satsuki's prostrating Elite Four, their faces pointed down to the ground with their right arm held diagonally across their chests, Ragyo glanced at Inumuta with a sly smirk on her face, "Tell me, are you still hacking into government servers?"

"You don't need to worry about that. Such petty indulgences are now far beneath me," Ragyo did not miss the slight hint of condescension in Inumuta's voice. He truly believed she was unaware of his forays into the Revocs mainframe over the last few years.

"Do I now?" Ragyo's stride didn't falter as she passed Inumuta. Turning her maroon eyes one final time to him she said, "That's quite

the pity. I was looking forward to personally meeting the person who keeps hacking into Revocs."

Ragyo's smile widened imperceptibly as she sensed Inumuta's shocked and worried expression. It had been quite arrogant of the 'former' hacker to assume the CEO of the conglomerate he continuously broke into hadn't been able to trace the connection back to Honnouji Academy.

As she reached the podium, Satsuki bowing her head and stepping to the side, Ragyo subtly glanced upwards and sighed contently at what she saw. Sitting on the wall of the stadium, her legs kicking in the air and with a happy smile on her face, was Nui Harime. When they left for Honnouji Academy the Grand Couturier had professed a desire to stick to the shadows and wait for Ichigo and the others to come. At first Ragyo had been slightly disappointed that Nui didn't want to be by her side but the Kiryuin Matriarch could see the logic in the Grand Couturier's words. When Isshin brought help, and Ragyo knew the man would bring everything he could to stop her, she needed enough of a warning to allow the pieces to fall into place.

Offering a knowing smirk to Nui, who clapped her hands together and beamed happily, Ragyo shifted her gaze to the quiet crowd, "Ladies and gentlemen! Let me ask you a simple question - what is this world?"

Ragyo listened to the faint mumbling from the crowd of humans with derision. Stretching her arms out to the side, the rainbow light shining from her body growing brighter by the second, Ragyo grinned maliciously as she answered for them, "The answer is clothing! Life Fibers are the true rulers of the world and I, Ragyo Kiryuin, am one of the few who carry out their will! This academy was created to herald this day! The weak and worthless among you will serve as the foundation for everything to come!"

Rei Hououmaru perked up as a voice crackled over her earpiece. Turning her head slightly to the side in order to better hear them, Rei's eyes widened upon receiving the news. Turning her attention



up to Nui Harime, who was staring at something outside of the stadium with an increasingly giddy look on her face, Rei whispered to Ragyo, "I've just received word that the nudists have entered the outskirts of the city. They shall be here in five minutes."

Ragyo's eyes widened mirthfully. Everything was starting to finally come together. If the nudists were here then that meant Isshin and Ichigo couldn't be far behind. Now that the final pieces were in place all she needed to do was sit back and wait. Stepping forward and holding her hand over the heart-shaped podium with a single button on it, Ragyo's grin widened at what she was about to do. Casting her gaze up at the crowd, unwilling to miss even a moment of their terror as they realized what their lives actually amounted to, Ragyo pressed her thumb down on the button after exclaiming, "Let the celebration commence!"

A cacophony of terror-filled screams and shouts reached Ragyo as the Life Fibers in every human's uniform heeded her call and began absorbing their wearer. As the throngs of vibrant colors in the stadium were replaced by cocoons of glowing red Life Fibers Ragyo stared up into the sky and closed her eyes. This silence, the wonderful lack of sounds that humanity spewed every waking minute of the day, was what Ragyo dreamt of ever since she and Isshin first made contact with the Original Life Fiber.

Taking a deep breath, memorizing the feeling of humanity's fate finally being realized, Ragyo opened her maroon eyes and sighed happily, "This is what I've been waiting for. The fate of humanity is at hand and nothing shall remain in this world but the tranquility possessed by Life Fibers."

"The experiment is a success, Lady Ragyo. No abnormalities have been detected," Rei Hououmaru pulled out her PDA and began going over the data from the various Revocs machines and sensors stationed around the stadium. She had the utmost confidence in the experiment but Rei knew Ragyo expected nothing but perfection. If a mistake or error was found Rei vowed to correct it before the rest of humanity was consumed by Life Fibers.

"Wonderful, Hououmaru," Ragyo turned around towards her daughter. Gazing into Satsuki's stoic expression, her stormy blue eyes betraying not a hint of her true emotions, Ragyo leaned her cheek against her hand as her hearing, enhanced leagues behind that of a human's, heard the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching them. It seemed like the guests of honor were finally arrived. Ignoring the barest twitch of Satsuki's hand towards Bakuzan, Ragyo took a single step forward and abruptly raised her hand before catching the spiritual energy bullet fired by Lille Barro.

"Impossible!"

Perched on the top of Honnouji Academy, the end of his spiritual rifle smoking from the bullet it just fired, Lille Barro began sweating nervously as his right eye widened in astonishment. The Sternritter could not believe what he was seeing. Ragyo hadn't even turned to look at him before stopping his bullet. After watching Isshin Kurosaki accomplish an identical feat yesterday he knew Ragyo Kiryuin would be tough to damage. He had assumed Ragyo's resistance to damage was dependent on seeing the attack coming. Therefore if he could snipe her from far enough away she wouldn't have a chance to block or dodge. The bullet of spiritual energy current crushed in Ragyo's hand disproved that theory entirely.

"Oh, what is this?"

Ragyo turned to face Lille Barro, the Sternritter pushing his body off the ground in preparation for anything to come. Noticing Satsuki and her Elite Four following her gaze, their attentions focused on the man that just tried to assassinate her, Ragyo recognized quite well the energy in the bullet. It was nearly identical to the arrows Masaki had tried to kill her with more than seventeen years ago. Chuckling menacingly and taking a step forward, her eyes widening in glee as Lille Barro flinched backwards, Ragyo said, "You must be a Quincy. How amusing. I was wondering when you people would stop scurrying around in the shadows."

Raising and pointing her hand at Lille Barro, a malevolent look on her face, Ragyo smirked when the Sternritter wisely decided to retreat using Hirenkyaku. Slightly interested in the familiar technique, Ragyo nevertheless saw that the Sternritter's usage of it was not nearly as effective as Masaki's. She watched Lille Barro flee across the stadium in agonizingly slow motion, his every step as clear as day to her, before turning away in boredom. If she truly wished to kill the Quincy it would be as simple as stabbing her hand into his chest. Looking with maroon eyes down at the stadium below, Ragyo watched Ichigo and Ryuko race into the stadium as one of the locked student entrances exploded in a cloud of dust and energy.

"Interesting..."

Ragyo folded her arms under her bosom and looked at Ichigo with what could pass for a motherly expression. Staring into his brown eyes, which betrayed his emotions and feelings as easily as reading a book, Ragyo realized her daughter must have confessed her past to Ichigo, which was a pity. Unlike Satsuki, who was an absolute failure, Ragyo saw Ichigo as a son. If Satsuki managed to corrupt Ichigo's opinion of her, Ragyo vowed to make sure her daughter saw the error of her ways. Cocking her head to the side Ragyo watched as Lille Barro appeared next to the group and smirked, "It's good to see you again, Ichigo. Have you enjoyed your time at Honnouji Academy?"

The tightening of Ichigo's glare was all the answer Ragyo needed. Mentally sighing upon realizing things were going to be a bit more difficult than she originally thought Ragyo took a moment to look at the rest of Ichigo's group. There were three other people dressed similarly to the Quincy that believed he was strong enough to hurt her. From the nervous expressions on their faces as she locked eyes with them Ragyo grinned as she saw realization hit their eyes. Shifting her gaze past Ryuken's son and Yasutora Sado, both of whom played a large part in defeating her daughter's assault on Karakura Town, Ragyo noticed Amu standing in the back of the group. What intrigued Ragyo, her hands clenching into fists as a

mental attempt to hold in her excitement, was noticing Amu holding the purple Scissor Blade.

*" So Isshin gave Amu her sister's Scissor Blade. That is just like him."*

Ragyo smirked when she saw Ururu tense under her gaze. She didn't see anything wrong with her daughter keeping the purple Scissor Blade for the moment. Focusing her attention on the last of Ichigo's group, Ragyo rested her cheek upon one hand and cocked her head slightly to the side, "I suppose you must be Ryuko Matoi."

"I know who you are! Ragyo Kiryuin!" In one fluid motion Ryuko looped her finger around the red Scissor Blade in the pouch on her waist. Flicking her wrist, the Life Fiber blade expanding to its natural size in less than a second, Ryuko pointed it up at the Kiryuin Matriarch. She had seen the Life Fiber cocoons throughout the stadium and while she wanted nothing more than to attack and kill Ragyo Kiryuin for daring to harm Mako's family Ryuko needed to keep her calm. Ragyo was strong, she could feel it. Attacking without a plan would be the same as losing her cool against Nui Harime. Gnashing her teeth together, growling upon seeing Ragyo's condescending expression, Ryuko shouted, "Turn everyone back to normal!"

"Oh my," Ragyo quirked one silver eyebrow at Ryuko's rude and crass behavior, "Such rudeness is unbecoming of the daughter of Professor Matoi. Did your father ever teach you manners?"

Ryuko's blue eyes tightened in rage, "What the fuck did you just say?"

Ragyo ignored Ryuko's nearly palpable rage in order to focus her attention on Senketsu. As much as she loathed the mere thought, her late husband had managed to create a true Kamui. Trailing her eyes across Senketsu, every stitched and woven Life Fiber open for her to see, Ragyo was delighted when the Kamui began shivering under her gaze, "So this is Senketsu? I must confess that the beauty

of it greatly exceeds my initial expectations. It possesses a natural beauty inherent to all Kamui."

"Can we stop talking about fucking clothes for a second?" Bazz-B asked as he stared at Ragyo Kiryuin. As confident as he was in his abilities he was in the presence of the primary threat to His Majesty's plans. He was not about to rush in headfirst and die like an idiotic shinigami. If they were to return to the Silbern with victory firm in their minds than Bazz-B needed to stick to the plan.

"You seem to be confident in your power, Quincy," Ragyo's tone carried the barest hint of malice as she addressed Bazz-B. Grinning as the Sternritter tensed under her gaze, some instinctual sense anticipating a possible attack, Ragyo simply shook her head and said, "Your strength is impressive for a naked pig but you're nothing but an ant attempting to fight an elephant."

As a vein became prominent on Bazz-B's temple, his anger boiling into the barest wisps of flames surrounding his body, Ragyo turned back to Ichigo, "I saw your fight against Junketsu, Ichigo. It was most impressive. Tell me, did you enjoy fighting against the true power of Junketsu?"

Ichigo scowled but didn't say anything as he glanced past Ragyo at Satsuki. The Student Council President was listening in rapt attention to everything her mother said. Barely noticing the subtle nodding of Satsuki's head, Ichigo narrowed his eyes and drew Tournesol from its scabbard. Holding the Life Fiber blade in front of his body, his stance solid, Ichigo took a second to gather his thoughts before shouting, "I don't care what you say or ask, Ragyo Kiryuin! I'm going to make sure you don't win!"

Ragyo was taken aback by Ichigo's refusal. She thought for sure that as a fellow hybrid he would understand her motives. It seemed she needed to have a long talk with Isshin when this was done. Upon sensing the Grand Couturier carefully making her way closer to the group, and watching Amu follow her sister with perfect precision, Ragyo decided to humor Isshin's son a bit longer. Going along with

the charade of being unaware of Satsuki's plans Ragyo fully turned her back to her daughter, the slight twisting of her daughter's waist all but apparent to her, and said, "You truly are Isshin's son, after all. I wonder, however, if you can back up your threats..."

"You're damn right!" Ryuko shouted angrily, her sneakers slamming against the dirt and rock of the stadium's floor as she took a step forward. Pointing her red Scissor Blade up at Ragyo before shifting it to Hououmaru and finally Satsuki, a confident smirk spread across Ryuko's face, "Who cares if you're really strong? There are nine of us and only seven of you! We're more than strong enough to kick your glowing ass!"

"La vie est drôle."

Ragyo wasn't someone that usually took such bait but the determination on Ryuko's face was something she couldn't wait to see vanish. Raising one arm into the air, the rainbow light shining forth from her form-fitting sleeve doubling in intensity, Ragyo had a malicious grin on her face that stretched from ear to ear as she snapped her fingers, "Such tempting words shall not be ignored! Nine on seven isn't quite fair. Nine against twelve sounds fairer, wouldn't you agree?"

As she snapped her fingers, the reverberating sound echoing throughout the stadium, Ichigo tensed as five forms burst out of their disguises amongst the crowds of cocooned citizens and landed on the stadium floor in front of him. Staring down at the five members of Xcution, his gaze lingering on Riruka for a moment, Ichigo moved his hand to his left shoulder and prepared to transform Mugetsu when he heard Ragyo laugh.

"Welcome to your Xcution!"

Not a single person missed the smug tone in Ragyo's voice. As the rainbow light shining forth from her horns intensified Ragyo turned her attention to Ichigo and Ryuko, "It is unbecoming for Kamui to fight mere raiment. They shall not stop you from attempting to reach me

so please activate your Kamui. I wish to see the true power of Mugetsu and Senketsu."

"Damn it!" Ichigo seethed in anger as he stared at the smug grin on Ragyo's face. He wasn't about to leave his friends to fight Xcution alone. The power he felt from Xcution dwarfed Satsuki's Elite Four from during the Sudden Runoff Elections. Gripping Tournesol tightly, his mind desperately trying to think of a third option, Ichigo paused when he felt a massive hand on his shoulder.

"Let us handle them, Ichigo," Chad stared at Xcution, his eyes drifting to the woman in front and, upon looking into her cold blue eyes, felt a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek. If Armstrong was right, and they were all more powerful than Ira Gamagori, than his work was cut out for him. Clenching a fist, memories of his abuelo bolstering his determination, Chad took his hand off Ichigo's shoulder and stepped forward, "It's time that I protected you."

"Like hell I'm going to let you fight these guys by yourselves!" Ichigo exclaimed.

"Your worry is appreciated but I have to agree with Chad," Uryu locked eyes with the same blue haired woman Chad noticed, her icy blue eyes promising eternal suffering if she ever got a hold of him. With the effectiveness of his heilig pfeil diminished significantly against a Three-Star Goku Uniform Uryu knew the resistance of the Life Fibers in raiment would be even greater. Luckily he hadn't run off without making a plan or two for such a contingency, "Let us handle Xcution. Taking down Ragyo Kiryuin is far more important than our lives. If she wins... well, I don't think I need to tell you what will happen."

"Man, this is going to suck," Bazz-B grumbled as he ran a hand through his Mohawk.

"Just try not to die," Bambietta drew her dao as she locked gazes with Riruka. For some reason she instinctively felt a need to smash Riruka's face into the ground. Glancing over at Meninas, who has a

content look on her face as she cracked her knuckles as she focused on Moe Shishigawara, Bambietta spat on the ground and muttered, "I don't want to drag Giselle all the way out here to heal you."

"I'd like to see you fucking try!" Bazz-B shouted back. Calming down slightly, his voice still a little tense, the Sternritter turned to Ichigo and said, "What the hell are you two waiting for - a fucking invitation? We can deal with these punks without even working up a sweat! Ragyo Kiryuin thinks we Quincy are weak, does she? I'm going to show her how weak we are after we fucking kill these guys!"

"Go with Ryuko, Ichigo. We'll be fine," Uryu ignored Bazz-B's wording as he formed his spiritual shortbow, enjoying the short looks of surprise on the faces of Xcution, before added, "Although I find your lack of faith in my skills insulting. Do you honestly think I will allow myself to be killed these people?"

Ichigo looked at Uryu in concern, "Did you hit your head yesterday? I seem to recall Junketsu kicking your ass pretty thoroughly..."

"That was different!" Uryu snapped back, his anger at Ichigo's stupidity reaching its boiling point, "I just fought Jakuzure and Inumuta back to back! I was tired!"

As much as he wanted to argue with Uryu a little more Ichigo had to trust his friend that he would win. His Quincy powers might not work so well against Life Fibers but Uryu had Chad, Ururu and the others to back him up. There was no way he could lose. If he did Ichigo would just go to the Soul Society and kick his ass for dying in the first place. Turning to Ryuko, who smirked at him as she reached for her Seki Tekko, Ichigo slammed his hand down on his spaulder. Engulfed in a burst of blue light alongside Ryuko's red energy and stars, Ichigo emerged fully clad in Mugetsu and with nary a sound launched himself up at Ragyo Kiryuin.

Landing on the runway between Ragyo and Satsuki, Ryuko's heels clicking down next to him a moment later, both Kamui wearers raised



their Life Fiber weapons in preparation to fight the Kiryuin Matriarch. Holding up her hand as Rei prepared to activate her raiment, Ragyo stepped forward and gazed upon Mugetsu and Senketsu with lustful eyes, "Your Kamui are truly beautiful."

"I'm not here to listen to your weird nonsense, Ragyo Kiryuin!" Ryuko shouted angrily as she gripped the red Scissor Blade with both hands. She could feel the power subconsciously radiating from Ragyo and for some reason she instinctively knew it was far greater than Nui Harime's, "Ichigo and me are going to kick your ass and stop your plans of enslaving humanity to Life Fibers!"

"Are you now?" Ragyo sighed in a manner befitting that of a parent whose child was misbehaving. Amused at their continued defiance, Ragyo waved her arm through the air towards the throngs of Life Fiber cocoons lining the stadium and asked, "Tell me, do you know of the true origin of Life Fibers?"

"They came from the Original Life Fiber," Ichigo answered, remembering what Armstrong told them yesterday. Upon seeing the subtle, half-cocked smirk, on Ragyo's face he decided to add a bit more, "It arrived one hundred thousand years ago. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Everything!"

The rainbow light emanating from within Ragyo tripled in intensity as she held her arms out in front of her body. As her maroon eyes pierced into their souls, both Mugetsu and Senketsu literally shivering under the vehemence of Ragyo's gaze, she asked, "Isshin never spoke about our past, did he Ichigo? He and I are the only two people that know everything in this world!"

"Ahem... make that two and a half..."

Ragyo spun around, a rare look of complete surprise on her face, as the massive screens blared into life. Watching as a man she long considered dead appeared on the screen, a knowing and taunting

smile on his face, her surprise turned into anger. Eyes narrowing, the rainbow light from her body appearing to grow darker with her emotions, Ragyo's voice was a measured clip as she spoke, "You're supposed to be dead."

"Well..." The man on the screen drawled out the word for several seconds before he chuckled nervously, "You'd be amazed what you can live through."

Adjusting his green and white bucket hat, torn and faded from weeks of wear, Kisuke Urahara turned to Ichigo and gave a friendly wave, "Hello, Ichigo! It's been quite a while, hasn't it? I see Mugetsu is doing well, which means you managed to get my note about the Kamui."

" ***That's the man who made me!***" There was no hiding the excitement in Mugetsu's voice as she beheld the visage of a man long thought dead, "***Say hi for me, Ichigo!***"

He may be relieved and happy knowing that Kisuke was not dead but Ichigo decided to hold back on expressing it until he kicked the man's ass for worrying them for so long. Ignoring Mugetsu's excited request for the moment, Ichigo spat on the ground and shouted at the screen, "I got your damn note but did you have to be so smug about it?"

"But Ichigo... it was the only way to make sure you listened to my instructions! As your former mentor I know the inner workings of your mind," Kisuke's image flickered as he snapped a paper fan in front of his mouth. When he spoke again, his tone measured and serious, his gaze lingered from Ragyo to Ryuko and finally to Satsuki, "I see that you managed to make friends with quite the interesting group. From your expression on your face I take it you know you're a Life Fiber Hybrid. Ah! Don't say anything! I'm a genius, remember? I knew about what you were the second I put the finishing touches on Mugetsu!"

"You're an asshole, you know that?" Ichigo shouted back in frustration, "You could have called or left a note saying you were alive!"

Kisuke gave a giggle unbecoming of a man his age before noticing Tournesol, "Oh good, I see Yoruichi managed to deliver Tournesol. It's a great name, isn't it? I was worried Nui Harime would discover it when she went back to my shop. I had just managed to trick her clones into thinking they killed me, you see, and it would be incredibly stupid to show myself!"

"You seem to be a very hard man to kill, Kisuke Urahara," Ragyo's anger had evaporated as she listened to Ichigo converse with the man Nui Harime had assured was dead. This was the man that not only created a Life Fiber blade rivaling Bakuzan and the Scissor Blades but also Kamui Mugetsu, a feat she had deemed all but impossible for those unfamiliar with the process. Sensing Nui's attention completely on the image of Kisuke, her fight against Amu forgotten for the moment as waves of hatred radiated from the Grand Couturier upon seeing her failure, Ragyo forced herself to smile, "Can you clarify something for me? Just how did you survive playing with my precious Nui?"

"Well..." Kisuke's eyes drifted off to the right and only those familiar with the man knew he was about to lie, "... I guess she just didn't try hard enough. The clones were interesting but quality trumps quantity. I'm sure your Grand Couturier would have defeated me if she stayed around to finish the job. Now, I have a question for you. Do you know where I am right now?"

As Kisuke moved away from the camera, allowing everyone to see where he was, Ragyo nearly lost herself in anger. The mere thought of a human entering that room was abhorrent! Grinning like a child as he looked through the camera at Ragyo's expression, Kisuke waved and said cheerfully, "That's right! I'm in the Fiber Palace - Forbidden Room! I stopped by to see if anyone was home and when I didn't get an answer I just let myself in. I hope you don't mind."

Kisuke's expression and voice changed swiftly at he spoke, the cheery and jovial tone that normally irritated Ichigo replaced by a cold and calculating clip. Pressing down on his bucket hat, shadowing his eyes in the process, Kisuke sighed and said, "I'm sure you're mighty curious why I'm here. Let me put it in a way something like you can understand, Ragyo Kiryuin. I know you can get to the Kiryuin Manor in less than five minutes but that's just not quick enough. By the time you get here I shall have already sealed away the Original Life Fiber. I believe this is checkmate."

## Slipping Into Darkness

*Here is Chapter 39 and I'm pleased to announce we're reaching the end... of the first arc, which I have decided to call **The Honnouji Academy Arc** that will end (seeing no problems) next chapter - Chapter 40. I hope that you enjoy this chapter and all the references/characters/plot working together nearly perfectly. I would like to point out the following Word of God (that's me) birthdays for the Kiryuin and Kurosaki families as well as some related characters. It's important so that the timeline makes sense. Ragyo's age is given as 45 at the end of KLF so I just extrapolated her birth year from the current story's year of 2002. As for Isshin I simply decided an appropriate forged age was 50 and worked from there.*

**Ragyo Kiryuin:** June 21st, 1957

**Satsuki Kiryuin :** May 20th, 1984

**Ryuko Matoi:** April 5th, 1985

**Rei Hououmaru :** August 3rd, 1963

**Ururu Tsumugiyu:** September 9th, 1985

**Nui Harime:** September 9th, 1985

**Isshin Kurosaki:** December 10th, 1952

**Ichigo Kurosaki:** July 15th, 1985

**Yuzu Kurosaki:** May 6th, 1989

**Karin Kurosaki:** May 6th, 1989

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## Chapter 39 - Slipping Into Darkness

Yukio Hans Vorarlberna's face tightened into a mild grimace, his hidden green eyes narrowing tensely behind limp bangs of blond hair, as he watched Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi jump up to the runway jutting out into the middle of the stadium. The burst of power that accompanied Senketsu and Mugetsu's activation was unlike anything Yukio ever felt.

Folding his gloved hands into the pockets of his coat-like raiment, mirth evident in his eyes as the corners of his mouth curled up in the faintest trace of a smile, Yukio turned to Riruka, who was staring up at Ichigo in restrained fury, and said, "You should be happy Lady Ragyo ordered us to not attack Ichigo Kurosaki or Ryuko Matoi. It would be pathetic if you were taken out twice in a row."

"Whose side are you on?!"

Riruka stomped her foot impotently against the ground, her thigh-high boot kicking up a small cloud of dust, and bit down on the tip of her thumb. Grumbling softly under her breath, every other whisper a rather impressive string of curses, Riruka scoffed and glared at the seven people still remaining. Lady Ragyo said they couldn't go after Ichigo, which is what she really wanted to do, but killing these people might make her feel better. Damn it! She wanted to beat the scowl off Ichigo's face for destroying her original Duveteux Raiment. Even if Lady Ragyo had been generous enough to weave a new one Riruka still missed her old raiment. She sorely missed the wondrous feeling of Ichigo's Life Fibers boosting her power.

"Why are you getting mad at me? I'm not the one that got taken out in a single attack," Yukio calmly chided in response, his politeness barely betraying a mocking undertone.

"Just who do you think you're talking to?" Riruka angrily snapped as she grabbed Yukio by his cravat.

The growling from her throat intensified when Yukio calmly stared at her, completely unbothered by her tone. Before she could snap at Yukio her attention was diverted when she heard Moe Shishigawara shout something incredibly foolish and stupid before rushing into battle. Squinting due to her myopia blurring out any details from further than twenty feet away Riruka gasped when she heard, rather than saw, Moe crash through the wall of the stadium as the supposedly vapid pink haired girl punched him square in the face.

"Well, I haven't seen that in a while," Yukio offhandedly commented as he pulled out of Riruka's loosened grip. Adjusting his cravat back into place Yukio reminisced back to the day Moe begged the Grand Couturier for a quick spar. Nui Harime had gladly agreed to do it only to end the fight after one light punch sent him flying through the wall. Watching Moe get punched clear across the building had been quite satisfying.

Riruka opened her mouth to speak but was violently cut off when Uryu Ishida appeared in the air above Esdeath, who simply stared at him with a bored and inquisitive expression in her eyes, and fired a barrage of arrows down upon her. Throwing her arms in front of her eyes, the cloud of dust exploding out from Esdeath's location reaching her a moment later, Riruka decided enough was enough. Magenta eyes narrowing in rage, teeth biting down on her lower lip, Riruka held her arms out as a rainbow aura surrounded her body. A split second later there was a brief explosion of energy as she was clad in her Duveteux Raiment once more. Flexing her armored fingers, a familiar battle staff appearing in a flash of light, Riruka grinned as she picked out her first target.

"Let's start with you..." she trailed off, magenta eyes focused maliciously on an unsuspecting Chad.

Holding her battle staff firmly in her hand, pink energy coalescing on the tip, Riruka didn't stop until she had enough energy to turn not only Chad but everything around him completely fluffy. As the last traces of energy gathered in her staff, a soft hum reverberating through the air as she kept tight control over it, Riruka aimed at Chad

but just before the Addiction Shot fired there was a crackle of thunder before something slammed into the side of her head. Staggering several steps to the left, the Addiction Shot going wildly off balance up into the sky, Riruka rubbed her head and angrily shouted, "Who the fuck did that?"

Yukio turned, one eyebrow quirked in interest, as Riruka spotted Lille Barro kneeling in the stands, wisps of smoke rising from the muzzle of his spiritual rifle. Rolling his eyes as Riruka shouted at the Sternritter, her every other word a curse or threat, Yukio took several steps away from the magenta haired teenager. Riruka's temper was notoriously short and he really didn't want to accidentally get hit by an Addiction Shot. That was never a pretty sight.

With his hands in his pockets once more Yukio took a moment to look around. On one of the large screens wrapping around the stadium Yukio saw a man with messy blond hair not dissimilar to his own. He didn't know who the man was but he wasn't too worried. Lady Ragyo already knew her daughter was going to betray her. That was why she recalled Xcution to Honnouji Academy, after all. Even if that man was part of Satsuki's overly complicated plan Yukio knew there was no chance he could lose.

"Well, I suppose I should get started," Yukio quipped as he watched Giriko calmly avoid a stream of fire from one of the Sternritter. Raising his right hand above his head and flicking his wrist Yukio confidently smirked as dozens of Life Fibers emerged from his sleeve, "Création de Créature."

In the span of less than five seconds two golem-like creatures were spun into existence from the Life Fibers in Yukio's Fantaisie Raiment. Nearly twelve feet tall hunched over, red light glowing from the cracks in their stone-like skin and the empty hole where their faces should have been, the golems stood silently on either side of Yukio. With a sly smile on his face Yukio turned around, mild interest evident in his eyes, as Bambietta Basterbine appeared behind him using Hirenkyaku.



"Oh?" Yukio stared in amusement at Bambietta, "Are you the one that's going to fight me?"

Bambietta didn't say anything as the corners of her mouth twisted into a sadistic smirk, causing Yukio to quirk a blond eyebrow in curiosity. Watching Bambietta earnestly as she snapped her fingers, a subtle shift and distortion in the atmosphere the only indications that she had done anything, Yukio didn't flinch as one of his golems landed in front of him before it abruptly exploded. Leaning out from behind the smoldering remains of the Life Fiber golem, an expression of awe on his face, Yukio whistled and asked, "So you can make explosions? That's kind of cool actually."

Her face briefly falling at her explosion being blocked, Bambietta recovered moments later, a huff escaping her lips as she smirked. Pointing with a finger to Yukio's destroyed golem, spiritual energy already gathered for another explosion, Bambietta exclaimed, "It doesn't matter if you think it's cool or not, you idiot! If one explosion took out one of your golems than two more will be enough to kill you!"

Yukio's eyes narrowed at Bambietta's declaration before he shook his head. With a complete lack of concern in his voice he motioned with a lazy wave of his hand at his shattered golem. In the span of only a couple seconds the golem pulled itself back together before standing completely intact above Yukio once more, "That's interesting but you're wrong about one thing, Quincy. Your explosions are pretty neat but they're not nearly strong enough to defeat my golems."

Bambietta's eyes tightened in anger as Yukio offhandedly mocked her explosions. Drawing her dao, a faint blue-white aura enveloping the blade as she ran spiritual energy through it, Bambietta took a step forward before vanishing using Hirenkyaku. Yukio's golems could regenerate from a pile of rubble, which meant attacking them was pointless. Reappearing directly behind Yukio, her right arm holding the dao twisted behind her back and a manic smile on her face, Bambietta laughed triumphantly as her weapon cleaved

through the surprised Xcution member. Landing with her back to Yukio, who barely had time to look at her before exploding violently, Bambietta grinned savagely, "That's what you get for being stupid!"

"I'm sorry. Was that supposed to kill me?"

Spinning around at familiar voice Bambietta was astonished when she saw Yukio standing intact behind one of his golems, which was impossible. She felt her blade cleave through his body, blood and visceral flying through the air in the moments before he exploded. He shouldn't be alive and yet he was standing in front of her. Glancing towards Yukio's burnt remains Bambietta sneered when instead of bone and blood she saw only a pile of Life Fibers disappearing into the wind.

"Did you really think you killed me?" Yukio folded his hands in his pockets as he stood between his golems, his back slouched slightly forward. Lips curled up into a knowing smile Yukio took a moment to enjoy the infuriated and disbelieving expression on Bambietta's face before continuing, "I made that clone the moment you blew up my golem. It couldn't attack or defend but it was rather useful to keep you distracted, wouldn't you say?"

Bambietta growled angrily at Yukio. She knew Life Fibers were resistant to Quincy spiritual energy but at this rate she would need to use Vollstandig just to hurt the blond haired bastard. Viciously shaking her head, dissuading that notion before it could take root, she vowed to kill him without using Vollstandig. Stalking forward at a slow pace, her white boots kicking up miniature clouds of dust with every step, she was suddenly thrown backwards as Ururu Tsumugiyā crashed into the ground in front of her.

Bouncing along the ground before regaining her balance, Ururu's feet left twin furrows as she managed to skid to a stop. Clenching the purple Scissor Blade tightly, the shattered remains of her Powersoul Mark II gauntlets desperately clinging to her fingers and hands, she twisted her body to the side as Nui Harime came spiraling down through the air towards her. Tucking her arms in and spinning

around Nui's new purple Needle Blade, the weapon's lethal jabs barely clipping her dress, Ururu let the Scissor Blade fall from her hands before leaning back and slamming her foot directly into her sister's stomach

Coughing violently, flakes of blood tinging her saliva a deep crimson, Nui's sapphire eyes narrowed as her arm shot out and the Needle Blade sliced across Ururu's left shoulder. Hopping back before leaping up into the stands, a smile on her face despite her bloody and ragged appearance, Nui leaned against the Needle Blade and stuck her tongue out childishly at Ururu. Pouting softly when Ururu didn't utter a word despite the red staining the left side of her dress Nui waved cheerfully at Yukio before turning around on her heel and fleeing with Ururu only feet behind her.

Watching the two Life Fiber Hybrids vanish into the catwalks lining the stadium, the telltale sound of metal screeching and breaking reaching his ears, Yukio perked up when he felt a massive gust of wind ruffle his raiment courtesy of the series of explosions going off behind him. Looking over his shoulder, a disinterested gaze in his green eyes, Yukio observed the currently half-destroyed state of his golems. Shaking his head, the golems already mostly regenerated, Yukio sighed wearily at Bambietta, "I said your explosions aren't strong enough. Unless you have something up your sleeves I'm going to have to get serious and kill you."

"Screw you, you stupid Life Fiber freak!"

Bambietta's dark blue eyes glared at Yukio, the intensity in the stare actually unnerving Yukio a little. His Majesty had forbidden the Sternritter from using Vollständig but deep beneath the anger and rage clouding her mind, buried under the psychosis and pride of being a Sternritter, was a nagging voice telling her she couldn't win without it. Clenching her hands tightly, her gloves audibly crinkling, Bambietta noticed Meninas out of the corner of her eyes struggling to overpower Moe Shishigawara. Their hands were locked firmly together, cracks radiating outwards along the ground under their feet, before Moe reared his head back and slammed it against

Meninas's forehead. The pink haired Sternritter staggered backwards before Moe slammed his fist against her nose, an explosion of energy ringing out upon impact, and sent her flying backwards into the wall of the stadium.

"There's no need for harsh language," Yukio quipped sardonically as he turned around, the two golems subconsciously moving to prevent Bambietta from getting a clear line of sight. Whistling softly, his mind preoccupied with other things for a moment, Yukio lightly chuckled, "Let me ask you something - do you think dragons are real?"

"What kind of stupid question is that? Everyone knows dragons aren't real!" Bambietta snapped. There was something about Yukio's seemingly random question that caused a cold feeling to pierce her heart. She heard a question like this before and if Yukio was anything like Gremmy then things were going to get a whole lot worse.

"That is completely true. Dragons do not exist on this planet," Yukio admitted. Holding an arm towards one of the golems he stared passively as it quickly dissolved back into the Life Fibers composing it. As the Life Fibers were rapidly absorbed back into his Fantaisie Raiment Yukio's green eyes looked mirthfully at Bambietta, "But still humanity knows all about dragons. If I were to ask one thousand people about dragons at least nine hundred and ninety would say they were familiar with the concept. How can dragons, which do not exist, be so pervasive in human culture? The answer is simple - imagination."

"That's crap! There's no way you can create anything simply by thinking about it!" Bambietta vehemently spat out at Yukio, her blue eyes simmering with rage. After that answer she was all but certain Yukio's raiment gave him nearly the same powers as Gremmy, which was just perfect. If Yukio was anything like that little freak then she needed to use Vollständig in order to stand a chance.

Yukio stared blankly at Bambietta before shrugging nonchalantly. Looking around, mentally noting the size of the stadium, he decided

it would probably not be a good idea to create a dragon. Lady Ragyo might get upset if the stadium Rei Hououmaru spent a lot of time building was destroyed. Clapping his hands together as a better idea came to mind Yukio allowed his second golem to dissolve back into its constituent Life Fibers.

Slouching forward, a faint rainbow aura surrounding his Fantaisie Raiment, Yukio smirked slyly at the increasingly cautious Bambietta before a massive explosion of light caused her to clench her eyes shut. When Bambietta could see once more, her vision temporarily filled with darkened spots, the Sternritter apprehensively noticed Yukio's raiment had transformed. His black coat and pants didn't appear to change that much, now resembling highly flexible armor with futuristic lines of rainbow light covering them. Taking a step forward, his new sabatons clinking metallically against the ground, Yukio adjusted a sleeve over his now bare hands, "So yeah, I can create pretty much anything from my imagination."

"I thought your raiment was already activated!"

"Why would I use my full powers from the start?" Yukio chided with a shake of his head. Unlike most of Xcution, with a few exceptions, he could use the majority of his Fantaisie Raiment's powers even in its inactivated state. It simply took more Life Fibers and time. Raising a hand into the air, hundreds of Life Fibers flying forth from inside his sleeve before twisting and weaving together in less than four seconds, Yukio dispassionately watched a massive wall of ice erupt across the other side of the stadium and sighed, "I suppose I should kill you now. I really don't need another lecture from Esdeath."

It was only her instinctive use of Hirenkyaku that saved Bambietta's life. The moment her body vanished, travelling several meters away at high speed, a massive zweihander crashed into the ground with a reverberating echo. Forced to squint from the massive cloud of dust that hit her in the face Bambietta's eyes widened when she saw what nearly killed her. Standing back up to its intimidating fifteen foot height, its face covered by a massive helm, the creature resembled a futuristic knight more than anything. Its armor, which seemed to

accentuate its musculature, was bone white with lines of rainbow light shining forth from its joints.

"Damn it!" Bambiotta seethed as she moved her hand towards her heart-shaped belt buckle. Claspig her fingers around it before dragging her hand across the air Bambiotta pulled out her Quincy bow, resembling a compound bow with five strings of energy nocked to it, and shifted her right leg backwards while hooking her finger around the strings.

"Huh, I didn't know you could do that," Yukio watched Bambiotta pull her bow out, interest evident in his eyes. Lady Ragyo may have given Xcution comprehensive data about what Quincy could do but this was a complete surprise. Green eyes noticing the smoking tips of her heilig pfeil, the ends of the arrows resembling miniature bombs more than anything, Yukio frowned, "I'm going to guess your arrows explode on contact."

The sadistic gleam in Bambiotta's eyes was all Yukio needed to know. As the heilig pfeil shot towards him, dozens of arrows firing on his location with the sole intent of blasting him out of existence, he sighed wistfully, "Interesting but it's not going to work."

With nary a sound the knight appeared in front of its creator, its zweihander vanishing in a burst of rainbow light before a large shield appeared in its place. Tensing as it held the shield the knight was barely staggered as arrow after arrow detonated against the protective metal, clouds of flame and smoke curling around the shield before harmlessly drifting up into the sky. After the barrage ended, the only sounds heard coming from the fights continuing around Yukio and Bambiotta, the knight raised its shield in the air and turned towards the flabbergasted Sternritzer. Shifting the shield to its left arm, the metallic surface barely scorched by her explosions, it held out its right hand as a large broadsword was clasped in its fingers.

"What the fuck?" Bambiotta felt fear as she stood under the long shadow of Yukio's knight. Each of her heilig pfeil packed the same

amount of power as her normal explosions yet his knight seemed completely unaffected by them. As sweat trickled down her face Bambietta reached over and tore off her right glove, exposing the black Sanrei Glove hidden underneath. Vollständig may have been forbidden by His Majesty but Bambietta knew without it she would die.

"Is that another trick up your sleeve?" Yukio's voice was full of condescension as he stood behind his knight, "It's not going to work, you know. My knight doesn't know fear, anger or any other emotion. Those explosions you like so much... useless. Goodbye Quincy. It's been fun."

Bambietta tightly gripped the Sanrei Glove as the knight stepped towards her, its massive steps causing the ground to subtly shake. Her mind was desperately trying to think of another way to kill Yukio without using Vollständig but despite everything she continued to draw a blank. As her fingers began to take off the black glove Bambietta paused when the knight stopped and rushed back to Yukio in a blinding burst of speed, its broadsword a glint of light on metal as it parried the spiritual bullet up into the morning sky, the clouds visibly parting. Wordlessly raising the shield in front of its body, the broadsword held at ready at its side, the knight stared directly at Lille Barro as he leapt to the ground on the other side of Yukio.

"Were you intending to disobey His Majesty's orders?" Lille Barro's voice was calm and collected even while keeping his sole eye firmly locked on Yukio and his knight.

"I'll do whatever it takes to win," Bambietta countered, a cold sweat breaking out across her body. Clenching her hand tightly, her spiritual compound bow forming once more, Bambietta glared at Lille Barro and scoffed before turning towards Yukio, "It doesn't matter what you say. This bastard is tough so either you help me or I'll kill you myself when I'm done!"

Lille Barro looked at Bambietta in disbelief, his half-lidded eye staring at her with a mixture of weariness and annoyance, before he perked up and cocked his head to the right. Noticing a hint of magenta in the distance, his previous opponent obviously looking for him despite her rather bad myopia, Lille Barro shook his head and lowered his rifle. Resting the stock firmly against his shoulder he stared through the scope and calmly stated, "I observed your fight against Bambietta. While your creations are quite powerful and, dare I say, capable of killing one of His Majesty's soldiers, there is a fatal weakness that is quite easy for someone like me to exploit."

"It's quite presumptuous for you to say something like that, especially since you failed to kill Riruka," Yukio's scathing tone, the mockery quite apparent, caused Lille Barro's eye to narrow. Aiming his rifle directly at Yukio's heart, the four protrusions surrounding the barrel unfolding, he waited a few seconds, power building up in his weapon, before pulling back on the trigger.

In the brief moment between Lille Barro's finger squeezing down on the trigger and the spiritual bullet spiraling out of the chamber Bambietta sprang into action, her fingers pulling back on the bowstrings of her compound bow. As energy coursed through her body, kicking up a slight wind and making her skirt shift violently, Bambietta steadied her arms and aimed directly at Yukio's back. Letting go of the bowstrings, the five arrows quickly multiplying into nearly two dozen, Bambietta watched as the knight slid in front of her attack in a blink of an eye and raised its shield once more. Grinning viciously, a small bang and flash of light hinting at the bullet finally leaving Lille Barro's rifle, Bambietta memorized the look of surprise in Yukio's eyes upon realizing he had been outplayed.

"Nice try."

With surprisingly little effort Yukio swung his arm out and deflected the bullet, the spiritual attack shooting through one of the large screens circling the stadium before disappearing over the horizon. Rubbing his forearm, the force from the bullet denting his raiment slightly, Yukio smirked at the stunned Sternritzer, "I bet you thought



because I use creatures to fight that I was weak. What makes you think two on one will change anything? My Fantaisie Raiment is strong enough to kill you both."

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Uryu watched Ichigo and Ryuko leave to confront Ragyo Kiryuin, his fingers twitching sporadically from nervousness, before turning his attention back upon the blue haired woman. The smile on her face, shadowed by an officer's cap with the Xcution symbol stitched on the front, was far too confident for his liking. Pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose with his free hand Uryu frowned as Moe Shishigawara started shouted boisterously before he pointed directly at him. Exhaling slowly, his heart rate lessening with every breath, Uryu shifted his left foot back. Waiting until Moe made the first move, the Xcution member sprinting along the ground towards him, Uryu sprang into action.

Jumping into the air, using Hirenkyaku to bolster his speed, Uryu squinted when Moe activated his raiment in a burst of rainbow light. Grimacing when Chad tried to halt the Xcution member's advance only to be overwhelmed by Moe's strength Uryu scowled when he saw the woman staring up at him, a look of boredom in her eyes. Pulling back on his bow, his face lit up by a bright blue-white light, Uryu knew his best chance of winning was to attack before she could activate her raiment. Twisting his body around, the light from his bow growing stronger every second, Uryu shouted, "Stark Regen!"

Dozens of heilig pfiel, each more powerful than his normal arrows, rained down on the blue haired woman. Even as a massive cloud of dust was kicked up Uryu did not let up firing arrows. Wincing slightly as pain lanced up his arm, droplets of blood coating his fingers, Uryu grit his teeth and pushed through the pain. With the light from his heilig pfiel reflecting ominously off his glasses, the polished spiritual material protecting his eyes from the intense illumination, Uryu stopped firing and immediately moved away using Hirenkyaku.

Landing on the ground a few meters away from the rising cloud of dust and smoke, blood dripping off his left hand, Uryu hunched over and breathed heavily. Stark Regen was something he created after his battle against Nonon Jakuzure and her Symphony Regalia. Using stronger arrows to overcome the innate resistance of Life Fibers to his Quincy techniques appeared to work but it quickly drained him of energy. Sighing loudly and wiping his hand on his pants, streaks of crimson staining the white material, Uryu raised his hand to his bow and waited. He wouldn't let down his guard until he saw her body lying on the ground. Narrowing his eyes as the dust shifted sporadically Uryu frowned as he saw a silhouette, "I know that didn't kill you."

There was a few seconds of silence, only broken by the sounds of the fights beginning to take place around him, before a manicured hand appeared out of the dust. Uryu took a step back, his body tensing, as a calm voice said, "Flèches Grêle."

A quick use of Hirenkyaku saved Uryu from being skewered by a barrage of arrows. Skidding along his ground, his shoes kicking up trails of dust, Uryu spun and barely avoided having one of the arrows pierce through his head. Watching the projectile pass dangerously close to his cheek, the crystalline blue material hinting at its composition, Uryu twisted his body around and fired a salvo of his own, if only to keep the woman occupied long enough for him to put some distance between them.

Uryu perked up when he saw a figure walking towards him. Emerging from the dust, not a scratch on her uniform, the blue haired woman lightly brushed off her sleeves and stared at him with a bored gaze. Adjusting her officer's cap, the shadow falling over her cold blue eyes, the woman folded her arms over her chest, "Attempting to kill me before I could activate my raiment was impressive, Uryu Ishida."

"I'm not surprised you know my name. After all, Ragyo Kiryuin did try to murder my father," Uryu shifted his foot back, his bow raised defensively in front of his body, as the temperature around him

began falling. Shivering slightly from the cold while slowly reaching with one hand towards his belt Uryu kept his eyes firmly locked on the woman as he spoke, "Those arrows you fired... and this drop in temperature... it doesn't take a genius to realize your raiment grants you power over ice."

The woman's eyes narrowed slightly at Uryu's deduction before leaning forward with her arm held out to the side. Clenching her hand into a fist, a rainbow aura surrounded her body as ice flowed like water out of her sleeve before coalescing into a rapier-like blade. Taking a single step forward, her white thigh-high boots leaving small patches of ice with every step, the woman held the glowing blue rapier in front of her face, "Rapière Grêle."

Only months of training enabled Uryu to twist out of the way of the woman's surprising fast attack. Watching the rapier pass dangerously close to his heart, the woman's eyes showing complete boredom, Uryu grimaced as he hooked a finger around one of the Seele Schneider. Pulling the spiritual weapon out of his belt, a glowing blade of blue spiritual energy appearing a moment later, Uryu swung his arm upwards at the same time the woman pivoted on her heel and slammed her weapon towards his neck.

Uryu grunted, his knees starting to buckle under the woman's immense strength as he fended off her attack. He knew her raiment would be leagues above Jakuzure's Symphony Regalia but he couldn't have expected such a massive increase in power. Gritting his teeth, beads of sweat trickling down his face as he used more and more of his spiritual energy to reinforce his body, Uryu looked into the woman's bored gaze. For a moment he saw nothing but disinterest but when he noticed the slight curling of her lips Uryu looked at his Seele Schneider in shock, "What the hell?"

His Seele Schneider, a weapon made of spiritual energy rotating at millions of times per second, was rapidly freezing over from the point of contact with the rapier. Quickly letting go of the weapon, the wave of ice reaching the handle a moment later, Uryu vanished using Hirenkyaku before reappearing kneeling on the edge of the stands.

Examining his hand briefly, numbness coursing through his fingers, Uryu's eyes narrowed contemplatively. It should be impossible to freeze raw spiritual energy since it has no form or substance.

Standing up, clenching and relaxing his hand to restore feeling, Uryu stared down at the woman as he drew another Seele Schneider, "I don't know if I should be happy I was correct about your raiment's abilities. Freezing whatever you touch is quite dangerous. Who are you?"

The woman pointed her rapier towards the ground as she glanced at the frozen Seele Schneider with a confident smirk. Stomping down on the ice-covered weapon, her heel crushing it into oblivion, the woman fixed the collar of her uniform before turning back to Uryu, "Your observational skills are rather impressive. Most people do not survive this long. You may call me Esdeath."

Without preamble Esdeath leapt after Uryu, her heels cratering the ground while her rapier gleaming maliciously in the early morning sunlight. Barely dodging Esdeath's series of rapid strikes Uryu grimaced when he saw a wave of ice explode out from the tip of her rapier over the stands. Jumping away Uryu's mind raced as he tried to analyze Esdeath's raiment for any weaknesses, *"Her control over ice is dangerous. She can not only create ice out of the air but her raiment is rapidly lowering the temperature around her body to below zero degrees Centigrade."*

"Your ability to survive so long interests me, Uryu Ishida," Esdeath complimented, her breath even and steady compared to Uryu's heaving panting, before launching herself across the stadium. Her legs were a blur, the concrete walls cracking and shattering beneath her heels, as she sprinted towards Uryu. Rapier held parallel to the ground, wisps of ice drifting into the air, Esdeath swung her weapon against Uryu's Seele Schneider only for the Quincy to let go as soon as she was dedicated to the attack. Frowning slightly at Uryu's cowardice Esdeath's blue eyes widened in mild interest when she saw a small silver canister leaking a glowing blue liquid in front of her eyes.

"Blesse!"

Landing in a crouch on the ground with his back turned to Esdeath, Uryu didn't flinch as the blue haired woman was enveloped in an explosion. Blesse, one of his more powerful Ginto techniques, was designed to hit an opponent with a blast comparable to a hollow's cero. Standing up, his Quincy uniform flapping chaotically in the wind, Uryu turned around and narrowed his eyes. While Esdeath's raiment granted her incredible resistance to his attacks Uryu was certain getting hit with a point-blank explosion would at least deafen her, Life Fibers or not.

When Esdeath did not immediately appear Uryu decided to chance a look around the stadium. It would be foolish to assume their fight would remain isolated. Glancing across the stadium, past Bazz-B's fight against Giriko, Uryu saw Chad running towards Moe Shishigawara. The Mexican teen had his left fist cocked back, blue spiritual energy wafting off his arm, as Meninas McAllon used her monstrous strength to temporarily place Moe in a chokehold long enough for Chad to hit him. Twisting his head around as a massive thud reverberated through the stadium Uryu noticed Ururu skidding along the ground past Bambietta Basterbine with Nui Harime quickly closing in.

*"At least Ururu seems to be keeping Nui Harime occupied for the moment,"* Uryu thought before looking up at the massive screen next to the runway and scowling at the image of Kisuke Urahara. He should have known Kisuke would pull a stunt like this. Sensing moving nearby Uryu turned around and asked, "How long are you going to play dead, Esdeath? I know Blesse was not nearly enough to hurt you."

Emerging from the smoke Esdeath landed silently in front of Uryu with her raiment sporting just the faintest of scorch marks. Folding her arms across her chest, blue hair shifting in the breeze, she dusted off her raiment with an amused smile on her face, "That wasn't bad, Uryu Ishida, but let's see how long this lasts. Rempart grêle."

Uryu apprehensively watched as Esdeath clapped her hands together, a soft but sadistic smile on her face, and slammed them against the floor of the stadium. As a massive wall of ice erupted from the ground, jagged edges and spikes gleaming dangerously in the morning sun, Uryu mentally cursed before quickly using Hirenkyaku to leap into the air and avoid being frozen alive.

*" That was close. If I had reacted just one second slower..."*

Sighing in relief, his heart pounding in his chest, Uryu felt a wave of adrenaline course through his body as his feet cleared the wall of ice by less than an inch. After what happened to his Seele Schneider he had no intention of getting hit by one of that woman's attacks. As he stood in midair Uryu froze when he saw that Esdeath had vanished. Turning around, his eyes looking over the entire stadium for the ice-wielding woman, Uryu gasped in pain when an elbow was driven deep into his stomach.

Esdeath's lips curled upwards, a sadistic glint in her blue eyes, as she watched Uryu cough up blood. Taking a step forward, a circular disk of ice spinning into existence under her heel, Esdeath pulled her arm out before grabbing Uryu by the front of his shirt. Easily lifting the young Quincy with only a single arm she smirked hungrily at the defiant look in Uryu's eyes, "You still refuse to submit?"

"Do I look like an idiot?" Uryu ignored the coppery taste in his mouth as he stared defiantly at Esdeath. Subtly flicking his wrist, the handle of a hidden Seele Schneider falling out of his sleeve into his hand, Uryu activated the blade before quickly stabbing it into Esdeath's stomach. As her grip on his shirt relaxed Uryu coughed once before adding, "Letting someone like Ragyo Kiryuin win is not an option I -"

Uryu was cut off as Esdeath pivoted around and smashed her heel into his stomach. As a large cloud of dust was kicked up by the impact, a reverberating echo fading away into the distance, she took a moment to look at the Seele Schneider held in her hand, ice already starting to coat the blade. Clenching her hand, the Seele Schneider shattering into dust, Esdeath quirked an eyebrow in

amused interest as Uryu staggered back onto his feet. Chuckling lightly while stepping forward, a small platform of ice instantly forming several inches under her foot, Esdeath slowly descended towards her injured adversary.

"Your tenacity is admirable but it seems you have reached your limit." Holding her arm out to the side, another rapier flowing forth from her raiment, Esdeath paused briefly as she reached Uryu. Raising the ice blade above her head, a sadistic grin appearing as she savored Uryu's determined expression, Esdeath quickly spun around as a narrow beam of fire spiraled through the air towards her. Deflecting the attack, her eyes momentarily widening when the flames actually began melting her weapon, Esdeath let go of her blade and jumped away as Bazz-B slammed his foot on the ground where she had just been standing.

"Fuck! I almost had her!"

Bazz-B's steady but annoyed voice was in stark contrast to his actual appearance. The sleeves and pants of his once immaculate Sternritter uniform was colored red from numerous cuts while a stream of blood oozed down from a long open wound on his forehead. Snorting angrily, the chain with the Wandenreich emblem visible through his partially destroyed trench coat, Bazz-B felt something wet dripping from his nose. Cursing as he became aware of the injury Bazz-B looked over his shoulder at Uryu, "You can't seriously be this weak! I was told you were something special but here you are, fucking waiting to die!"

Scowling at Bazz-B for a moment, a look of derision on his face, Uryu eventually sighed and forced his body to stand up. Momentarily staggering as he struggled to regain his sense of balance, a lance of pain shot up from his stomach, Uryu waited until the world stopped spinning before fixing his glasses, "Should you be saying something like that given your current state?"

"At least I'm not getting my ass kicked!" Bazz-B spat before noticing Giriko beginning to emerge from his flames. Grunting in annoyance

at how hard it was to hurt these Xcution bastards Bazz-B clenched his fists, his black gloves crinkling in the process, and glowered at Esdeath. When he saw the curious look on Esdeath's face Bazz-B allowed an aura of fire to erupt from his body. Looking over his shoulder, a manic grin on his face, Bazz-B turned to Uryu, "Ishida! We're switching partners and I don't want to hear any bitching from you! You can deal with that old geezer while I take care of this ice bitch!"

Uryu felt his stomach lurch at the prospect of agreeing with the Sternritter. His father told him all about the Wandenreich. The only reason he was working with them was the danger to the planet posed by Ragyo Kiryuin. Glancing to his left and noticing Giriko keeping his distance from Esdeath, his raiment sporting only a few burn marks, Uryu mentally filed away that piece of information, "Fine, I'll leave her to you. So what powers does that man have?"

"This is your lucky day! He wouldn't stop talking about his abilities like a fucking moron," Bazz-B felt his blood boiling as Esdeath created another ice rapier. Slouching forward with his hands in his pockets, a wide smirk on his face at the prospect of fighting someone that didn't use cheap tricks, Bazz-B continued talking as he walked away from Uryu, "His raiment boosts his speed, reaction time and reflexes. Have fun fighting that cheap bastard and make sure to kick him the balls for me before killing him."

The hot-blooded Sternritter didn't bother waiting for Uryu's response as he approached Esdeath. When he heard Uryu finally leave Bazz-B stomped to a halt roughly twenty feet away from the blue haired woman. Grinning as wisps of flame-like spiritual energy wafted off his body Bazz-B chuckled at Esdeath, "No hard feelings but orders are orders. You're going to have to die."

Esdeath's blue eyes narrowed in slight annoyance not at him, as Bazz-B would have figured, but at Giriko. Fixing her officer's cap, which had been knocked slightly askew during Bazz-B's surprise attack, she stared at him and said, "Before we get started tell me something. Did Giriko truly give away his raiment's abilities?"



Bazz-B winced slightly but still managed to keep a cocky grin on his face as he pulled a hand out from his pockets, "Like a stupid asshole."

"I see I'm going to have to discipline Giriko after the festival about proper protocols," Esdeath's mouth spread in a sadistic smile as she shifted her stance, her rapier held at her waist. As the air began to grow colder, causing even Bazz-B to shiver before he intensified his flame aura, Esdeath chuckled maliciously, "Your confidence suggests your strength exceeds Uryu Ishida's. Let's test that, shall we? Cristaux de Glace!"

"I thought you'd never ask!" Bazz-B exclaimed and stomped his foot on the ground, a column of flame exploding into existence around him. Pointing his hand at the approaching Esdeath, a large spear of ice forming around her arm, Bazz-B laughed excitedly, "Let's find out what is stronger - your ice or my fire. Die ice bitch! Burner Finger Two!"

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"By the time you get here I shall have already sealed away the Original Life Fiber. I believe this is checkmate."

Ragyo Kiryuin's maroon eyes narrowed in barely controlled rage, her teeth clenched in frustration, as Kisuke Urahara grinned cockily down at her. Out of all the humans on the planet Kisuke was one of the few that could pose a threat to her plans. He had managed to create a working Kamui, something she had deemed all but impossible for a normal human, as well as a Life Fiber blade on par with the Scissor Blades and Bakuzan. Ragyo did not know nor did she care how Kisuke Urahara managed to enter the Fiber Chamber. All that mattered was stopping him from touching a single fiber on the Original Life Fiber.

Taking a calming breath, her anger dissipating with every rise and fall of her chest, Ragyo narrowed her maroon eyes as a dark smile spread across her face. Noticing the subtle, but appreciable, shift in Kisuke's expression Ragyo wondered if he truly believed this was checkmate simply because he blindly stumbled upon the Original Life fiber. Chuckling coldly at the man that survived encountering her precious Nui, her laughter growing in tempo and more menacing with every passing second, Ragyo clapped her hands together mockingly, "This is quite impressive, Kisuke Urahara, but I'm sorely disappointed if this is the full extent of your plan! You claim to possess the ability to seal away the Original Life Fiber. So go ahead and seal it away. The only question is how many lives you're willing to sacrifice."

There was a tense silence after Ragyo spoke before an explosion, courtesy of Uryu's Stark Regen, reverberated through the stadium. Tipping his bucket hat forward Kisuke knew trying to pull the wool over Ragyo's eyes at this point would be incredibly stupid. Sighing sardonically as he subtly watched data scroll down a monitor below the camera he allowed a sly smirk to spread across his face, "Bluffing is unbecoming of you, Ragyo Kiryuin. The Life Fiber wards placed around this room prevents anyone from entering or leaving unless you accompany them. When your overly dedicated servant tried to stop me I was just barely able to stop the wards from eating him alive..."

"Kuroido was foolish for trying to stop you," Ragyo turned away from the screen, mirth clear in her maroon eyes, before gazing upon her daughter. The confused expression on her daughter's face suggested Kisuke's interruption had thrown off her meticulously crafted plan. Walking to the end of the runway without saying another word Ragyo stared at the battles raging below and was impressed, if only mildly, at the skills possessed by the Quincy.

Momentarily focusing on Yukio as the Xcution member summoned two golems Ragyo turned back to Kisuke and folded her arms under her bosom before smirking maliciously, "As amusing as this has

been it's obvious you're stalling for time. A man of your intelligence wouldn't have dared show his face until after sealing the Original Life Fiber."

"That's an interesting idea," Kisuke's voice grew more serious as he placed a hand on his bucket hat. The sensors scattered throughout the Fiber Chamber were starting to behave erratically, which could only mean one thing. Pushing the hat down, shadows covering his eyes, Kisuke turned his attention to Ichigo and asked, "Can I count on you to deal with things on your end for a little while, Ichigo? The illustrious Kiryuin Manor is about to get a bit... chaotic. I'll catch up with you once I'm finished."

"La vie est drole," Ragyo closed her eyes as the rainbow light emanating from her silver hair intensified. Bathing in the cacophony of sounds from the battles raging below, her loyal Xcution fighting to kill those daring to stand in her way, Ragyo held a hand over her mouth and chuckled, "You are an amusing man, Kisuke Urahara but I have grown weary of this farce. Do you think you truly can defeat me?"

Kisuke scratched at the stubble on his chin before a childish grin spread across his face and the screen faded to black. Staring at the dead screen for several seconds, her maroon eyes narrowed in frustration, Ragyo's attitude perked up when she sensed someone rapidly running towards her. Calmly twisting her arm behind her body, her left pinky hooking through the hole in Ryuko's Scissor Blade, Ragyo chuckling derisively at Ryuko's astonished gasp, "Attacking while my back is turned? It seems your father truly did not teach you any manners."

"Shut up about my dad!" Ryuko shouted angrily as the vents on her back began blasting out steam.

Silver eyebrows momentarily quirked at the increase in power, maroon eyes growing more intrigued as her arm was bent backwards, Ragyo smirked as she abruptly stopped Ryuko's advance with the barest hints of power. Adjusting her grip on the

Scissor Blade, her manicured fingers easily holding the hardened Life Fiber weapon without repercussion, Ragyo stared deep into Ryuko's gear-shaped pupils. Sighing nonchalantly, her free hand delicately caressing her cheek, Ragyo shook her head and asked, "Who are you, Ryuko Matoi? A normal human is unable to fully wear a Kamui without being devoured by the Life Fibers yet I can see you've fully synchronized with Senketsu. I wonder..."

As she tightly held onto the Scissor Blade, half-lidded eyes watching Ryuko struggle to free her blade, Ragyo couldn't help but feel there was something intimately familiar about the girl. It was unlikely that Souichiro, who had the audacity to take the name of the only man she would ever love, remarried and had another daughter after betraying her. Her constant assassination attempts made sure he couldn't settle down in one place for too long. Upon remembering how Ryuko could access Senketsu's advanced configurations without being devoured Ragyo's eyes widened as everything began to make sense.

"Yes, I know who you are now." Ragyo leaned forward, her face only inches from Ryuko's, as the rainbow light shining forth from her hair intensified. Gazing at Ryuko with a hungry expression in her eyes she whispered, "Your existence is truly a surprise, Ryuko Matoi! To think that -"

Ragyo was cut off when Ichigo appeared behind her, a deep scowl on his face, with Tournesol arcing downwards towards her head. Closing her eyes as Tournesol grew closer, the blue edge gleaming brightly in the morning light, Ragyo decided it was time to see how well Isshin had raised his son. As she released the Scissor Blade, Ryuko quickly pulling it back and gripping the handle with both hands, Ragyo huffed and raised her left hand. Curling the middle finger inwards under the thumb while the rest remained fully extended Ragyo smirked and flicked her finger at Ryuko.

Ryuko screamed in pain as the massive wave of air pressure hit her, the runway visibly bending and warping, before she was sent rocketing backwards through the air into the stands with a

resounding crash. Staring in amusement at the rising cloud of dust while lowering her hand, a wisp of smoke rising off her finger, Ragyo's smirk widened into a sly grin as she quickly leaned backwards at her waist as Tournesol sliced through the air.

"Que c'est beau!"

Staring in adoration at Tournesol, the Life Fiber blade ringing with a beautiful tone, Ragyo smirked and sighed in satisfaction. She could feel the Banshi within the blade thrumming with power, and it angered her that a human, even a brilliant one, came up with such a remarkable idea. Once his foolish plan to seal away the Original Life Fiber failed, as Ragyo knew it would, she would take her time forcing Kisuke to tell her everything he knew.

Brought out her musings as she saw Tournesol arcing over her falling body Ragyo smirked as she spread her arms outwards. As her body came to quick and jarring halt, her head inches above the runway, Ragyo savored the shocked expression in Ichigo's eyes before reaching up and clasping her hand around his wrist, "You wear Mugetsu quite well, Ichigo..."

Ragyo's eyes shone with a malevolent light as she spun around, her limbs a blur of motion, and slammed Ichigo into the runway hard enough to crater it. Shaking her head sadly as she let go of Ichigo's wrist and watched him easily stand back on his feet, no doubt due to the Life Fibers in his body, Ragyo wondered if Isshin bothered to teach his son anything. His current level of strength, while impressive for a human, was utterly disappointing. Where was the strength Ichigo used to save her worthless daughter from Junketsu? Leaning her cheek onto her hand and sighing wistfully Ragyo continued from where she left off, "... but you should be stronger than this. Did that bumbling man teach you anything about what you truly are?"

"What is with you and my old man?" Ichigo groaned exasperatingly. He still didn't know how his dad knew Ragyo Kiryuin and he sure as

hell didn't believe that heroic bullshit story about rescuing her from a burning building.

"Oh my..." An overly dramatic sigh escaped Ragyo's lip as she closed her eyes and shook her head. Turning away from Ichigo, her gaze on the battles below, Ragyo chuckled softly and added, "It is quite rude to ask a woman about such personal things."

Ichigo froze as his mind wrapped around the subtle implications of Ragyo's words. As his mind refused to do anything but visualize Ragyo and his dad together, their bodies pressed against each other, he was saved when a massive explosion lit up the stands behind him. Flying out of the explosion, crimson energy trailing off her Scissor Blade and clad in Senketsu Shippu, Ryuko hovered in the air for a moment before she spotted Ragyo. Roaring angrily as her body twisted around due to Senketsu's jets shifting directions Ryuko swung her Scissor Blade with all her might, the Kiryuin matriarch barely having time to turn around before she was enveloped in a massive burst of energy.

As she floated in midair, her legs curled under her body, Ryuko allowed a cocky grin to stretch across her face. It seems that waiting around for Ragyo to give her an opening paid off after all. Remembering to apologize to Senketsu after the festival for doubting him she spat on the ground and mockingly asked, "How is this for a surprise, Ragyo Kiryuin?"

"It seems I was right. Your father truly did not teach you any manners..."

As a bright rainbow pulse of light dissipated the dust kicked up from her attack Ryuko involuntarily gasped as she saw Ragyo holding the Scissor Blade inches above her head, her well-manicured fingers delicately gripping the hardened Life Fibers with ease. Drinking in the despair on Ryuko's face, her maroon eyes widening as the teen noticed her unblemished appearance, Ragyo's lips curled upwards into a psychotic smile. Tightening her grip on the Scissor Blade while slowly drawing her other arm back, her hand clenching into a fist,

Ragyo stared directly into Ryuko's disbelieving eyes and chuckled, "Let me teach you what happens when you rudely interrupt a conversation..."

"Get away from her!"

Ichigo's shout distracted Ragyo just long enough for him to race towards her with his arm cocked back. Smashing his fist into Ragyo's face with a reverberating crack, causing the Kiryuin matriarch to involuntarily let go of Ryuko's Scissor Blade, Ichigo scowled as he landed on the runway. Glaring at Ragyo, who was leaning forward with her eyes cast in shadow, Ichigo raised Tournesol and turned to Ryuko, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, but thanks for asking," Ryuko muttered, her eyes refusing to look at Ichigo, before turning her attention back to Ragyo Kiryuin.

" **Ryuko...**" The seriousness in Senketsu's voice drew both Ryuko and Ichigo's attention. With his single multihued eye focused squarely on the supposedly injured Ragyo Senketsu shuddered as a feeling of dread coursed through his Life Fibers, "**She's faking it...**"

" **Impossible!**" Mugetsu's tone was one of disbelief as she looked at her fellow Kamui, nervousness in her eyes, before swiveling around to look at Ragyo, "**There's no way -**"

"Ceci est merveilleux!"

Ragyo's eyes gleamed madly as she lowered her hand, exposing the perfect and flawless flesh of her cheek. Throwing her arms outwards, the rainbow light from her hair brightening, she began laughing melodiously as her gaze swept over the two teens. It pleased her tremendously to see Ichigo so readily accepting the Life Fibers in his body. It was cute to hear Ichigo constantly preach that he was human but Ragyo was no fool. That night seventeen years ago when she experimented on his body was the moment Ichigo stopped being a human and evolved into something far greater.

"Well, this has been fun..." Ragyo chuckled and cocked her head to the side, her cheek leaning on a closed fist. Closing her eyes, enjoying the grunts of frustration from Ryuko and the scathing look from Ichigo, Ragyo sighed gloomily. What was taking her worthless daughter so long to betray her? She didn't have all day to wait around and the COVERS invasion was scheduled to begin rather soon. Lips curling upwards into a smile as an idea came to mind Ragyo looked at Ryuko, "Isn't Senketsu a truly beautiful Kamui, Ryuko Matoi? Don't you just love the way he wears you? How every part of his being caresses your skin?"

Ryuko narrowed her eyes as a feeling of disgust coursed through her body, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Ragyo's maroon eyes stared at Ryuko before a series of dry chuckles escaped her throat, "No, I suppose you wouldn't understand the wondrous feeling of being worn by a Kamui. It's quite disappointing your father didn't tell you anything before I had my darling Nui murder him..."

"T-That was you?" Ryuko's eyes were a storm of anger as her grip on the Scissor Blade tightened, "But I thought..."

"You thought my dear daughter was the one to give the order? That's an amusing idea but inaccurate," Ragyo answered nonchalantly as she turned away from Ichigo and Ryuko before walking back towards Satsuki and her Elite Four. Folding her arms under her chest, the tight dress helping to accentuate her figure, Ragyo smirked and looked over her shoulder, "Eleven years after your father escaped my grasp he created Anti-Life Fiber wards around his home designed to keep the Grand Couturier from finding him. Until seven months ago my precious Nui could not step within one hundred feet of your father's home. How happy I was that when he asked you, his only daughter, to visit and was forced to lower the Anti-Life Fiber wards for a single day..."

Ryuko's grip on the Scissor Blade slackened as the weight of Ragyo's revelation hit her. As the Life Fiber weapon fell to the



runway, the sharp edge easily slicing through the steel, Ryuko's eyes quivered as her mind desperately tried to refute Ragyo's words, "N-No, that can't be true! You're lying!"

"Am I?" Ragyo asked as she shrugged nonchalantly at Ryuko's misery. Turning around as she reached Satsuki and her Elite Four, a rainbow aura shining through the seams of her pure white dress, she held one hand forward and scoffed, "That expression on your face... the crushing weight of the world... you fully understand what I'm saying, don't you Ryuko Matoi? The one who truly killed her father was not my precious Nui but -"

"Shut the hell up."

Pointing Tournesol towards the Kiryuin matriarch, the blue blade gleaming from her rainbow light, Ichigo scowled in annoyance and continued, "I'm so sick and tired of people like you talking about crap you make up on the spot. Everyone knows it was Nui Harime that killed Isshin Matoi. Besides, how the hell could you have known Ryuko was going to visit her dad if she didn't know until a few hours before?"

Anger passed through Ragyo's eyes at Ichigo's mentioning of Isshin Matoi but it disappeared too quickly for anyone to see. Ichigo just had to ruin her fun, didn't he? Turning to Ryuko through bored eyes, the tormented look in the girl's blue eyes as clear as day, Ragyo sighed wistfully at the lost opportunity. All that was needed was one more carefully worded half-truth and Ryuko would have been broken completely. Lips curling into a smile Ragyo began to mockingly clap at Ichigo, "Well spoken, Ichigo! That was quite the inspirational speech but I'm afraid our little confrontation must come to an end. Give me regards to Isshin when you see -"

Whatever Ragyo was going to suggest was harshly cut off as several dark green canisters rolled to a stop at her feet before detonating in an inferno of yellow flames as hot as the sun. As the Kiryuin matriarch screamed while desperately trying to put out the flames, which were hot enough that the runway was beginning to melt

around her, Satsuki appeared right behind her with Junketsu already shifted into her activated configuration. Drawing Bakuzan, her face a mask of palpable rage as years of abuse came swimming to the surface, Satsuki did not hesitate to sever her mother's head.

"Honnouji Academy's rebellion against Life Fibers begins now!" Satsuki shouted as she slammed Bakuzan, her mother's blood dripping off the black blade, onto the runway. As she glared at the intense yellow flames still covering her mother's body Satsuki tilted her head slightly to the side, "Inumuta, do it."

"Right away," Inumuta gave a curt nod as he pulled a PDA out of his Probe Regalia. Pressing a single button, instantly hacking into the Revocs security grid and enslaved the system to his device, he smirked as hundreds of round machines appeared throughout the stadium and began peppering the Life Fiber cocoons with powerful Life Fiber jamming rounds.

"That technology..." Rei Hououmaru's amber eyes narrowed behind her aviator sunglasses as she watched Satsuki undo all of Lady Ragyo's hard work. Twisting her attention towards Inumuta, an arrogant smirk on the blue haired youth's face, Rei's voice held a hint of irritation as she noticed the needle he was absentmindedly playing with, "Those are Revocs Life Fiber Suppression and Hibernation Needles. How did you -"

She was cut off when Inumuta chuckled and pressed a button on his PDA. Scoffing as rolls of specialized fabric emerged from the runway, a new invention from the Sewing Club designed to seal Goku Uniforms, Rei didn't hesitate to leap away. Watching as the trap sealed upon itself, the rolls of fabric curling inwards in a mockery of a cocoon, Rei's brief elation was shattered when Sanageyama appeared behind her already clad in his Blade Regalia Mark III and smashed her headfirst into the runway.

"You're not going anywhere," Sanageyama warned as he slammed his shinai into the ground next to her head. Once he was sure Rei was completely immobilized, his free hand holding her head against

the runway, he glanced in Inumuta's direction and smirked under his visor, "Looks like Plan B worked after all."

"Of course it did," Inumuta answered stoically as his Goku Uniform's collar automatically buttoned itself. Glancing at the Revocs secretary, unbothered by the smoldering anger in Hououmaru's eyes, Inumuta tucked his PDA away and added, "Lady Satsuki doesn't leave anything to chance."

Staring into the burning yellow flames enveloping her mother's body while just barely listening to her Elite Four's conversation Satsuki sighed in relief. Rei Hououmaru was currently incapacitated and it was only a matter of time before Tsumugiya managed to defeat Nui Harime. Closing her eyes and listening as the citizens of Honnou City regained their freedom, the Life Fiber cocoons shattering from the jamming rounds, Satsuki knew the battle was far from over even with the death of her mother, "Ichigo! Matoi! I wish to thank the both of you for your cooperation. Due to your defiance my mother lowered her guard long enough for me to land the finishing blow!"

"I don't know about that... I mean, wasn't she a Life Fiber Hybrid?" Ichigo muttered as he stared at Ragyo's burning form. Scratching the back of his neck, briefly apologizing to Mugetsu when he accidentally hit her eye with his elbow, he couldn't help but think that it shouldn't have been this easy.

"You make a valid point Ichigo, perhaps I should have used more explosives," Satsuki noted with a sly smirk before steeling her expression, "But I find it hard to believe Life Fibers can survive temperatures akin to the surface of the sun."

Ichigo couldn't find anything wrong with what Satsuki said but he couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling in the back of his head. Ragyo Kiryuin was a Life Fiber Hybrid like him and Nui so watching Satsuki kill her so easily bothered him tremendously. Frowning as he stared at Ragyo's corpse, his eyes looking for any sign of movement, Ichigo sighed and realized he was just overthinking things. Rubbing his nose, a relieved sigh escaping his lips, Ichigo perked up and looked

around when he remembered something, "Hey, now that your mother's dead shouldn't we deal with Xcution?"

"Oh crap! I completely forgot about them!" Ryuko frantically looked around, her mood already back to normal, before running to the edge of the runway. Watching as an Xcution member summoned what looked like a large knight against one of the Sternritter she was about to go help when she heard Senketsu grumbling in displeasure. Looking at her left shoulder, the multihued eye of her Kamui narrowed for some reason, Ryuko blinked in confusion and asked, "Hey, what's wrong Senketsu?"

***"It frays my fibers to see those raiment have special abilities,"*** Senketsu's answered, his voice full of annoyance. As a Kamui his strength and power far eclipsed any raiment or regalia but watching those humans throw around ice and summon giant warriors ruffled his Life Fibers. Huffing, his body slightly squeezing around Ryuko in the process, Senketsu turned his gaze up to his wearer, ***"But we don't need any fancy tricks to win, Ryuko! Let's go down there and show those cheap knockoffs what a Kamui like me can do!"***

"You're speaking my language, Senketsu!" Ryuko grinned eagerly. Now that Ragyo Kiryuin was dead, a bit more anticlimactically at that, all that was left was to take down Xcution. The thought that people would willingly work with someone as messed up as Satsuki's mother pissed her off but Ryuko was certain kicking their ass would help make her feel better. As she went to jump down, her first target already picked out, Ryuko stumbled when Satsuki's voice pierced through the air like a knife.

"Where do you think you're going, Matoi?" Satsuki's tone brokered no arguments. Smirking condescendingly at Ryuko, causing the teen to growl in return, Satsuki turned around and walked towards her Elite Four. Flicking Bakuzan to the side, droplets of Ragyo's blood splattering through the air, Satsuki's heel clicked loudly against the runway as an intense blue and white backdrop of light shone from behind her, "Honnouji Academy's forces will be more than enough to deal with Xcution!"

"That's one of the stupidest things I've heard you say, Satsuki Kiryuin!" Ryuko countered irritably, "My friends are down there fighting for their lives! Why the hell would I sit back and do nothing? Isn't that right, Ichigo?"

Ichigo didn't answer Ryuko's question right away, which caused her to growl in frustration, as he tried to ignore the increasingly loud voice in the back of his head. Looking around, his gaze shifting from Ragyo's corpse to Hououmaru's pinned form, he couldn't figure out what was bothering him. Deciding to err on the side of caution he walked towards Satsuki, careful to stay as far away from Ragyo as possible, and scowled, "Ryuko's right. Chad, Uryu and Ururu are fighting for their lives! I'm not about to just sit around and let them die! You know how strong Xcution is so why the hell are you asking us to do something so stupid?"

An airy smile appeared on Satsuki's face as she listened to Ichigo's argument. Tapping Bakuzan against the runway, the black metal chipping away at the steel floor, Satsuki took a deep breath before answering, "As contradictory as it sounds Xcution is not an invincible force, Ichigo. They are merely a collection of people held together by their loyalty and devotion to my mother. Now that she is dead and Hououmaru is incapacitated the only one able to keep them in line is the Grand Couturier. But as you know Nui Harime's full attention is currently focused on avoiding Tsumugiya's attacks. It is only a matter of time before Xcution shatters as their individual vices and weaknesses constructively interfere! I need you to trust me on this, Ichigo. It is my responsibility to correct the mistakes made by Ragyo Kiryuin!"

"As I said not even a minute ago that is one of the stupidest things I've ever heard!" Ryuko grumbled irritably as she listened to Satsuki. When she saw Ichigo seriously considering Satsuki's request she huffed loudly before stabbing her Scissor Blade into the runway and sitting with her back against it. Crossing her arms under her chest, Senketsu's eye matching her expression, Ryuko scoffed and

growled, "What the hell am I going to do while your goons do all the fighting, Satsuki Kiryuin?"

"Do you seriously need to ask such a ridiculous question, Matoi?"

Appearing in front of her, his loud and boisterous voice whipping her red and black hair backwards, Ira Gamagori towered over Ryuko with his eyes glowing a malevolent yellow, "Has your Kamui's power made you daft? At this very moment Ururu Tsumugiya's battle against Nui Harime is destroying Honnouji Academy, which is private property! Such vagrant displays of vandalism and destruction is simply abhorrent! Since you are complaining about having nothing better to do why don't you make yourself useful and offer Tsumugiya assistance in stopping the Grand Couturier?"

"Tone it down, will ya?" Ryuko scoffed as she stuck a finger in her ear. Huffing as the ringing sound reverberating through her head quieted down she snorted and glared up at Gamagori's imposing form, "We're supposed to be allies now or something so get off your stupid high horse. Damn it, I don't know what Mako sees in you."

Gamagori's mouth opened halfway before he paused, a scowl forming on his face, and abruptly snapped it shut. Leaning back, his spike-covered forearms crossed in front of his chest, he glanced left and right before turning his attention back to Ryuko, "Where is Mankanshoku, Matoi?"

Ryuko's stare intensified for a moment, a huff of air escaping her lips, before she sighed and leaned back against the Scissor Blade. Folding her hands behind her head, careful to not hit Senketsu's eye, she yawned in boredom before speaking, "I told Mako to stay in Karakura Town with Ichigo's family. It was too dangerous to bring her along no matter how many snacks and souvenirs she bribed me with. Why do you even care?"

For a few seconds Gamagori seemed unable to speak but eventually he answered as a scowl formed on his face, "I care because as Disciplinary Committee Chair it is my duty to make sure each and

every student is safe... even currently truant ones like Mankanshoku!"

Turning away from Ryuko before she could ask him anymore questions concerning his interest in Mankanshoku Gamagori clasped his hands behind his back and watched as a massive wave of fire clashed violently against a wall of ice. Grimacing as the stadium, and by proxy Honnouji Academy, was slowly but surely being destroyed, Gamagori's eyes shone with a bright yellow light as he activated his Shackle Regalia Mark II. Xcution's flagrant disregard of Honnouji Academy's rules would no longer be tolerated. Stomping towards the edge of the runway, green and purple bolts of electricity arcing around his body, Gamagori did not speak before leaping to join the fray below.

"I've always wanted to collect data about raiment," Inumuta quipped as he watched Gamagori leave. Shaking his head as the Disciplinary Committee Chair's laughter reached his ears, only stopping once Gamagori finally reached the ground, Inumuta pondered over what course of action he should take.

*"Going in covertly will enable to me to gather data about the basic functions of Xcution's raiment,"* Inumuta thought as he crossed his arms, the three gold stars on his Goku Uniform's collar flaring brightly, before he was clad in his Probe Regalia Mark II. As he stood still, the blue polyhedron armor covering his body shimmering in the morning sun, Inumuta frowned as he thought over his second option, *"However direct combat will allow my sensors to collect valuable data surrounding the capabilities of raiment, which is information I can't obtain by standing back and observing from a safe distance..."*

Coming to a decision, his expression masked by his Probe Regalia, Inumuta's body began fading out as he activated his optical camouflage. As his body shimmered before disappearing he held off turning on his acoustical camouflage to ask Jakuzure, "Since information on raiment is so rare this is a perfect time for me to gather some. If it is possible could you allow yourself to get hit with a

few attacks? Data about how your Symphony Regalia responds will be invaluable to Lady Satsuki's future plans."

Glaring at Inumuta Nonon's face darkened into a scowl, "One more clever word and you'll be pulling glass out of your face."

When Inumuta said nothing, his snobbish chuckling fading away as his Probe Regalia's acoustical camouflage kicked in, Nonon scoffed and stomped her foot against the runway. As much as she wanted to make good on her threats she knew that Lady Satsuki's orders came first. After all, she could always hunt Inumuta down after the festival. Touching a hand to her majorette hat, her fingers slowly trailing across the three gold stars, a snake-like grin spread across Nonon's face when she spotted the only person in the world she wanted to fight more than Strawberry.

Walking with a skip to her step, her Goku Uniform shining brightly before her body was surrounded by an explosion of blue stars and energy, Nonon reappeared a few seconds later hovering in the air over the runway clad in her Symphony Regalia Mark III. Spinning around and flying high above the stadium, her thrusters leaving thin contrails in her wake, Nonon held up her right arm as her subwoofers began charging with pink and violet energy. As she heard a gentle hum vibrate through the air, her subwoofers almost fully charged, Nonon looked down at the stadium and grinned viciously when she spotted Riruka Dokugamine.

With her battle staff firing indiscriminate Addiction Shots at Lille Barro, who was forced to break away every few seconds from his battle against Yukio in order to dodge the lethal bursts of energy, Riruka appeared to be in her own little world and completely ignorant of her presence. Smiling as she flipped backwards, a pink aura surrounding her body, Nonon twisted through the air before rocketed down towards the ground. Strafing to the side as Moe Shishigawara was sent flying into the stands from Meninas and Chad's combined attack Nonon shouted, "Let's see how fluffy you think this is, Dokugamine! Symphony Regalia: Prestissimo!"



Riruka's magenta eyes widened in surprise when she heard Nonon's voice pierce through the air. Turning around, her attention shifting from Lille Barro to the petite teenager, she gasped in shock when the pink heart-shaped concussive attacks tore right through her Dollhouse Zone, the microscopic circulating Life Fibers unable to account for the enormous amount of energy, before slamming into her body. Screaming in pain, her Duveteux Raiment's armor cracking slightly from the intense assault, Riruka was blasted through the stadium and out into Honnou City by the force of Nonon's attack.

Staring through the smoking hole she just made in the stadium, her armored lower arms folded across her chest while a smug grin adorned her face, Nonon moved to go after Riruka when she noticed Lille Barro standing nearby. Shouldering his rifle, his right eye quickly glancing at Bambietta's current status against Yukio he gave Nonon a small and courteous nod, "Your assistance is appreciated. Her constant attacks were starting to irritate me."

"There's no need to thank me, Quincy. Dokugamine has always been stubborn as a mule," Nonon answered as her thrusters shifted, sending her flying over the stadium's walls. As her pink eyes followed the trail of smoke and debris created by Riruka's less than graceful landing Nonon wasn't too worried about the gap between their powers. Riruka's raiment was definitely stronger than her Symphony Regalia but the magenta haired girl was as blind as a bat.

As she finally spotted Riruka, the Xcution member's trajectory having ended in the Two-Star Residential District, Nonon quickly spun around as an Addiction Shot pierced through the sky. Lips pulled up into a cocky grin, her speed in the air more than enough to avoid the badly aimed attacks, Nonon laughed as the sound of Riruka's frustration reached her ears.

"I should have known you would do something like this, Jakuzure!" Riruka spat out, her battle staff pointed in Nonon's general direction. Magenta eyes narrowed dangerously as a slight twitch developed over her right eye Riruka used her left hand to point at her Duveteux

Raiment, "Look what you did to my new raiment! Lady Ragyo made this for me herself and you ruined it!"

"I'm so terribly sorry, Dokugamine," Nonon apologized sarcastically while giving Riruka an exaggerated and mocking bow, "But what can I say? Every time I see your ugly face I just get too pissed off to care."

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"Well, that went better than I expected..."

A light and airy chuckle escaped Kisuke Urahara's mouth as he severed the connection between the Kiryuin Manor and Honnouji Academy. As a feeling of unease passed through his body, his coat ruffling as a stiff breeze coursed through the Life Fiber - Forbidden Room, Kisuke placed a hand on his bucket hat and let out a deep sigh. Turning around, his geta squishing against the Life Fibers covering the floor, the jovial smile adorning Kisuke's face vanished as he gazed up at the Original Life Fiber, "Now what I am going to do with you?"

Someone like Kisuke didn't live for as long as he did without developing a keen intuition. So as he stared at the Original Life Fiber, spirals and loops of Life Fibers emerging before disappearing, Kisuke couldn't shake the notion that something was wrong. Getting this far into the Kiryuin Manor should not have been nearly this straightforward. While passing through the wards surrounding the room had taken every piece of knowledge he knew concerning Life Fibers he shouldn't have been able to get this close to the Original Life Fiber without at least activating a trap.

*" I half expected it to attack as soon as I stepped in the room..."*  
Kisuke mused, deep in thought, before examining the hibernating COVERS lining the circular walls. Seeing all the empty white suit-like creatures, tendrils of Life Fibers weaving through their collars,

disturbingly reminded Kisuke of the suit Isshin had worn at his wedding, "... or at least for the COVERS to activate. Either I sorely overestimated Ragyo Kiryuin's intelligence or she has a surprise in store for me..."

As a soft shrilling ring interrupted his thoughts Kisuke reached into his pocket and brought out a device nearly the size of his hand. Staring at the radar-like screen, his mouth pulling into a grimace when he counted nearly thirty contacts, Kisuke knew he didn't have any more time. In less than two minutes he was going to be intercepted by what was most likely Ragyo Kiryuin's private security force. While he wasn't worried about fighting humans, even if they had automatic weapons, Kisuke did not want to wait around only to find Nui Harime leading them.

"I suppose there's no point in waiting any longer," Kisuke drawled, lightly tapping one of his geta against the Life Fibers on the floor, before turning away from the entrance to the room. Spreading his legs apart, his geta leaving small trails on the floor, Kisuke clenched his left wrist as the kanji for cloth appeared on the palm of his hand.

Motioning with his left arm towards the Original Life Fiber, his spiritual energy surging upwards, Kisuke took a deep breath as he shouted the incantation, "My left hand holds the shears to sever fate. My right fist clenches the needle to thread destiny. The falling stars in the heavens flicker and dim! Red fades to black which fades to nothingness! Deny the hand of destiny to obtain the key to freedom! Let the heavens weep and the earth erupt with fire! Life Fiber Seal Number Two - Kōgō Nuno Shīru!"

A pregnant silence filled the room as Kisuke finished the incantation. It had taken the better part of the last two months to invent Kōgō Nuno Shīru and while the technique wasn't yet perfected it seemed to do the trick. Sighing in relief, his breath coming out slightly heavy, Kisuke allowed his arm to fall towards his side when he saw the air around the Original Life Fiber beginning to shimmer with a faint green glow. Squinting slightly when a burst of light permeated the room, the shadows from the hundreds of COVERS lining the room

temporarily vanishing, Kisuke allowed the adrenaline of battle to vanish when he saw the seal was working.

"And Yoruichi always warned me to test my inventions thoroughly..." Kisuke smirked, pride clearly seen on his face, as he witnessed the Kōgō Nuno Shīru surrounding the Original Life Fiber. Taking the form of a green translucent sphere composed of interlocking hexagonal plates, which served to increase its ability to withstand any attacks from the Life Fibers trapped within its confines, the Kōgō Nuno Shīru was designed to completely cut off the Original Life Fiber from the rest of world and prevent whatever Ragyo Kiryuin had planned from commencing.

When the sounds of boots running down the steps right outside the room reached his ears, the sensors reporting thirty three people, Kisuke sighed and scratched at his stubble. From what he could tell none of them were Life Fiber Hybrids like Nui Harime or Ichigo, which meant he'd have no trouble escaping. Gripping Benihime's hilt, his hand ready to unsheathe his zanpakuto at a moment's notice, Kisuke waited patiently as the intricate doors leading into the Life Fiber - Forbidden Room were forcibly slammed open. Humming softly as dozens of people clad in full-body white hazmat suits, their faces completely closed off from the world, Kisuke waved at the blond haired teen wearing a lab coat and a translucent orange facemask.

"Hello! It's quite a strange coincidence to meet you in a fancy place like this!" Kisuke cheerfully exclaimed, causing Iori Shiro to stammer in surprise, before pulling a small fan out of his coat and snapping it open with a flick of his wrist.

"W-Who are you?" Iori asked, the shock of seeing someone standing in the Life Fiber - Forbidden Room momentarily overwhelming him. When he arrived at the manor minutes ago, his uncle already waiting to let the Sewing Club inside, he had been fully prepared to disable the wards surrounding the chamber using the sample of Ragyo Kiryuin's hair Lady Satsuki managed to procure for them. Seeing this

man standing so calmly in front of the most dangerous creature in the world with a sly glint in his eyes was unnerving.

"I'm just the owner of a small candy shop that happens to know a thing or two about Life Fibers," Kisuke answered before chuckling in amusement. It appeared he was wrong about who lori worked for. From the equipment his men were carrying to the way he made sure to not breathe in microscopic Life Fibers it seemed lori's intentions were similar to his own, "But a thank you would be nice. I am the one who dismantled the wards surrounding this room, after all."

lori didn't even know how to respond to Kisuke's explanation. As his patience grew thin he raised his arm, the members of the Sewing Club quickly aiming their weapons at Kisuke, and demanded, "How did you manage to get through the wards?"

"That's an interesting question..." His mouth hidden behind his fan, his voice drawling in a lazy tone, Kisuke had a bemused grin as he pointed a finger in the air and continued, "It was difficult to bypass them without using Ragyo Kiryuin's Life Fibers but as you can see I was able to do it. Also, if you would so kindly look behind me, I managed to seal the Original Life Fiber."

Looking up at the Original Life Fiber for the first time since entering the room lori was shocked to see a faint green sphere surrounding it. He couldn't believe how this man, a complete stranger in the world of Life Fibers, could have accomplished such a feat. Lady Satsuki had spent the last thirteen years plotting to overthrow and stop her mother and yet this man managed to do so without even raising a single alarm? Lowering his arm, his fellow club members relaxing their stances, lori walked forward and shook Kisuke's hand, "I am lori Shiro of Honnouji Academy's Sewing Club! We were sent here by Lady Satsuki to force the Original Life Fiber into hibernation and neutralize the COVERS. I, along with everyone at Honnouji Academy, thank you for your help."

Kisuke scratched at his chin, a blush of embarrassment on his face, and laughed, "Thank you for the compliment but let's not get too

ahead of ourselves! The Kōgō Nuno Shīru was designed to seal away only the Original Life Fiber. All the COVERS surrounding us are still highly dangerous and could activate at any moment!"

Twisting around, his Goku Uniform ruffling in the air from the sudden movement, Iori faced his men and barked, "Spread out and use the Life Fiber freezing agent on every single one of the COVERS. We cannot afford to let any escape!"

As he watched the Sewing Club fan out across the room, their specialized weapons covering the Life Fiber creatures in a special mixture designed to prevent them from moving, Kisuke couldn't help but wonder how things were progressing at Honnouji Academy. It would be foolish to think that sealing away the Original Life Fiber would automatically lead to Ragyo Kiryuin's defeat. Taking her down, as well as Nui Harime, was going to take a lot of time and planning. Ichigo and Ryuko Matoi, along with their respective Kamui, would help dampen Ragyo's advantage but defeating her was going to take more than raw power.

*" That reminds me. I need to have a talk with Isshin about when he was going to tell me Ururu was the Grand Couturier's twin sister. I don't think Yoruichi will -"*

Torn out of his thoughts when the device in his pocket began acting up again, this time with a familiar ringtone, Kisuke fished it out of his coat and read the data streaming down the screen. Quickly interpreting what it meant, a small frown on his face as he realized what was about to happen, Kisuke adjusted his bucket hat and tapped Iori on the shoulder, "I highly advise we all flee the manor as quickly as possible... preferably within the next three or four minutes."

Iori's golden eyes widened at the serious tone in Kisuke's voice. Turning around, his breath fogging up the inside of his facemask, he asked, "What happened?"

"There's no time to explain so I'll give you the summary," Kisuke said as he walked over to his equipment and began packing up, "My sensors detected a brief ultra-high frequency, far out of the range of human hearing, which originated from Honnouji Academy. From what I can tell the signal is supposed to awaken the Original Life Fiber from its slumber. An activation signal if you will."

"Damn..." Iori seethed in frustration. If Ragyo Kiryuin was able to send out an activation signal than Lady Satsuki must have failed to kill her. Shaking his head, unwilling to dwell on the consequences of failure, Iori shouted at the Sewing Club to pull out before looking over his shoulder at Kisuke, "How this this possible? I thought you managed to seal away the Original Life Fiber. Did you not foresee something like this happening?"

Kisuke grimaced, his eyes focused on the minute cracks appearing across the spherical shell, before answering, "I'm afraid therein lies the problem. It took me most of the last two months to create the Kōgō Nuno Shīru, which wasn't nearly enough time to ensure it would work. Creating a technique of such complexity, especially when you're trying to not draw the attention of someone like Ragyo Kiryuin's little helper, is not a walk in the park. Judging from the current rate of degradation we have roughly six minutes until the seal fails completely."

Scowling Iori turned to the members of the Sewing Club, who had gathered in front of him, and shouted, "You heard the man so move out! The fact that the Original Life Fiber is waking up means Lady Satsuki's plan has failed! Head back to Honnouji Academy and -"

"That would not be a good idea..."

Iori's whipped around, a furious expression on his face, and argued, "I am not going to leave Lady Satsuki to fend against her mother alone!"

Kisuke waited patiently for Iori to finish speaking before he sighed wearily. Placing a hand on his bucket hat, the shadows covering his

face making him appear far older, Kisuke mulled over his answer before explaining, "The fact Ragyo Kiryuin sent the activation signal means things at Honnouji Academy probably aren't going as smoothly as you hoped. Oh boy, I suspect Honnouji Academy is about to become the scene of something truly terrifying..."

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Standing on the edge of the runway, her long black hair blowing in the wind, Satsuki allowed her lips to curl into a smirk as she watched the progress of the battles raging below. Closing her eyes, her mind deep in thought, as a series of explosions from deep within the academy shattered most of the windows Satsuki could sense the climax of the Great Culture and Sports Festival rapidly approaching. With Ichigo's allies dealing with Xcution and Matoï assisting Tsumugiya in neutralizing the Grand Couturier it was merely a matter of time before victory was all but assured.

Turning her head slightly when a burst of red light shone through the broken windows of Honnouji Academy, followed soon after by Matoï's cursing, Satsuki wondered what was taking her so long to deal with Nui Harime. When the Grand Couturier's battle against her twin sister brought her onto the runway Satsuki had been certain Nui was on the verge of defeat. The blonde haired Life Fiber Hybrid had been panting heavily while favoring her left leg, her right eye nearly forced shut by a trail of blood oozing down from her forehead, as her bloody hand tightly gripped her new Needle Blade. For a moment Satsuki weighed dealing the final blow, a form of repentance for the lives Nui ruined, but stopped when she was literally beaten to the punch by Matoï.

As soon as Matoï noticed Nui Harime she had leapt to her feet, pulled the red Scissor Blade out of the runway and smashed her fist against the preoccupied Grand Couturier's face with enough force to send her flying into the stands. Before she had gone after Nui, Senketsu steaming with power, Matoï had turned to Ichigo and



shouted that they had a lot to talk about after she kicked Nui's ass and that he better not die before she got back.

A frown developed on Satsuki's face as a strange tightness spread across her chest. Quickly assuming the strain of wearing Junketsu was the cause Satsuki retracted her conclusion when she noticed the absence of malice in her Kamui's multihued eyes. Pursing her lips as she failed to determine the cause of the feeling Satsuki shook her head and mentally noted to figure it out once the festival was over.

"Is this your so-called freedom, Lady Satsuki?"

Pinning down beneath Sanageyama's Blade Regalia, her white suit scuffed and dirtied, Rei Hououmaru glared furiously at Satsuki as a small trickle of blood coursed down her face. Once Hououmaru saw she had the teenager's full attention she laughed and asked, "Can someone like you truly call this freedom?"

"I'm not surprised you are unable to see what is in front of your eyes, Hououmaru," Satsuki answered evenly as she stared down at the incapacitated Hououmaru before scoffing at the glare she received in return, "A willing slave to Life Fibers such as yourself does not possess the right to argue about freedom."

"You claim I don't know freedom but you yourself are completely ignorant of the concept," Hououmaru let her head rest against the runway for a second, her chest rising and falling as she laughed, before looking directly into Satsuki's eyes, "Were your exact words at the start of the school year not 'fear is freedom' and 'subjugation is liberation'? The foundations of your little academy are as far removed from freedom as Lady Ragyo was from humanity. The truth of the matter is you have no idea what freedom, true or otherwise, is!"

Satsuki stared at Hououmaru for several seconds, her gaze firm despite the storm of emotions in her blue eyes, before she turned and motioned with her arm towards the stadium surrounding them.

As the battles against Xcution continued to shift in her favor, the additional power of her Elite Four's regalia helping to turn the tide, Satsuki slammed Bakuzan against the runway as she answered, "I beg to differ. You are basing your ideas of freedom off misguided concepts and false ideals. Does not the military tear down new recruits before building them back up? I took that concept, sharpened and tempered over thousands of years, and applied it to Honnouji Academy! There cannot be freedom if humanity is not willing to fight for it!"

"That's an interesting point of view, Lady Satsuki," Hououmaru sneered, her tone sarcastic and mocking, before wincing when Sanageyama adjusted his grip. Waiting a moment for the pain to subside, a temporarily scowl on her face, Hououmaru took a deep breath before continuing, "If that is the case answer me this - what do you intend to do once this day is over? Will you simply step aside and allow the chaos that will envelop humanity to unfold or will you take your mother's place as head of Revocs?"

"Such absurdity is unbecoming of you, Hououmaru," Satsuki scathingly replied as she listened to the dark skinned woman's mocking tone. Tightening her grip around Bakuzan's hilt, the leather crackling under the pressure, Satsuki scoffed lightly before she continued, "Revocs shall not survive the death of my mother and the destruction of Xcution. Take a look around and tell me what you see. Your fellow slaves to Life Fibers are being systematically defeated, their raiment no match for the strength of humanity."

"That may be true... there are those who possess the necessary strength to oppose Life Fibers," Hououmaru chuckled as she once again allowed her head to rest on the runway. Lips curling upwards into an unseen smirk when she felt the Life Fibers in her uniform begin to quiver with power Hououmaru glowered at Satsuki and said, "... but the same does not apply to you, Lady Satsuki."

When Satsuki didn't speak, her full attention on the incapacitated woman, Hououmaru's smirk evolved into full blown laughter, "The power you claim is your own is nothing more than what you

borrowed from Junketsu. Every battle your little academy won, every school conquered in the name of Lady Ragyo, every single one of your accomplishments is because you used Life Fibers! If it weren't for the generosity of Lady Ragyo you would be nothing more than a scared child. Face it... it is only because of Junketsu's power that you were able to stab your mother in the back like a pathetic little -"

"You shall not insult Lady Satsuki anymore!"

Hououmaru was cut off when Sanageyama grabbed her head, his Blade Regalia's gauntlet gripping her light purple hair like a vice, and painfully slammed it against the runway with a resounding thud. As he leaned over the coughing secretary, blindfolded eyes narrowing dangerously, Sanageyama slowly pulled Hououmaru out of the runway and held his shinai under her throat, "Say one more word and I shall make you regret it!"

"Stay your hand, Sanageyama," Satsuki ordered, the simple sound of her voice causing the blind youth to lower his shinai, as she slowly walked towards the incapacitated Hououmaru. Grimacing in disgust Satsuki raised Bakuzan, streaks of dark crimson coating the blade's surface, and placed it directly under Hououmaru's chin, "Your words do not move me, Hououmaru. Do you have anything else to say before I pass judgment?"

The dark skinned woman bit her lip as she coughed, flecks of blood coating the runway, before scoffing at Satsuki, "Tell me one thing, Lady Satsuki. When was it you decided to betray Lady Ragyo?"

"You seem to be under the delusion that I was ever loyal to my mother!" Satsuki exclaimed passionately as the backdrop of light reappeared behind her head. Staring down at Hououmaru, the dark skinned woman forced to squint slightly from the intense light, Satsuki's face twisted into an angry scowl as the list of every atrocity and crime the woman committed flitted across her mind. Flicking her wrist, sunlight reflecting brilliantly off Bakuzan's blade, Satsuki's presence seemed to double as she shouted, "Everything I have

done over the past thirteen years has been to see this day come to pass! Ever since she had my father murdered and -"

Hououmaru spat a glob of blood on the ground as she was forced to listen to Satsuki's vapid excuses. Glowering as she ignored the backdrop of light that could only dream of matching the splendor of her mother's Hououmaru's lips curled up into a half-smirk as she interrupted her, "So this is all about revenge? That only makes you even more of a joke, Lady Satsuki. Did you not tell Ryuko Matoi that her goal of killing the Grand Couturier was pathetic and empty?"

"There is a difference between Matoi and myself," Satsuki bit back before turning her head to hide the slight paling of her face, "She wished for nothing more than simple vengeance against the Grand Couturier for murdering her father. I, on the hand, wished not for revenge but retribution against my mother for all the crimes and atrocities she's committed in the name of Life Fibers."

"You must think you sound so righteous right now, don't you Lady Satsuki?" Hououmaru's smirk widened when she saw a brief glimmer of uncertainty appear on Satsuki's face, "If this claim of retribution is the truth then why did you alienate every ally that could possibly help defeat Life Fibers? Lady Ragyo told you of Nudist Beach's strength and power yet you did everything you could to destroy them. Why?"

"It was necessary to keep Revocs and my mother in the dark," Satsuki explained calmly even as her voice developed a scathing undertone, "My mother was a shrewd and calculating woman who killed anyone that stood in her way however she made one. Fatal. Error. Before she had my father murdered he entrusted me with the truth and responsibility of destroying Life Fibers. That is why I stood in silence at her side and behaved like a good daughter! It did not matter what I had to do, whether it be attacking Nudist Beach or capturing traitors to Revocs. If it meant destroying my mother then I would harden my heart and commit atrocities without pause!"

A massive explosion lit up the stadium in shades of red and auburn as Satsuki finished speaking. Pulling Bakuzan away from Hououmaru's throat Satsuki sneered before stabbing the blade into the runway and shouting, "You dare to claim my methods pushed away my allies? By taking the title of villain I made sure Nudist Beach's full attention was on me at all times!"

Her brow creasing in confusion when Satsuki snapped her fingers Hououmaru felt Sanageyama's grip on her body shift before she was suddenly and violently lofted into the air. Held firmly in his Blade Regalia's grip, his Blade Regalia preventing her from moving her fingers more than inch, Hououmaru sneered but she could not hide the astonishment on her face at what she saw transpiring below - Xcution was losing.

Amber eyes wide in surprise Hououmaru watched as Giriko Kutsuzawa was slowly and systematically overwhelmed by the combined power of Uryu Ishida and Houka Inumuta. Hououmaru couldn't understand how that was even possible. Giriko's Époque Raiment should have been more than powerful enough to kill the two teenagers without much difficulty and yet she could see him struggling to keep up with Uryu's speed and Inumuta's digital clones and optical camouflage. Mouth slightly agape when she saw Uryu avoid Giriko's attack only for Inumuta to appear out of thin air and land a bone shattering kick Hououmaru turned towards Satsuki, her voice full of fury, and asked, "How is this possible! Xcution should be strong enough to deal with a few humans!"

"The true power of humanity is not dependent on Life Fibers!" Satsuki shouted, her voice reaching over the sound of explosions. Smirking victorious as she felt the endgame approaching Satsuki hoisted Bakuzan into the air and exclaimed, "Today marks the end of Revocs!"

"Au contraire, my foolish daughter, we have yet to truly start..."

Satsuki gasped, her blue eyes widening in astonishment, at the intimately familiar voice behind her. Turning around, disbelief racing

through her mind, Satsuki saw her mother standing on the far end of the runway with her arms folded under her chest. While the pure white dress, which had been burnt to nothingness under the intense heat of the flames, was restored to pristine condition it was the fact that Ragyo's head was back on her shoulders that stunned her more than anything.

Clapping her hands sarcastically, a wide and mocking smile on her face, Ragyo Kiryuin stood tall as she stopped holding in her rainbow aura. As the multicolored light burst forth from her body, illuminating the stadium in its brilliance, Ragyo spread her arms out and laughed, "Your skill at monologue is quite impressive, Satsuki. That little speech was truly inspiring even if half of what you said was nothing but lies. Hmm... your fear and terror seems to have rendered you mute. Can you not comprehend what is in front of your eyes?"

"Impossible!" Satsuki finally stammered incredulously as her voice returned. Gnashing her teeth together as a bead of nervous sweat dripped down her face she glared harshly at her mother with cold blue eyes, Bakuzan gripped tightly in her hand, and growled, "How did you survive?"

"Did you truly believe something like that was hot enough to destroy Life Fibers?" Ragyo asked wistfully as she rested her cheek against the palm of her hand, "Quelle folie..."

Turning her attention to Ichigo, her interest in Satsuki faded momentarily, Ragyo quirked an eyebrow when she noticed he looked far less shocked at her miraculous survival than her daughter. Lips curling into a pleased smile while the rainbow light shining from her hair increased in brightness Ragyo could not help but shake her head and wished once more that Ichigo had been her child instead of Satsuki. Allowing a sigh to escape her lips Ragyo smirked in bemusement as she addressed Satsuki, "As long as a single Life Fiber remains of my body I can fully regenerate from any injury. Satsuki... the screams of pain you're convinced you heard was simply acting. However I'm afraid that is a lesson you'll learn far too late."

"Is that so?" Satsuki's fear bled away only to be replaced by anger and frustration. It had been foolish for her to assume that her mother, a Life Fiber Hybrid, would be killed so easily. Tightly clenching her hands around Bakuzan's hilt, sunlight glistening off the blade, Satsuki's brow creased into a scowl, "Your arrogance will be your downfall, Ragyo Kiryuin! If severing your head does not suffice than I shall grind your body into nothing but dust!"

"Hmm..." Ragyo chuckled and cocked her head back, manicured hands delicately folded on her hips, as she listened to Satsuki's declaration, "Is that anyway to speak to your mother? I know I taught you proper manners. And you had the gall to call me a monster. I'm -"

Ragyo cut herself off when her enhanced hearing picked up the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching her. Lips curling up in amusement as she waited, maroon eyes wide with mirth, Ragyo wasn't disappointed when Ichigo appeared in the air above her a moment later. Clad in Mugetsu's Zangetsu configuration, power thrumming through his Kamui as he held Tournesol aloft above his head, Ichigo gritted his teeth as he swung at Ragyo only for her to easily sidestep the attack without even looking.

"It is rude to interrupt someone else's conversation, Ichigo. Did your father teach you nothing?" Ragyo's voice was little more than a bemused whisper as she turned to face Ichigo. Dodging the sneak attack with enviable ease she turned to face Ichigo and stared into his shocked brown eyes before she reared her arm back and jabbed it directly into his stomach. Stoically watching Ichigo gag, his breath coming out harshly, Ragyo sighed wistfully as he was blown down the runway towards her daughter, "But then again this is Isshin we're talking about..."

Sliding to a stop in front of Satsuki's feet, his stomach feeling like Kenpachi tried to use it as his personal punching bag, Ichigo grunted in pain as he propped himself on his elbows. Staring down the runway at Ragyo, who had a bemused look on her face, Ichigo was getting sick and tired of people giving him vague as hell hints about

things that happened in the past. As he pushed himself onto his knees and stood back up Ichigo made a mental note to remember to force his old man to explain everything about his relationship with Ragyo Kiryuin.

"That was incredibly foolish of you, Ichigo." Satsuki didn't even bother sparing Ichigo a disappointed aside glance as she spoke, "Did you really think something as simple as a sneak attack would work on my mother?"

"I wasn't about to just stand around. Her voice was starting to get on my nerves," Ichigo snapped back in annoyance. Usually he would spend the time his opponent talked about their powers or whatever to come up with a plan to take them down but Ragyo Kiryuin was different. Now that he had a moment to think about it she was a lot like Aizen - smug, smart and overbearingly powerful. In his brief battle against her alongside Ryuko he could sense that she wasn't even trying to fight back so attempting to come up with a plan to defeat her was going to take more than a few minutes. Tightening his grip on Tournesol, Mugetsu shifting back to her base configuration to conserve energy, Ichigo stood next to Satsuki and asked, "You have any ideas how to take her down?"

Ragyo strummed her fingers against her arm, her lips pursed in a disappointed frown, as Satsuki chastised Ichigo. After allowing them to argue for about a minute, her amusement growing by the second, Ragyo clapped her hands to get Ichigo and Satsuki's attention. Watching as their bodies tensed in preparation for an attack Ragyo folded her arms beneath her chest and looked at her daughter, "Oh my... it seems that preparing for this festival has caused me to completely forget. Satsuki, how goes your courtship with Ichigo?"

Despite Sanageyama's harsh coughing in the background, causing him to accidentally push Hououmaru deeper into the runway, Satsuki heard her mother loud and clear. Narrowing her eyes while biting her lower lip she asked, "What are you talking about?"



"I was just curious about how things were proceeding," Ragyo answered nonchalantly. Smirking as she noticed the faintest of blushes adorning her daughter's cheeks, something which Satsuki was desperately trying to hide, the Kiryuin matriarch paced back and forth across the runway as a series of light snickers escaped her mouth, "You cannot fool your own mother, Satsuki. Your words came across as clear as day despite your best attempts to hide them behind ambiguity. The night of the Parent Student Day, when I gave you permission to court Ichigo, your words were full of praise. Why, I'd even go as far to say you were enamored with him."

When Satsuki did not respond, her head hanging low as her hand clenched dangerously around Bakuzan's hilt, Ragyo's eyes widened in mock surprise, "Don't tell me you never made a move on Ichigo. That's such a shame... by the time I was your age I had dozens of men pining for my attention. Granted I didn't care at all about them but that's no excuse for you. As your mother I want only the best for you so let me tell you that asking is always the hardest part. Once you actually ask Ichigo out I'm sure that he'll be more than willing to accept, wouldn't you Ichigo?"

"What the hell kind of loaded question is that?" Ichigo shouted as he desperately tried to ignore the five pairs of eyes focused completely on him. He remembered clearly the last time his dad tried to give him advice about dating girls and Ichigo was adamant on preventing another debacle like that from ever happening.

"It's not a loaded question if the answer is either yes or no," Ragyo clarified as she propped her cheek against her fist, a sigh of contentment flowing from her lips.

"That is too a loaded question!" Ichigo argued as he took a step back from Ragyo. As a blush of embarrassment spread across his cheeks Ichigo vigorously pointed at Ragyo and shouted, "If I say no then you'll just ask what is wrong with Satsuki. Not only that her four goons will hunt me down and force me to say yes! So no matter what I say there is no correct answer!"

"Just like Isshin..." Ragyo shook in head in amusement, memories of her first encounter with Isshin forefront in her mind, before turning half-lidded maroon eyes to Satsuki, "You've been awfully silent, Satsuki. Don't tell me that you're too embarrassed by your mother's gossip that you've forgotten how to speak. If it's really that difficult for you I suppose I can offer you a helpful hand. If I remember correctly Isshin tried to make a self-help video nineteen years ago. I can go get it and -"

That was the last straw for Satsuki. Glaring at her mother, a blush visible on her face despite the rage simmering in her eyes, Satsuki gritted her teeth and shouted, "That's enough of this foolishness, Ragyo Kiryuin! We will not listen to any more of your lies!"

"Actually... she's not lying..."

Refusing to look at Satsuki, his gaze firmly on the stands to his left, Ichigo scratched at the nape of his neck, "The video actually exists. It's... worse than it sounds. I would rather fight Nui Harime without Mugetsu than be forced to watch that... that monstrosity again."

"It wasn't that bad," Ragyo smirked as she felt something prickling at the edges of her senses. Realizing it was time for things to reach a crescendo, the rainbow light emanating from her hair intensifying, Ragyo looked up into the sky and chuckled, "I do suppose Isshin tends to go overboard when he gets excited but that only makes me love him even more. Why, I remember one Valentine's Day when Isshin confused ounces with kilograms. It took months to go through sixteen kilograms of chocolate candies..."

Satsuki ignored the mutter of 'oh damn it' from Ichigo as she tried to pierce through the veil her mother was setting up. Staring at her mother while observing everything she did or said Satsuki decided to bait her. Lowering Bakuzan, Ragyo's eyebrows quirked in interest, Satsuki smirked and said, "You were right about one thing. I do harbor feelings for Ichigo but he already knows that. What we experienced in Karakura Town is not something that can be replicated."

A stiff wind blew through the stadium after Satsuki finished speaking. There was a momentary silence as everyone turned towards her before Ragyo gasped and covered her mouth, "Oh my... I was wrong about you, Satsuki. You managed to take things with Ichigo much further than I would have dared to dream..."

"WHAT!" Sanageyama's shout of disbelief reached far across the stadium, causing the various combatants fighting below to briefly look upwards in confusion for a moment. Shifting his weight so that Hououmaru was pinned down with his leg Sanageyama threateningly waved his shinai at Ichigo as he looked at Satsuki, "Tell me that didn't happen, Lady Satsuki!"

"It didn't happen!" Ichigo exclaimed instead, the sheer nonsense of the situation finally getting to him. Pointing a finger at Ragyo, who had a look of innocence on her face, he turned to Sanageyama and shouted, "She's screwing around with us! Nothing like that happened in Karakura Town!"

"Ichigo..."

As Ichigo was about to swear to Sanageyama under pain of death that did not, in fact, have sex with Lady Satsuki he froze upon hearing the aforementioned woman's cold voice. Turning slowly towards Satsuki, whose attention was firmly locked on her mother, Ichigo swallowed nervously, "Yes?"

"Did my mother..." Satsuki seemed to be repressing a vast amount of embarrassment as she spoke, her tone constantly shifting back and forth between tranquility and fury as she glared with hatred at Ragyo, "... just imply what I think she did?"

"Come now Satsuki, there's no shame in finding a man to love," Ragyo added, unperturbed about the furious gaze her daughter was giving her. When the prickling sensation at the back of her mind grew stronger, the state of Life Fibers nearly palpable, Ragyo pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed, "I suppose I am a tad jealous that your first time was with Ichigo. I truly wish Isshin Shiba was mine but

unfortunately that claim belongs to Souichiro and we all know how well that turned out..."

Ignoring Ragyo referring to his dad as Shiba for the moment, which would only serve to open a can of worms that he wasn't prepared to deal with, Ichigo glanced at Satsuki and saw that she was on the verge of losing it. Turning to Satsuki's mother, shuddering slightly at the implications of her words, he asked, "Are you saying you and my old man -"

"It is not polite to ask a woman such intimate questions. If you are curious I suppose you can ask Isshin but, knowing that man, he will probably come up with a random excuse and run away," Ragyo rested a hand against her cheek and turned away from Ichigo and Satsuki with a faint blush on her face in order to hide the conniving grin threatening to spread across her face. Taking a moment to scan the stadium below Ragyo noted that Xcution was nearly on the verge of defeat and sighed. Good help was just so hard to find these days. Even after she spent time and money searching for people with exceptionally high resistance to Life Fibers they still couldn't compare to a Kamui or a hybrid like herself.

"Still... losing Isshin did have some benefits," Ragyo muttered quietly as she turned back to face Ichigo. Amusingly staring at Ichigo, her maroon eyes observing every twitch of his body, Ragyo shook her head, "I think we've gotten a bit off topic. You never did answer my question about whether you would agree to court Satsuki."

Biting her lip hard enough to nearly draw blood as she desperately tried to hide the blush spread across her cheeks Satsuki glared at Sanageyama when she heard him still arguing with Ichigo. As the blind kendo master wilted and quickly shut up under her furious gaze Satsuki turned back around to Ragyo and seethed, "No more stalling, Ragyo Kiryuin! There is nothing you can say to prevent your death!"

"I do suppose we've reached an impasse," Ragyo looked off the side, her eyes focused on something in the distance, before she

sighed, "It seems Xcution is missing someone. It looks like I'm going to have to discuss the proper etiquette when taking a vacation with that coward when I return to Revocs."

"You are delusional if you believe you'll escape this fate, Ragyo Kiryuin!" Sliding her foot back, Bakuzan held perpendicular to the ground, Satsuki's eyes were cold as she glowered at her mother, "For all the crimes you committed, every atrocity you inflicted upon humanity, your life is now forfeit!"

"Oh, is that so?" Ragyo's tone was sarcastic, her eyes half-lidded out of boredom, as she chuckled in amusement. It was entertaining to listen to Satsuki but it looked like she was out of time, "Then by all means do your best to take my head a second time, Satsuki. It wasn't like Ichigo and Ryuko Matoi tried their hardest to land a single hit on me only to fail..."

"You continue to underestimate me, Ragyo Kiryuin!" Satsuki shouted passionately as she stepped towards her mother, Bakuzan held tightly in her grip, "You may be strong but -"

"Hold that thought for a moment, Satsuki." Turning around and exposing her back to Satsuki Ragyo walked down the runway, her steps slow and deliberate, before she came to a stop right near the end. Staring out over the stadium, her maroon eyes closed as her lips curled up into a smirk, Ragyo raised her hand into the air and snapped her fingers. As a pulse of power rippled outwards, causing Ichigo to involuntarily shudder, Ragyo looked over her shoulder as the sky turned blood red, "Now, what was it you were saying?"

Staring up into the sky, the crisscrossing familiar pattern of Life Fibers turning the clouds and sun an evil shade of crimson, Ichigo watched as thousands of Life Fibers began to slowly descend. Brown eyes widening as the dense balls of Life Fibers spun around before they each transformed into thin white suits, red energy shining out from their interiors, Ichigo took a nervous step back, "What the hell are those things?"

"Those are COVERS. Beings created from the Original Life Fibers," Ragyo exclaimed joyfully as she turned around. Holding her arms outwards, the rainbow aura shining from her body reaching unprecedented levels, Ragyo chuckled and asked, "Now then, just how long were you planning to lay around, Hououmaru?"

Almost as soon as Ragyo finished speaking Sanageyama was thrown through the air as a burst of energy exploded from Hououmaru's body. While the sounds of the Athletic Committee Chair came to an abrupt stop as he crashed into the stadium below Hououmaru stood up, her movements unaffected by her wounds, and slowly put on her aviator sunglasses, "My apologies, Lady Ragyo, I was simply waiting for your signal."

"That's quite alright, Hououmaru," Ragyo smirked at the stunned look on Satsuki's face, "Your acting was admirable. Satsuki could do to learn a few things from you. Now be a dear and keep Ichigo busy for a few minutes. Satsuki and I need to have a mother-daughter moment..."

Hououmaru nodded in affirmation as she turned to Ichigo. While Mugetsu was undoubtedly strong and could overpower her raiment she had one thing both Ichigo and Satsuki lacked - experience. Twenty years of working for Lady Ragyo, both as her secretary and leader of Xcution, would more than make up for whatever physical advantage the orange haired teenager held. Holding one hand towards Ichigo, her palm facing the sky, Hououmaru's eyes narrowed while a rainbow aura began surrounding her body, "You cannot be allowed to interfere any longer, Ichigo. Xcution Uniform: Écusson -"

Ichigo scowled and raised Tournesol in preparation for whatever strange techniques the woman's raiment possessed. As he watched a rainbow aura envelop the dark skinned woman's body, contrasting heavily with her pure white suit, Ichigo was caught completely off guard when something flew through the air and slammed into Hououmaru's face faster than he could track. Wincing as he watched Hououmaru's body get launched into the air before bouncing off one of the large screens, her body hitting several more objects before

crashing indignantly into the stands, Ichigo turned back towards whatever hit her and was astonished at what he saw, "The hell... Kon?"

"Who were you expecting... the Easter Bunny?" Stumbling dizzily on the runway, barely able to keep on his feet, Kon shook his head once he noticed Ichigo and Satsuki staring at him. Quickly recovering his senses the mod soul pointed one stubby arm at Ichigo and shouted, "Your dad's insane, Ichigo! He said I was going to have a fun time before he threw me clear across this screwed up city! And what the heck's up with the sky? Are those flying suits?"

"Étonnante... a perfect COVERS..." Ragyo's maroon eyes widened in excitement, the little worry she had for Hououmaru vanishing, as she stared at Kon in amazement. She could not believe Isshin managed to create an independent COVERS that did not require a naked ape as a power source. Her precious Nui had mentioned meeting a COVERS called Kon in Honnou City but Ragyo never believed she would actually see it with her own eyes.

"What's going on, Ichigo? Does that woman have a rainbow trapped in her hair?" Kon asked, completely ignorant of the impending COVERS invasion. Huffing and walking up to Ichigo while making sure to sneak a perverted glance at Satsuki's skimpy attire Kon hummed thoughtfully as he stared at Ragyo before his beady eyes blinked, "Oh! I almost forgot. Your dad said I needed to give someone called Ragyo a message. Uh... let's see... I think it was 'raise your art for a surprise' or something. It was really hard to understand what he was saying at the time."

Ragyo's silver eyebrows rose in interest at Kon's rambling. She may not have cared about what the COVERS was saying but she was quite interested in how it could move. Despite his size Kon was composed entirely of Life Fibers but for the life of her she couldn't figure out how Isshin bypassed the need for a human power source. As she raised her arm, a rainbow Life Fiber emerging from her finger, Ragyo stopped when she found a familiar hand clamped around her wrist.

"First of all... Kon, it was 'raise your arm' not art," Isshin Kurosaki corrected as he appeared behind Ragyo while keeping a tight grip on her wrist. Sparing the Kiryuin matriarch a quick glance, her maroon eyes wide in true surprise, Isshin turned to his son and shouted, "Secondly... Ragyo has a point, Ichigo! Why have you not asked Satsuki out yet?"

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## **Kamui Tales #26 - The Home Video**

"So... you made a video?"

Sitting behind her desk at Revocs, a silver eyebrow quirking upwards from both interest and apprehension, Ragyo Kiryuin stared at the VHS tape Isshin was holding in his hands. Watching as the man waved it back and forth in the air with pride evident on his face Ragyo blinked once before sighing, "Dare I ask what's on it?"

"It's just something I whipped up!" Isshin answered with a chuckle, "Since Masaki is expecting in five months I thought now was a good time to get started on some parenting videos!"

Ragyo suppressed a shudder as she thought about what Isshin could have put on that tape but as much as she wished to politely refuse she knew that was impossible. She could not afford for Isshin, as much as she loved the man, to become suspicious of her experiments. Her attempts to infuse Satsuki with Life Fibers had already failed miserably and as she rubbed her stomach Ragyo hoped her second child would be a much better candidate. If her second daughter failed, and knowing Souichiro's lousy genes that was a distinct possibility, she had just one more avenue to get the perfect child...

"As thrilled as I am about your... dedication to parenting, Isshin, this is a terrible idea," Ragyo shook her head and leaned forward,



propping her chin on top of her hands. Staring into familiar maroon eyes, the rainbow light from her silver hair dimming slightly, Ragyo looked at Isshin with a hint of irritation and asked, "Do you recall what you tried to do after Satsuki was born?"

Isshin's face was a mask of innocence as he looked anywhere but into Ragyo's eyes. He knew exactly what she was talking about but he wasn't about to admit anything, "... no?"

Ragyo's eyes narrowed at Isshin's blatant lie before she raised her right hand and snapped her fingers, "Batou, if you will be so kind as to remind Isshin of the events of May 21st of last year?"

"Please don't remind me..." Batou rubbed his eyes as that nightmarish day when Isshin had the bright idea to barge into the hospital. As Head of Revocs General Security it was his job to keep people away from Ragyo Kiryuin but on that day it was like he was tracking a damn ghost, "... none of my men have any idea how he got into your room, Lady Ragyo. Olivier is still pissed to high heaven that Isshin managed to bypass every single precaution and defense she set up and don't get me started on Genesis. That bastard really needs to develop a sense of humor."

Batou remembered May 21st as if it happened yesterday. Lady Ragyo had just given birth to her daughter, Satsuki, so the entire hospital was full to the brim with Revocs security and personnel intent on making sure no one, even her close friends, got to her room. He had been on break in the hospital's coffee room when the report came in that someone was heading up to Ragyo's room. That would not have bothered him, apart from ordering security to intercept them, if the intruder hadn't suddenly vanished only to reappear walking out of the men's room on the third floor.

"Hey Isshin..." Batou chose his words carefully as he stared at the man that so casually tore apart his security force, "... are you ever going to explain how the hell you jumped thirty feet into the air?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Isshin huffed childishly before laughing, "The stairs just happened to be next to the bathroom and I really had to go!"

Rolling his eyes at the apparent stupidity of Lady Ragyo's close friend Batou leaned his head back and groaned, "Damn, I'm never going to be drunk enough to understand how the hell you screwed with me."

"Isshin's lack of tact aside I do believe I speak for all of humanity in expressing horror at what could be on this tape," Ragyo gingerly took the tape from Isshin and contemplated crushing it. Deciding not to upon realizing Isshin probably made several copies Ragyo stared at the black tape and asked, "Before I even consider watching this I need to know one thing - what exactly is on it?"

A large smile appeared on Isshin face as he began making exaggerated motions with his arms, "I knew that once the doctors said Masaki was going to have a boy that it was inevitable that he would become close with your Satsuki! Therefore I took it upon myself, as a dedicated and eager young father, to make a video showing the rights and wrongs of a relationship! On that tape I have singlehandedly acted out several scenes that a budding young couple should know!"

As Batou began retching in the corner, his imagination betraying his mind's orders to not think about what Isshin could have done on that tape, Ragyo's eyebrow quirked up as her maroon eyes widened in interest. Looking down at the tape, her lips curling up into a smile, Ragyo chuckled and said, "Well... I do suppose I should watch it just in case I need to explain things to Satsuki when she's older."

# Blumenkranz

*It's been a while but here is Chapter 40 and the finale for the Honnouji Academy Arc. I must say that it's been quite a ride coming here. I started the story on February 2 nd and less than a year later I'm almost 600.000 words and 40 chapters into this epic story! Every single review, alert and PM is appreciated and for those of you that PM'ed me and didn't receive a reply I apologize for that. As for the title, which I can hear some of you complaining about, the answer is very interesting. At first I wanted to keep the standard naming scheme and use a rock song but I soon realized as the finale of the arc it needed to have an impact. What better and strong name is there for a chapter where everything comes to a climax involving Ragyo Kiryuin than Blumenkranz?*

*So I would like to wish you all a Merry Christmas and hope that this chapter does not do what Episode 13 did and almost ruin the holidays. And as I mention every chapter or two (sometimes three) I have a tvtropes page for this story. If you have the time you should head over and read it while perhaps adding a few things along the way. So don't forget to read and review and enjoy the chapter!*

*Unfortunately there is no omake this chapter. At 26.500 words this chapter is long enough.*

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## Chapter 40 - Blumenkranz

The silence on the runway was palpable as Isshin Kurosaki appeared behind Ragyo Kiryuin, his hand clasped tightly around her thin wrist. As Ragyo slowly turned around, an incredulous expression on her face, Isshin stubbornly kept his attention on Satsuki and Ichigo. Taking a single step to the side, his white doctor's coat

fluttering gently in the breeze, Isshin adjusted his grip on Ragyo's wrist as he waited impatiently for what his son would say. When Ichigo instead scowled in annoyance Isshin frowned and raised his voice, "Are you deaf or something, Ichigo? It was a simple yes or no question!"

"I'm not going to tell you just because you asked me twice," Ichigo sarcastically answered, his scathing remark accompanied by an annoyed roll of his eyes. Resting Tournesol against his shoulder, his attention unaffected as an explosion disintegrated part of Honnouji Academy, Ichigo noticed the familiar look in his father's eyes and couldn't help but scoff, "If I didn't tell Satsuki's mom I'm sure as hell not going to tell you."

Isshin flinched at his son's adamant refusal to share any of the details with him, "Your emotions are leading you to a terrible fate, Ichigo! What will Ryuko think when she finds out you have feelings for Satsuki?"

"She will think you're insane just like everyone else," Ichigo retorted angrily while all too aware of the subtle narrowing of Satsuki's eyes. Taking a moment to calm down, years of experience reminding him that trying to argue with his dad was an effort in futility, Ichigo groaned loudly and asked, "What the hell are you even doing here?"

"Can't a father visit his troublemaking son without having an ulterior motive?" Isshin countered angrily before shaking his head in disappointment. Sometimes Ichigo was too smart for his own good. Visibly leaning away from Ragyo as she attempted to move closer into his arms Isshin's face scrunched up in irritation at his son's behavior, "Once I'm finished speaking with Ragyo you and I are going to have a long talk about proper manners, young man! Knowing that you had a girlfriend and didn't tell me is insulting on six different levels! I was starting to worry that perhaps you were turning out to be like Uryu..."

"Shut the hell up already..." Ichigo muttered in annoyance before his eyes widened as he remembered what Ragyo had mentioned just a

few minutes ago. Turning back to his dad, a confused scowl on his face, Ichigo rubbed his neck as he tried to think of the best way to ask, "Clear something up for me. Did you and Satsuki's mom ever..."

Years as a father allowed Isshin to instinctively understand what Ichigo was trying to spit out. Whipping his head towards Ragyo, who had yet to even try and escape from his grasp, he groaned at the bemused look in her eyes, "Did you tell me son that we had relations? You know I would never cheat on my lovely Masaki!"

Ragyo's expression darkened, her maroon eyes losing any traces of mirth, as she heard Isshin speak the name of the one person she hated above all else. Clenching her free hand tightly in anger, the rainbow light from her hair brightening in conjunction with her emotions, Ragyo stared at Isshin before chuckling coldly, "Unlike what Ichigo may have assumed I never did say anything like that. I merely implied he should mind his own business. It's not my fault if his mind jumped to conclusions. Besides it was just too much fun to let such an opportunity pass on by. I'm sure someone like you understands."

Punctuating her words by pulling her wrist free, Isshin's grip tearing her dress in the process, Ragyo huffed as she stepped away from him before her lips curled upwards. It was always nice to see Isshin, especially when he was trying to be coy, but she couldn't stand around and talk all day. As the Life Fibers in her dress quickly repaired themselves Ragyo rubbed her wrist and shifted her gaze to Satsuki, or more specifically, Kon trying to hide behind her daughter's legs.

"You've been hiding things from me, Isshin," Ragyo's tone was accusatory as she folded her arms beneath her bosom. She could feel her heart beating faster in excitement at the thought of pulling apart Kon one Life Fiber at a time to see how Isshin managed to create an independent COVERS. As the unholy smile on her face widened Ragyo narrowed her eyes as she turned back to Isshin, "Didn't you say you no longer worked with Life Fibers? Can you

explain how a COVERS is standing before me without a human as an energy source?"

"What can I say... a man has to have his secrets, you know," Isshin answered with a small shrug of his shoulders. Placing his hands into his coat, his fingers tracing over the single cigarette he always kept inside, Isshin ignored the harsh glare Ichigo was boring into the back of his head. He wished he could have sat down with Ichigo and explained everything he knew but with the Original Life Fiber's mental block his choices were quite limited. Huffing proudly, a hand scratching at his cheek, Isshin continued, "Besides... If I recall I told you nineteen years ago that nobody's perfect. You've been so focused on your fancy COVERS that you forgot to step back and look at the big picture. If you really want to know about Kon, the idea for a self-sustaining COVERS came to me early one morning while I was making a sandwich."

Ragyo quirked a silver eyebrow at Isshin's explanation, "The big picture, you say? You wouldn't happen to be lying to me, would you Isshin?"

"Who do you take me for?" Isshin asked in return, "As a man my word is pretty much all I have. Masaki understood that."

Her mood souring once more at the mention of Masaki's name Ragyo glanced at Ichigo and noticed he seemed completely surprised by his father's words. Filing that information away for later Ragyo turned back to Isshin, her cheek resting lightly against the palm of her hand, and shook her head, "You never seem to stop surprising me, Isshin, but I suppose that's why you will be the only man I will ever love."

"There are lots of fish in the sea," Isshin responded as he stared at the rows of COVERS hovering directly overhead. Narrowing his eyes as he felt Ragyo's will preventing them from descending down on Honnouji Academy, something that could change at any moment, Isshin rubbed the back of his neck and asked, "What about

Souichiro? He was a hell of a man, you know. He could do things with Life Fibers that boggles my mind."

"Souichiro was a foolish human that tried to reach beyond his grasp," Ragyo retorted angrily, the rainbow light illuminating her hair dimming slightly, as she coldly stared at Isshin. Perking up when she heard Satsuki's grip on Bakuzan tighten, her daughter's teeth clenching furiously at her callous mentioning of Souichiro, Ragyo's chuckled as her lips curled into a psychotic grin, "He thought himself a genius and yet he had the audacity to believe he could hide his betrayal from me. I knew what he was planning from the very beginning but I patiently waited for four years, allowing his hopes and dreams to reach their zenith, before deciding to deal with him. You cannot believe the anger I felt when I realized Kuroido failed to finish the job."

Satsuki's grip on Bakuzan faltered, the black Life Fiber blade nearly slipping from her fingers, as she heard her mother admit failing to kill her father. Quickly regaining control of her emotions, an enraged scowl forming on her face, Satsuki slammed Bakuzan into the runway as her white and blue backdrop briefly reappeared, "Your lies will not dissuade me, Ragyo Kiryuin! The image of father's burnt corpse is as clear in my mind as the day I first saw it!"

Ragyo turned half-lidded eyes towards Satsuki as a bored look crept onto her face. Waving her hand in the air nonchalantly, Satsuki's backdrop shattering at the gesture, Ragyo sighed in disappointment, "You overthink your importance to me, Satsuki. What possible reason would I have to lie to you? No matter what you may think the truth is Kuroido failed to kill Souichiro when he tried fleeing Revocs thirteen years ago. I suppose the only consolation for Kuroido's failure is that my darling Nui managed to finish the job."

Satsuki's breath hitched as the full weight of her mother's words pierced through her mind. Clenching her hand tightly around Bakuzan, her fingers threatening to relax and drop the Life Fiber blade onto the runway, Satsuki felt her ironclad control on her emotions shattering. Part of her plan to rebel against Life Fibers had

involved tracking the movements of the Grand Couturier, including where she went and who she killed. Inumuta had tracked Nui Harime's victims, cross-referencing them with known Nudist Beach supporters as well as couturiers belonging to the few companies not already owned by Revocs. Out of all the victims one name stuck out more than the rest but what her mother was inferring was impossible. If it was the truth, and the cold feeling spreading through her chest suggested it was, than that meant...

"Are you saying Satsuki and Ryuko are sisters?" Ichigo's direct question tore Satsuki from her thoughts. As she turned her attention towards him Ichigo stepped forward and swept his arm in front of his body, "That's impossible!"

"I'm sure you'll find that nothing in this world is impossible, Ichigo," Ragyo answered with a slight shake of her head. Turning around, her daughter's look of despair etched into her mind, Ragyo slowly and deliberately walked away. As her high heels echoed hollowly against the runway, the sounds from the remaining battles drifting upwards, Ragyo's lips curled into a playful smirk as she savored the utter hopelessness in her daughter's eyes, "Oh? Do you have something to add, Satsuki?"

"My sister died at your hands!" Satsuki's voice started barely above a whisper, her tone cold and harsh, but by the end she was nearly shouting. Pointing Bakuzan at Ragyo, who appeared amused at her daughter's reaction, Satsuki scowled before continuing, "She wasn't even a week old before you experimented on her with Life Fibers! You didn't even give her a name before killing her and throwing her body away like trash!"

"That is the correct sequence of events of what happened," Ragyo admitted before quirking a silver eyebrow when she saw the intensity in Isshin's gaze. More than twenty years of experience suggested Isshin would have tried to stop her by now but he was just standing with his hands tucked in his jacket. Pushing aside the mild curiosity about what he was thinking Ragyo shook her head and looked coldly at Satsuki, "But I'm surprised you're placing the blame entirely on my



shoulders. Did you ever stop and consider that Souichiro was equally at fault?"

"Father was too afraid of you to speak up!" Satsuki retorted angrily, her face paling as traitorous thoughts circulated in her mind, "He saw how you brutally murdered anyone that disagreed with you and knew if he spoke up the same fate would befall him!"

"Oh, is that what you think? Allow me to shatter the idyllic image you have of your father." The rainbow light shining from Ragyo's hair burst into brilliance as she turned the full weight of her attention to her daughter, "Souichiro didn't betray me until I threw away your sister. Do you know how many human we went through to develop the first COVERS? I'm not going to tell you, of course, but Souichiro was at my side the entire time. The man you consider a hero, the same one that helped found Nudist Beach and survived Kuroido's assassination attempt, simply developed a guilty conscience. If you still don't believe me why not ask Isshin?"

Isshin mentally sighed as Ragyo shifted the focus of the conversation onto him. Rubbing the back of his neck, Ichigo and Satsuki's attention fully on him, he took a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking, "As much as I hate to say it Ragyo is telling the truth. Satsuki... your father was dedicated to studying everything there is to know about Life Fibers. At first he was completely ethical - paid volunteers, animals, and tests on Life Fibers themselves but over time his obsession overwhelmed him. I didn't even know half of what he did until he told me. Once I did know... well... I decked him in the face and told him to never come to my house again. There are some things that just can't be forgiven."

"Yet you helped him develop the Anti-Life Fiber wards surrounding his home. Do not try to deny it, Isshin," Ragyo countered as she turned her head towards him, "Without them I would have tracked Souichiro down years ago."

"I might not have forgiven Souichiro but that didn't mean he deserved whatever you planned to do to him," Isshin answered, a small frown appearing on his face. He knew better than anyone, except perhaps Nui Harime, Ragyo's disposition when someone betrays her trust. Nobody, not even Souichiro, deserved the kind of torture Ragyo was more than capable of inflicting when she was truly enraged, "He was more than aware it was only a matter of time until you caught him. Knowing your temper I thought it was only fair that Souichiro got a head start."

For a brief moment Ragyo seemed like she was about to snap at Isshin but after a few seconds she closed her eyes and exhaled loudly. As her temper settled down, a faint pulse of rainbow light shining from beneath her silver hair, the Kiryuin matriarch shook her head and sighed, "You truly are testing my patience, Isshin. First you hide my guilty husband after he betrayed my trust and then you scare my precious Nui away from Karakura Town. Is there a limit to your rudeness?"

"Hang on a second. You fought Nui Harime? When the hell did that happen?" Ichigo couldn't hide the surprise in his voice. For the last few minutes he had been paying close attention to the conversation between Ragyo Kiryuin and his dad, The revelation that Satsuki and Ryuko were sisters was shocking but hearing that his dad not only met Nui Harime but forced her to retreat made him wonder how well he actually knew his dad.

"It was more than six years. You were in school at the time," Isshin shrugged his shoulders as he kept his attention focused firmly on Ragyo. Dredging up the memories from that day Isshin paused briefly before continuing, "Nui arrived in Karakura Town early in the morning and headed towards our house. Luckily I managed to persuade her to leave before she did anything stupid."

"Is that what you did?" Ragyo's smirk fell off her face as she recalled the terror on Nui's face when she returned to Revocs. Even with the fury coursing through the Grand Couturier's body at the humiliation she received at Isshin's hands there was no hiding the slight shaking

of her body, "Your little 'persuasion' nearly scared Nui to death. How could you do something like that to an eleven year old girl?"

"Sometimes you have to be harsh to get the message across," Isshin corrected, the expression on his face tightening as he caught a glimpse of light reflecting off a mirror at the top of the stadium. Folding his arms across his chest, one hand scratching at the permanent stubble on his chin, Isshin scoffed smugly and turned his head to the side, "And there's no point in trying to convince me Nui is just some innocent little girl. I don't think that's ever been true."

"You wound me, Isshin," Ragyo faked a gasp as she mockingly held a hand over her heart.

Chuckling dryly at Isshin's remark, her laughter coming out cold and forced, Ragyo's lips curled upwards when she heard a sharp scream in the distance followed by a burst of purple light emanating from outside the stadium. Maroon eyes widening slowly when she realized Isshin had been stalling for time, something she should have realized from the very start, Ragyo held her hand up to summon the COVERS and flicked her wrist, "It's been fun reminiscing with you Isshin but I'm on a tight deadline, which is a concept that you never quite understood. I'll be more than willing to speak privately later if you want. Oh, that reminds me of something I need to do..."

A sharp gasp escaped Satsuki's lips as her mother vanished from her sight, her Junketsu-enhanced senses unable to follow her movements, before she reappeared only a few feet in front of her with a fist cocked back. Even as her blue eyes widened in surprise, her body already moving from years of training to intercept her mother's attack, Satsuki knew she would not be able to defend herself in time. Her mother was moving too fast, her attack too close, for Bakuzan to intercept or counter. Leaning backwards while shifting her weight in order to minimize the damage she would take Satsuki was bewildered when Ichigo's father appeared next to her, one hand already firmly clasping Junketsu's pauldron, and pulled her to the side.

"That was quite the close call. You should be more careful in the future, Satsuki," Isshin chided as he turned around before letting go of Junketsu. Watching as Ragyo gracefully took a single step before instantly coming to a stop, her white heels barely clicking against the metal runway, Isshin sighed as he realized he was out of options. He had come to Honnouji Academy hoping to stop Ragyo without resorting to fighting but it appeared that was never an option.

Pulling off his lab coat, carefully folding it before tossing it haphazardly over his shoulder, Isshin rubbed a crick in his neck as he weighed his options. Attacking Ragyo with Ichigo and Satsuki around could potentially get them caught in the crossfire but if he waited too long Ragyo would probably go on the offensive. Pursing his lips as several ideas coursed through his head Isshin noticed out of the corner of his eye Satsuki preparing to fight her mother. Lowering his arm away from his neck as he began unbuttoning the cuffs of his sleeves Isshin looked over his shoulder at Ichigo, "I'm sure you have a lot of questions on your mind, Ichigo."

Ichigo scowled as he shook his head. Resting Tournesol against Mugetsu he turned away from his dad and scoffed, "Why should I have any questions? It's just like what I said against Aizen, you must have your reasons for not telling me how you know Satsuki's mom. As long as you eventually tell me everything I'm alright with waiting."

"With that kind of attitude you're never going to find out anything," Isshin lazily complained as he finished unbuttoning his cuffs. Rolling up his sleeves, wishing more than ever that he still had Engetsu, Isshin blinked when he saw Satsuki beginning to walk towards her mother. Holding out an arm in front of her, completely unaffected by the angry scowl on her face, Isshin shook his head and said, "Hang on just a second, young lady. I don't think you should be fighting your own mother."

"I don't care what you think," Satsuki replied, her left arm already swinging outwards to remove Isshin from her path. Surprised when Isshin not only rebuffed her attempts but pushed her back with ease Satsuki's scowled intensified before she shifted the full intensity of

her gaze at her mother, "It is my responsibility to destroy my mother. She has committed too many atrocities, killed too many people, to be allowed to live. Even if her words about my father carried a hint of truth it does not change the fact she needs to be killed."

Isshin didn't budge as he listened to Satsuki, his face a rare mask of stoicism, but inside he couldn't understand what Ragyo could have done to Satsuki to warrant such hatred. Even if Ragyo killed a lot of people, which he knew to be true, that didn't explain why Satsuki's words seemed much too personal for her actions to be simply justice. Ragyo must have said or done something to Satsuki to cause her to feel such animosity but Isshin just couldn't figure out what it could be.

Narrowing his eyes as he stepped in front of Satsuki, momentarily preventing Ragyo from attacking her daughter, Isshin looked over his shoulder at her and bluntly replied, "You don't have a chance of beating Ragyo, even with Junketsu's power. The same goes for you, Ichigo! I'm the only one here that can beat her and Ragyo damn well knows that."

"Oh Isshin... even after all these years you know exactly what to say," Ragyo shook her head as she interrupted Isshin. His constant interference was truly starting to test her patience. Gently closing her eyes and clasping her arms together under her bosom Ragyo sighed wistfully, "But it is surprising that you're acting so serious. You may be my equal in strength but you're out of practice. I'm afraid whatever advantages you might have held twenty years ago are no longer applicable."

"I'm not as out of practice as you think, Ragyo," Isshin answered with a slight hint of smugness in his voice before turning his gaze up at the COVERS still hovering in the air. Unlike Ichigo and Ryuko, who were artificially turned into Life Fiber Hybrids, he was made into one by the Original Life Fiber itself. That was what as he looked up at the COVERS, a faint shimmer of maroon piercing through his brown irises, Isshin could hear the inaudible growls from the Life Fiber beings. Judging from the way they were all directed at him Isshin

figured the Original Life Fiber wasn't exactly happy with his life choices.

"Ichigo... take Satsuki and deal with Hououmaru," Isshin's tone lacked any of the usual mirth as his expression tightened, "Ragyo and I have some things to discuss."

There was a question on the tip of Ichigo's tongue but before he could ask his attention was stolen as a burst of power erupted from the stands behind him. Twisting around, Tournesol slowly falling off his shoulder, Ichigo watched with narrowed eyes as the rubble created by Hououmaru's crash landing disintegrated into dust. Scowling as the power from Hououmaru's raiment burst forth in a cacophony of rainbow light, shattering the nearby screens and causing millions of glass shards to rain downwards, Ichigo turned to Satsuki and asked, "So what can she do? Does her raiment have some sort of special power or what?"

"The true extent of Hououmaru's abilities eludes me," Satsuki answered with a cold clip to her voice. As she pushed a strand of black hair out of her eyes and over one of the wing-like protrusions jutting upwards from her head Satsuki felt a brief and strange feeling of emptiness in her chest. For years her goal was retribution against her monster of a mother. To find out that she wasn't strong enough, even with Junketsu's strength, bothered her but she was pragmatic more than anything else. If Isshin Kurosaki was truly strong enough to defeat her mother then she would be content with letting him fight her.

Clenching her hands tightly around Bakuzan's hilt, a slow and calming breath escaping her lips, Satsuki's brow creased into a scowl when she spotted Hououmaru. With Junketsu's power thrumming through her body, the blue lines covering the Kamui glowing with energy, her power would be more than enough to overwhelm Hououmaru's raiment. Shifting one heel backwards and kicking up a thin trail of dust Satsuki huffed and shouted, "Do not assume victory, Ichigo! Hououmaru is the leader of Xcution! Do not allow her to get in a single attack!"

"Just don't try to order me around like one of your goons," Ichigo muttered back at Satsuki with a roll of his eyes. Shaking his head, Mugetsu's power coursing through his body, Ichigo bents his knees in preparation to leap over to the stands and confront Hououmaru when a massive explosion, tinged red and purple, erupted from the main building of Honnouji Academy. As he twisted his head toward the rising column of smoke, a worried expression on his face, Ichigo was surprised when Satsuki spoke up.

"You don't need to worry about Matoi... Ryuko," Satsuki quickly corrected herself, a conflicted expression on her face, before she focused her gaze on Hououmaru, "Tsumugiya's strength should be more than enough to help her deal with Nui Harime. Now come, Ichigo, Hououmaru's patience is growing thin."

Without saying another word Satsuki pushed off the runway into the air, Bakuzan swinging downwards, with Ichigo in close pursuit. As they leapt towards Hououmaru, the leader of Xcution tensing her stance in preparation for the fight, Kon blinked worriedly as he realized he was left alone with Ichigo's dad and a rather hot lunatic. Staring up at Isshin, beads of sweat somehow dripping down his plushie face, Kon raised one stubby arm and shouted, "Alright smart guy, what the heck am I supposed to do now? Do you have any sort of plan to get me out of this inferno of evil clothing and women?"

"Of course I have a plan! I told you on the way over. Weren't you paying attention to anything I said?" The lack of an answer from Kon told Isshin all he needed to know. Huffing in annoyance at the mod soul Isshin didn't take his gaze off Ragyo as he repeated what he told Kon not an hour ago, "If Ragyo summons the COVERS I need you to use that thing I showed you to help Ririn, Kuroudo and Noba stop them from taking any people."

"Alright, I got it," Kon grumbled as he spun around on one foot and ran away. He was starting to get really tired of Ririn always trying to boss him around. He was the first mod soul, COVERS, whatever of the four and that automatically made him the leader. All he needed to

do was kick the most COVERS ass and the others will fall in line without any problems.

Ragyo watched the perfect COVERS leave, a slightly disappointed expression on her face, before twin bursts of blue energy exploded out from the stands as Ichigo and her daughter engaged Hououmaru. As her silver hair was whipped through the air by the fierce wind, her form-fitting white dress accentuating her figure, Ragyo smirk seemed to become forced as she spoke, "I'm disappointed in you Isshin. The Original Life Fiber showed both of us its glorious power and yet you turned your back on me. I wish for nothing more than having you standing at my side as we usher humanity towards its destiny. Are you truly going to fight for the naked pigs in human clothing?"

Isshin shrugged his shoulders as he replied, "What can I say? I'm a pretty humble man. All those big plans with world-changing consequences never really interested me. I'd much rather relax and enjoy each passing day."

"C'est la vie..."

The French words drifted eloquently off Ragyo's tongue as the light shining forth from her hair intensified. Unlike Ichigo and her foolish daughters she could not afford to play around with Isshin unless she wanted to lose. Lips curling into a sly and knowing smirk, her maroon eyes glistening with concealed mirth, Ragyo brought up her right arm and held it in front of her body before snapping her fingers. Chuckling as a rainbow colored bolt of lightning slammed into the runway in front of her, the stadium briefly illuminated by the intensity of the light, Ragyo clasped her fingers around the rainbow Needle Blade and pulled it out of the ground.

"I do suppose we should get started, Isshin," Ragyo mused as she trailed one finger sensually along the Needle Blade. As the corners of her mouth curled upwards in amusement Ragyo stared at Isshin with a maniac expression and added, "The first thing I'm going to do



is destroy that ridiculous disguise you're wearing. It's completely unbecoming for a man of your status to wear something so ugly."

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"God damn it!"

Ryuko cursed as she shifted the rubble off her body and stood up. Staggering momentarily on shaking legs, her breath ragged and her back in pain, Ryuko gritted her teeth in anger as she stared through the hole in the ceiling created by her descent. Eyes narrowing in contemplation as she heard Ururu fighting Nui Harime in the distance Ryuko reached over and tore her red Scissor Blade free from the ground. Spitting on the ground, a frown on her face, Ryuko let out a loud and tired huff before asking, "What the hell's going on? There's no way Nui Harime was this damn strong the last time we fought!"

It disturbed Ryuko greatly that Nui Harime was still so monstrously strong even after fighting Ururu. When she saw the Grand Couturier's ragged and bleeding state Ryuko had assumed it would be easy to take her down. That confidence had been bolstered when she managed to punch Nui Harime with enough force to launch her into Honnouji Academy's main building. It was when she leapt after Nui Harime that she realized her mistake. The Grand Couturier had been waiting for her and slammed her elbow into the small of her back the moment she stepped into the academy.

Senketsu's single eye blinked slowly, a strange feeling coursing through his Life Fibers as he listened to Ryuko express her anger. It annoyed him that even after recovered most of his missing memories, including the ones dating back to his creation, there were a few things that eluded his grasp. Letting out a huff, his armor around Ryuko's body shuddering slightly in the process, Senketsu looked stared at her and said, ***"I don't know why but I think it has something to do with her eye."***

"What about her eye?" Ryuko remembered the purple eyepatch Nui Harime used to wear, as well as the empty socket underneath it, but she couldn't understand how that was important.

***" I can't explain it but my Life Fibers are telling me Nui Harime wasn't at her best when we fought her,"*** Senketsu explained as he shifted his gaze upwards at the ceiling. He could feel his Life Fibers resonating with the power Nui and Ururu were emitting. Multicolored eye narrowing deep in thought while a small amount of worry coursed through his Life Fibers Senketsu turned his attention back to Ryuko and continued ***"... it wasn't until a minute ago that I realized it but wouldn't you say the Nui Harime we're fighting is a completely different?"***

"Come to think of it..." Ryuko trailed off and brought her left hand up to her face, her fingers curled into a fist, as she relived the painful memories of when she lost control of Senketsu due to her overwhelming anger. Pushing past the hazy memories, a phantom wince of pain hitting her as she saw Mako's body on the ground, Ryuko watched her berserk form fight Nui Harime before violently shaking her head. Tightly clenching her Scissor Blade, her Kamui's armor creaking from the pressure, Ryuko scowled as she understood what Senketsu was trying to tell her, "Are you saying she's back at full strength right now?"

***" Yes."*** The bluntness behind Senketsu's answer surprised Ryuko, ***"But that doesn't matter right now. I can feel it in my Life Fibers that Nui Harime is on the brink of exhaustion. Fighting Ururu has tired her out. If you were to work together..."***

"Then we can win!" Ryuko shouted excitedly as a large smile broke out on her face. Kneeling against the ground, the red lines covering Senketsu glowing with power, Ryuko took a deep breath as the vents on her back burst into life, "Let's do this, Senketsu Senkou!"

The moment her Kamui shifted configurations, Senketsu's body morphing into his familiar armor, Ryuko leapt back through the hole she created in the ceiling. Her Scissor Blade thrumming with energy,

a faint red glow covering the entire Life Fiber weapon, Ryuko readjusted her grip as she continued to pass floor after floor and frowned. Nui Harime may be weakened from fighting Ururu but that didn't mean she would be a pushover. If she made one wrong move she could lose an arm or even worse. Eyes narrowing as she approached the top of Honnouji Academy, Senketsu's power increasing even further, Ryuko reached out and gripped the edge of the floor with her free hand before flipping forward into the room.

As she fell through the air Ryuko's shoulders tensed upon spotting Nui and Ururu rapidly exchanging blows, their respective purple weapons emitting violent bursts of purple sparks. In the short time it took her to return to the fight both sisters had sustained further injuries with the largest difference being the gash staining the left side of Nui's pink dress red. Gritting her teeth as she tightened her grip on the Scissor Blade, Senketsu's power flowing through the Life Fiber blade, Ryuko locked onto Nui Harime and shouted, "Senkou - Ichiban Genkai!"

"Like that's going to work, Ryuko!"

Taking advantage of her sister's brief moment of inattentiveness to slam her foot into her stomach, sending Ururu flying backwards, Nui spun around and aimed her new purple Needle Blade at the incoming attack. Even though she couldn't see the true extent of the attack with her eyes it was laughably easy to sense where Ryuko was going to hit her. Sapphire eyes widening in manic glee as she pushed past the pain coursing throughout her body, the open wound on her stomach hurting the most, Nui swung her arm upwards and stopped the invisible Ichiban Genkai above her head.

"It's adorable that you're trying to fight me!" Nui gloated, a psychotic laugh escaping her lips, as she stared into Ryuko's fury-filled eyes, "But you're just a stupid human, Ryuko! And naked pigs like you can't beat me!"

"Shut the hell up!" Ryuko growled as she pushed forward while Senketsu's vents erupted with energy. As her synchronization rate

with Senketsu increased to newfound heights, the red undertones in her hair glowing brilliantly, Ryuko shifted her grip on the Scissor Blade and shouted, "There's no way I'll lose to someone like you, Nui Harime! Senkou - Ichiban Genkai!"

As Ryuko slammed a second Ichiban Genkai against her Needle Blade, the windows on the entire floor shattering from the change in pressure, Nui gasped in astonishment as the ground beneath her feet immediately cratered. With her blonde pigtails whipping chaotically in the harsh wind kicked up by the attack Nui quickly raised her left hand and firmly braced it against her weapon. Knees bending under the strain of holding the attack back, her bloodied and injured arms quivering from exhaustion, Nui gnashed her teeth together and pushed back against the Ichiban Genkai. It would be a cold day in hell when she lost to a mere human wearing a fake Kamui, "This is impossible! How can a human like you have so much power? This isn't fair!"

"Life isn't fair, Nui Harime!" Ryuko shouted as she pushed more power into her Ichiban Genkai in order to overwhelm the weakened and exhausted Grand Couturier.

"No! No! No!" Nui cried as she felt her arms struggling from exhaustion. With bloody fingers clenching tightly against the Needle Blade, her injured body on the verge of failing, Nui pushed whatever power she had left against Ryuko. As she managed to take a step forward, a sinister smirk spreading across her face, Nui snarled, "I refuse to lose to a stupid human like you!"

"Damn... it...." Ryuko growled, her arms shaking from pushing so much of Senketsu's power into Ichiban Genkai. Mentally apologizing to her Kamui for what she was about to do, promising to wash him just the way he liked after the festival, Ryuko gave all of her remaining power to her Scissor Blade. As the light from the Life Fiber blade illuminated the room Ryuko grinned when Nui's eyes widened in shock, "What was that, Nui Harime? I swear you said I was going to lose!"

"This... can't be happening... !"

With the increased power of Ryuko's Ichiban Genkai pressing down against her Needle Blade Nui found herself back on the defensive. Gritting her teeth as she desperately held back the attack, wisps of red energy passing in the air around her, Nui growled at the humans for what they did to Amu. None of this would be happening if the naked apes hadn't brainwashed her sister into fighting against her own family. It was bad enough that Ichigo thought she was evil but to know her own sister was willing to kill her filled Nui with a mixture of sorrow and anger. Letting out a gasp when her bloody fingers slipped against the polished surface of her weapon, the digits weakened and cramped from battle, Nui desperately tried to fix her grip before it was too late.

Ryuko noticed the fear and worry in Nui's eyes the moment her fingers began to slip. Sliding her feet along the ground, Senketsu's armor thrumming from his remaining power, her blue eyes glared at the Grand Couturier as she swung her Scissor Blade. As her weapon easily broke through the Grand Couturier's guard, Nui's sapphire eyes wide in surprise, the energy in the Ichiban Genkai detonated with the force of a small explosion. Screaming in pain, her weakened state due to Twin Life Fiber Entanglement causing her to feel the entirety of the attack, Nui was launched backwards through the air before slamming violently against the wall.

Collapsing to her knees as Senketsu transformed back to his normal form Ryuko leaned against her Scissor Blade and took a shaky breath. She knew defeating Nui Harime would be difficult but she didn't expect it to require so much of Senketsu's power. Breathing heavily as she stared at the unmoving form of the Grand Couturier slumped against the far wall, her Needle Blade lying some distance away from her hands, Ryuko allowed a victorious smile to grace her face, "The... first one... was for my dad. The second... was for what you did... to Mako..."

" **Ryuko!**" Senketsu's voice was panicky as he looked at his wearer, "**Are you alright?**"

"Yeah... I'm just really tired... Senketsu..."

Leaning back, her hands braced behind her back against the ground, Ryuko stared at the ceiling and let out a tired sigh. It had taken her more than seven months, nearly losing herself and her best friend in the process, but she finally managed to make Nui Harime pay for killing her dad. Closing her eyes, Senketsu transforming back to his normal uniform appearance in a flash of light, Ryuko allowed her body to fall backwards. Spread out on the ground, ignoring the sounds coming from the battles raging in the stadium for just a moment, Ryuko turned her head when she heard someone sit down next to her. Opening her eyes and seeing Ururu collapsed on the ground next to her Ryuko worriedly asked, "Hey, are you ok, Ururu?"

"I'll be fine. Thank you for asking, Ryuko," Ururu timidly answered, her voice quiet, as she held one hand against the wound on her shoulder. With sapphire eyes staring at the unconscious form of her sister, several conflicting thoughts racing through her mind, Ururu pulled her hand away from her shoulder as she felt the pain in her body abating. Staring passively at her hand as the blood covering it was slowly absorbed into her skin as her Life Fiber regeneration kicked back in Ururu's eyes drooped as she turned to Ryuko, "Nui is beginning to regenerate."

"Are you serious?" Ryuko looked incredulously at Ururu but the seriousness in the normally emotionless girl's eyes told her everything she needed to know. Grunting in pain as she forced her body to stand back up, her legs burning from the effort, Ryuko stumbled forward as she gripped the red Scissor Blade tightly for support. Briefly pausing to take a ragged breath, her exhaustion beginning to catch up to her, Ryuko grimaced as she slowly walked towards the downed Grand Couturier, "Then I guess we should finish her off. It's going to be really annoying if she gets up good as new."

" ***Ryuko... are you really going to kill Nui Harime?***" Senketsu was well aware of the danger posed by the Grand Couturier when she regained consciousness. Blinking slowly as he turned his gaze away from Nui Harime, his multicolored eye narrowing contemplatively

when he noticed Ryuko's hand shaking, Senketsu looked into his wearer's eyes and asked, ***"I know how dangerous she is but can you actually do it?"***

"I... Senketsu... shit, I don't know!" Ryuko yelled as she held the red Scissor Blade in the air over Nui. For the last seven months her sole purpose had been to enact revenge against Nui for killing her dad. Watching the Grand Couturier kill Mako and tear Ichigo's heart out of his chest, all the while with a wide and happy smile on her face, only worked to harden her resolve to kill Nui Harime. But now that she stood over the unconscious blond haired teenager Ryuko found she couldn't go through with it. Biting her lower lip hard enough to draw blood Ryuko squeezed her hand into a fist and seethed, "I can't do it... I fucking can't kill Nui Harime even after all she did to me..."

***" Ryuko..."***

"No. I'm fine, Senketsu," Ryuko gave Nui one last glare as she turned away from the fallen teenager. Ichigo's dad had been right all along. Killing Nui Harime wouldn't bring her dad back no matter how much she wished for it to be true. Stumbling back towards Ururu, whose wounds seemed to be vanishing before her eyes, Ryuko sat back down accompanied by an audible groan. Turning towards Ururu, her eyes catching the way the quiet girl's fingers clenched the purple Scissor Blade's grip, Ryuko blinked owlshly and asked, "Hey Ururu, can I ask you a question? Were you going to just let me kill her?"

Ururu's eyes briefly misted over as she stared at her twin sister. It would only be a few minutes, maybe five at the most, before Nui regained consciousness with the majority of her wounds healed. Shaking her head, the gash in her shoulder already completely regenerated alongside her uniform, Ururu answered, "Nui is my twin sister. Despite everything she's done, including killing Mako, I don't think I can actually kill her. She's... family... and you don't kill family. I would have stopped you."

Ryuko listened to Ururu before sighing again and looked at the stadium through the hole in the wall to her left. She could still hear the sounds of battle, which meant Ichigo and Satsuki haven't won yet, but as much as she wished to help she was too exhausted. Rubbing a hand against her face as she propped her back against her Scissor Blade, her entire body hurting, Ryuko groaned, "I hope Ichigo and the others are kicking Xcution's ass."

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Giriko Kutsuzawa grumbled lightly, a perturbed look on his aged face, as he pulled his body free from the rubble encasing it. Easily pushing away a half-ton piece of concrete, his strength bolstered by his Èpoché Raiment, the oldest member of Xcution clapped his hands together to rid them of dust before noticing something on the ground nearby. Reaching down, his fingers carefully gripping the largest piece of his former trench knife, Giriko sighed once more from mild annoyance. Uryu Ishida and Houka Inumuta were turning out to be much more difficult to kill than he initially anticipated.

Reaching into the waistcoat of his raiment, a new trench knife spinning into existence out of Life Fibers, Giriko clasped his fingers around the dark purple weapon and pulled it out with practiced flourish. His trench knives might not be as durable as Bakuzan or the Scissor Blades but they were still strong enough to easily cleave through almost anything. At least that was what he originally thought. Fingers tightly gripping the purple trench knife, brown eyes briefly puzzled at the burst of rainbow light emanating from within the stadium, Giriko took a moment to gather his thoughts.

As the oldest member of Xcution, but certainly not the longest employed, Gikiro tended to see many things from a slightly different perspective compared to the newer and younger employees. The newer members, like Yukio and Riruka, tended to rush into battle confident their raiment's power was more than enough to kill anyone standing in their way. Such haste only led to inevitable defeat, as



demonstrated by Riruka's loss to Kugo Ginjo and Ichigo Kurosaki in Karakura Town. He preferred to take the necessary amount of time to consider all the available options.

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, after all," Giriko quieted quoted from memory as he sensed his opponents quickly approaching. Staring across Honnou City while looping his fingers through the trench knife, the familiar weapon sitting comfortably against his knuckles, Giriko glanced at the watch on his wrist and scoffed, "I find myself disappointed at your lack of timing. You weren't supposed to arrive for another fifteen seconds. Do you truly wish to die so quickly?"

"Sorry to disappoint you but I don't plan on dying today."

Landing softly on the ground nearby, his uniform torn and blood caking his left hand, Uryu grimaced and raised his bow at Giriko. Ignoring the twitch of pain in his shoulder, his fingers bleeding and nearly numb, Uryu didn't know how much longer he could keep up this level of combat. His opponent's power was no laughing matter and while Giriko did not possess the overwhelming strength of Esdeath his raiment was still extremely dangerous. Forming a heilig Pfeil in his bow, the spiritual arrow glowing a fierce blue-white from the amount of energy composing it, Uryu slid his foot backwards along the ground as he added, "You shouldn't assume victory until the battle is over. Your power may be greater than mine but one slip up is all we need to defeat you."

Humming thoughtfully as he noticed Inumuta shimmering into existence behind him, the blue haired youth releasing his optical and acoustic camouflage at the same time, Giriko mulled over his options. He could easily kill Inumuta or Uryu on their own but the fact they were working together against him made things a tad more difficult. Clasp his hands behind his back, a hard glint in his eyes as he came to a decision, Giriko turned his back to Inumuta as he addressed Uryu, "You seem to understand the value of time and effort, Uryu Ishida, which is something I cannot say about many of today's youths. However Lady Ragyo's orders are quite clear."

"Your confidence is misplaced, Giriko Kutsuzawa. I already know how your Èpoche Raiment works," Inumuta retorted calmly, one hand adjusting his glasses. One of the many upgrades Iori managed to weave into his Probe Regalia Mark II was a vastly improved data collection rate. He already had enough data about Giriko's raiment to extrapolate out anything else he might be capable of doing. Noticing the doubting expression on the man's face Inumuta continued, "Your Èpoche Raiment improves your reflexes, overall speed and reaction time by at least a factor of five. A remarkable improvement but unlike other raiment you don't possess any actual techniques. Am I wrong?"

Giriko pursed his lips at Inumuta, an annoyed glint in his eyes, before he sighed and turned to face the blue haired teenager, "You hit the nail on the head but is there anything else you wish to know about? Are you interested in my birthday or favorite food? Perhaps you wish to collect data on what movies I prefer watching or where I would like to go on vacation."

"Oh, I have all that information already," Inumuta gloated with a smug chuckle.

"Well aren't you quite the rude little brat..." Giriko scoffed as his raiment began glowing with a faint rainbow light. As much as he preferred waiting until the opportune moment his patience did have its limits. Clenching his fingers tightly around his trench knife, the purple blade gleaming dangerously from the light his raiment was emitting, Giriko brought his arms up into a stance, "... but you are too reliant on your data. You may understand my Èpoche Raiment and all of its abilities but that does not necessitate you can fight it. How, I ask you, can you counter pure speed and agility? My raiment may not be as fancy or extravagant as some of the others but its abilities are far above anything your Goku Uniform can achieve."

Giriko was already in motion before he even finished speaking. Rushing towards Inumuta, his Èpoche Raiment boosting his speed to nearly the same level as Uryu's Hirenkyaku, Giriko took in the blue haired youth's shocked expression as his trench knife passed

cleanly through his Probe Regalia and severed his carotid artery. His face stoic as he watched blood spurt out of the gash in Inumuta's Goku Uniform, his cries getting quieter by the second, Giriko could not suppress a murmur of disappointment when Inumuta vanished in a burst of light, "A holographic clone... my, you are quite the clever child."

"Clever is an insult to my intelligence," Inumuta shimmered into existence next to Uryu, a smug look on his face, as Giriko turned around to face him. Smirking at the expression on Giriko's face he added, "That was an advanced holographic clone designed to imitate a physical body for a short period of time. Using the latest advances in optics it can replicate the look and feel of an actual body for several seconds. Judging from your expression you were completely convinced it was the real me, weren't you?"

"That was quite the trick. I suppose you intended for your clone to confuse and disorient me," Giriko patted down his raiment, a small cloud of dust rising off his pants, as he turned completely towards the two teenagers. It was just his luck he ended up fighting two children that refused to rush into battle without a second thought. If Jackie were still alive she would be cursing up a storm but Giriko would not allow himself to lose control of his temper, "It was an extremely well thought out plan that required patience and timing. Remarkable for someone of your age to come up with but not enough to -"

Giriko was cut off when the starch mine covertly placed by Inumuta under his clone's feet abruptly detonated in an explosion of purple and blue without warning. Staring out over the devastation, his Probe Regalia working to limit the effects of the change in brightness on his eyes, Inumuta could not help but smirk at a job well done. Turning towards Uryu, who allowed the heilig pfeil in his bow to dissipate back into its composite spiritual energy, he said, "It appears our plan was quite successful, wouldn't you say?"

Uryu curtly nodded as he kept his eyes firmly locked on the rising cloud of smoke enveloping Giriko, "Don't let your guard down. His

raiment may be deactivated but he is still very dangerous."

The plan they devised to deal with Giriko and his Èpoche Raiment was both simple and elegant. The Xcution member's speed and reaction time were his two most dangerous qualities, but he had a singular weakness - he couldn't avoid attacks he didn't know were coming. That is where the starch mine, provided to Uryu by Tsumugu Kinagase, came into the picture. When the Nudist Beach operative handed Uryu the device, which was about the same width of his hand, he made sure to carefully explain to the Quincy how it did not have a timer in the conventional sense. While it could be set with a timer once activated at the slightly pressure it would immediately go off with enough force to revert a Kamui back to its normal state at point blank range.

"Guh..."

Stumbling out of the smoke, his body covered in burns and other injuries, Giriko collapsed onto his hands and knees gasping for air. Coughing harshly from the pain coursing through his body, blood pooling on the ground beneath him, he wheezed painfully as he forced himself to glare at Inumuta. Whatever it was that the blue haired teenager hit him with was the most painful thing he ever experienced, the Grand Couturier's training notwithstanding. Arms struggling as he pushed himself back onto his feet, the lack of strength a clear sign his raiment was no longer activated, Giriko held a hand against a bloody gash in his side and panted, "... that... what the heck... was that...?"

"There is no reason to explain anything to you," Uryu answered as he held his left hand in front of his face. As a normal heilig pfeil appeared within his fingers, his face glowing blue-white from the spiritual arrow, Uryu nocked it within his bow and aimed directly at Giriko's heart. With his raiment forcibly deactivated and his resistance to Quincy attacks shattered it would take only a single heilig pfeil to end his life. Narrowing his eyes at the defiant expression on the Xcution member's face Uryu's fingers twitched in

anticipation, "Your raiment is destroyed. There is no way for you to win."

"You expect me to... surrender to the likes of you... naked apes in clothing?" Giriko spat sarcastically, his voice rising in volume with every word, until he was nearly yelling by the end. Adrenaline flooding his veins as he pushed his body forward, blood dripping onto the ground from his many wounds, Giriko seethed with all the hate he could muster at the two teenagers in front of him. With his normally calm and collected demeanor shattered by the humiliation he suffered at the hands of mere children Giriko pointed a bloody finger at Uryu and shouted, "You may defeat me but Lady Ragyo will kill -"

Giriko gurgled thickly, trails of blood leaking from the corners of his mouth, as a sharp blade was stabbed through his back and out of his chest. Leaning forward, a series of wracking coughs causing blood to splattering across the ground, Giriko looked with quivering eyes at the blade covered in his blood. Weakly reaching forward, his strength failing just before his fingers could touch the blade, Giriko gasped as a foot was pressed against his back and the blade was violently removed from his body. Collapsing to his knees and then to the ground, his disbelieving eyes wide in shock, Giriko looked up and caught a glimpse of a man wearing a grey cassock before darkness enveloped his vision forever.

"May you forever rot in the bowels of hell."

Alexander Anderson scoffed as he stepped past the dying Giriko. As the Nudist Beach Commander of Life Fiber Pacification and Elimination it was his sacred duty to destroy any member of Xcution that he came across. The General might have ordered him to bring a member of Xcution back to Osaka for interrogation, specifically because she killed the last one, but Anderson had no intention of following that order. It would be a cold day in hell when he allowed someone like Giriko Kutsuzawa, whose body count was nearly two hundred, to continue living for even another minute.

Swinging his Tailor Bayonet through the air, the blood coating the blade splattering randomly across the ground, Anderson grimaced at the sight of Inumuta's Probe Regalia. Armstrong had beaten into his head that Satsuki Kiryuin was amassing power to overthrow her mother. Until the moment Ragyo Kiryuin was confirmed dead he would move relieving the Elite Four of their Goku Uniforms to the bottom of the list.

Flicking his wrist, a second bayonet sliding out of his sleeve and into his left hand, Anderson's glasses gleamed sinisterly as he turned to Uryu, "Care to explain why ye were fighting Xcution?"

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Rei Hououmaru knew her chance of victory over two Kamui was slim if not impossible. Avoiding Ichigo's straightforward attack with experienced ease, her body twisting to the side as Tournesol passed dangerously close to her stomach, Hououmaru grit her teeth as she picked up the clatter of Satsuki's heels rushing towards her. Leaning backwards while planting her hands firmly on the ground, her slightly clawed fingers easily digging into the steel floor for support, Hououmaru waited for Bakuzan to pass overhead before picking her knee up and slamming it against Satsuki's wrist. As Satsuki's arm spun to the side, her grip and stance momentarily broken, Hououmaru vaulted over Lady Ragyo's daughter and immediately leapt higher into the stands.

"You are running on borrowed time, Hououmaru," Satsuki's words were cold as she turned around, her wrist flexing back and forth, and stared at her mother's secretary. Satsuki knew from the moment Hououmaru activated her raiment that the fight would be difficult. It took someone with both a strong will and great power to keep people like Tsukishima and Esdeath in line. Raising Bakuzan into the air, light gleaming off the hardened Life Fiber blade, Satsuki's brow creased into a scowl as she glared at the dark-skinned woman, "Your Excussion Raiment is reaching its limit. Mere raiment can

never match the power and strength of a Kamui. It is only a matter of time before your raiment fails and shatters, Hououmaru."

Kneeling against the stands, her chest rising and falling in time with her breathing, Hououmaru's amber eyes narrowed angrily at Satsuki. Contrary to what Lady Ragyo's treacherous daughter may think she had no delusions about the probable outcome of the fight. The longer the battle dragged on the greater the likelihood her Écusson Raiment would overheat and fall apart. Clenching a fist, the metallic purple armor creaking lightly as her slightly clawed fingers brushed against the palm of her hand, Hououmaru realized she needed to stall long enough for Lady Ragyo to finish dealing with Isshin Shiba.

"It would be wise to not assume victory so quickly, Lady Satsuki," Hououmaru warned as she stood back up and reached around to the small of her back. As she slowly unsheathed a large black military-style knife, the blade resting familiarly in her grip as years of practice flowing through her nerves and muscles, there was a flash of rainbow light as a purple visor appeared over her eyes. Spitting on the ground as she held the knife in front of her body, her left hand curled over her wrist, Hououmaru growled, "For until one of us is dead there is no true winner."

Satsuki tightened her grip around Bakuzan, the aged leather wrapped around the hilt crackling softly, as she listened to Hououmaru's veiled threat. Even with Junketsu's full power coursing through her body she was not arrogant enough to assume Hououmaru would easily concede defeat. Sparing Ichigo a quick glance, the expression on his face one of resignation for what needed to be done, Satsuki pursed her lips and scowled, "If you truly wish to die, Hououmaru, than I am more than happy to oblige! This ends -"

Hououmaru's body blurred into motion before Satsuki even finished speaking. Racing down the stadium, sparks of purple lightning wrapping around her body as she reached speeds comparable with Giriko's raiment, the leader of Xcution's unseen eyes narrowed as she saw Ichigo moving to stop her. Reversing the grip on her knife,

the blade flowing between her fingers with uncanny dexterity, Hououmaru shifted her arm upwards and parried Tournesol with enough force that Ichigo was sent stumbling back. One foot planted firmly on the ground as she watched Satsuki swing Bakuzan, the trajectory of the blade aimed at her neck, Hououmaru waited until the last moment before quickly crouching down.

"You have grown conceited with Junketsu's power, Lady Satsuki," Hououmaru chided as several strands of her purple hair drifted across her vision. Spinning the knife around in her fingers, the black metal gleaming maliciously in the sunlight, Hououmaru clenched her fingers around the handle before thrusting it towards Satsuki's bare stomach.

With the sole exception of Mugetsu all Kamui covered as little skin as possible to limit the mental influence, passive or otherwise, from the Life Fibers on the wearer. That was common knowledge. What most people didn't know, Lady Satsuki included, was that the vaunted protection of the Kamui's armor didn't fully extend to the exposed skin. While it was certainly strong enough to withstand all but the most devastating of attacks to an experienced fighter like Hououmaru Satsuki's stomach was nothing more than an easy target.

Satsuki's heels clicked harshly against the ground as she backedpedaled away from Hououmaru. Teeth gritting in mild anger as she narrowly avoided the black knife, the wind following the razor sharp blade brushing against her stomach, Satsuki narrowed her blue eyes upon noticing the smug smirk adorning Hououmaru's face. Quickly pirouetting on her left foot Satsuki spun around and smashed her knee directly into Hououmaru's chin.

"I am not arrogant enough to think you don't pose a threat, Hououmaru," Satsuki retorted as she watched the dark-skinned woman stumble away. Pressing her advantage by jabbing the point of her elbow into Hououmaru's chest, a soft gasp escaping the smaller woman's mouth, Satsuki stared angrily at her injured opponent and shouted, "But that does not mean I will hold back! You



say your Écusson Raiment is strong enough to stand up to Kamui like Junketsu and Mugetsu? If that is the case I shall come at you with everything Junketsu possesses!"

Hououmaru wiped her forearm against her chin before spitting on the ground. She never expected Junketsu to actually give Satsuki its full power. The reports from the battle for Karakura Town suggested Satsuki nearly died as a result of Junketsu taking over her body yet the Kamui seemed to be working in tandem with Lady Ragyo's daughter. Grunting as she pushed her body back up, the pain in her chin abating in the process, Hououmaru cocked her head as she sensed Ichigo moving into position behind her. As a pillar of fire lit up the stadium, ice both melting and solidifying around it, Hououmaru brought her arms back up and gripped the knife tightly in her hands. Without Lady Ragyo around Xcution was actually losing the battle against the nudists and their allies.

"Your speeches are as grandiose as ever, Lady Satsuki. Unfortunately a fight is no place for talking..." Rushing towards Satsuki, her feet kicking up a cloud of dust, Hououmaru's body appeared to crackle with purple energy as she swung her arm out and expertly deflected Bakuzan. Acutely aware that Ichigo was currently sprinting towards her, the power thrumming through Mugetsu hard to ignore, Hououmaru didn't waste any time as she pressed her body against Satsuki and smashed a fist into her stomach, "Électrocution Valse."

Satsuki's mouth opened in a silent scream, her muscles convulsing sporadically, as purple bolts of electricity arced through her body. A moment later there was a resounding bang, arcs of electricity wrapping around her body, before Satsuki was sent crashing backwards through the air. Letting out an exhausted sigh as she slid her foot back, an expressionless look on her face, Hououmaru was aware Électrocution Valse would not work on Satsuki a second time. She only managed to land a hit on Lady Ragyo's daughter because she was unaware of her Écusson Raiment's abilities.

"Satsuki!"

Ichigo sprinted forward as he saw Hououmaru send Satsuki crashing through the air after only a single punch. Gripping Tournesol's hilt with both hands, the blue blade thrumming with power, the orange haired youth realized if Hououmaru could fight Satsuki without much trouble then he couldn't afford to hold back Mugetsu's power. His fight against Ragyo Kiryuin, if he could even call it that, demonstrated quite clearly that the woman was not fooling around and would easily kill his friends if she felt like it. Gritting his teeth while telepathically shifting Mugetsu into her Zangetsu configuration, a burst of blue light and stars covering his body as the Kamui's armor shifted and morphed, Ichigo leaned to the side as Hououmaru abruptly spun around and sliced her knife at his face.

*" She can follow me even in Zangetsu?"*

As he avoided Hououmaru's counterattack, his eyes tracking the midnight black knife held tightly in her fingers, Ichigo leapt backwards and readjusted his grip on Tournesol. Even though Zangetsu may increase his speed to nearly the same level as his old bankai Ichigo knew it was not infallible. Sanageyama did manage to counter his speed during the Sudden Death Runoff Election due to the combined power from his Blade Regalia and Shingantsu. Instead of relying entirely on his speed to overwhelm Hououmaru he needed to first figure out what other techniques her Écusson Raiment could do. Shifting his left foot back, a bead of sweat dripping down his face, Ichigo was about to attack Hououmaru when he spotted Satsuki in the distance.

"Why the hell are you working for Satsuki's mother?" Ichigo shouted angrily while trying to stall for time until Satsuki returned. Refusing to look away from Hououmaru as a bright burst of rainbow light illuminated the stadium, no doubt coming from his dad's fight against Ragyo Kiryuin, Ichigo's brown eyes narrowed as he growled, "She wants to kill everyone on the planet!"

"I know what you are trying to accomplish, Ichigo Kurosaki," Hououmaru's voice was flat, her tone full of disappointment, as she answered. Standing up straight, her clawed fingers clenched tightly

around the knife in her hand, Hououmaru's lips curled downwards into a frown. She had perhaps five minutes until the strain of battle caused her Écusson Raiment to overheat and deactivate. Spitting on the ground, a trace of crimson in the saliva, Hououmaru shifted her right foot back and scoffed, "I shall finish this before Lady Satsuki returns."

As Hououmaru raced towards Ichigo, increasing levels of power coursing through her dark purple armor even as minute cracks appeared on it, her mind was having trouble understanding how he managed to become so skilled at such a young age. Dancing around Ichigo's accurate counterattack, her hidden eyes expertly tracking the blade's path, Hououmaru mentally scowled when Ichigo adjusted his stance and blocked her attack. It had taken Lady Satsuki years of rigorous training, supervised by her mother of course, to wield Bakuzan with a level of precision and lethality few on Earth could match. Yet as she dodged around Tournesol, her black knife changing the trajectory of the blade just enough so that it passed harmlessly to her right accompanied by a shower of sparks, Hououmaru couldn't figure out who trained Ichigo to such an extent.

Raising the knife above her head and blocking Ichigo's attack by placing it at the juncture of Tournesol's blade and hilt, her arms quivering as she prevented the blade from cleaving through her raiment. Hououmaru felt beads of sweat drip down her face. As her raiment's electricity flowing through her arms, the knife in her hand glowing with a faint purple light, Hououmaru asked, "You are far too skilled to have simply picked up a sword after transferring to Honnouji Academy. Did Isshin train you?"

Ichigo's eyes tightened in anger as Hououmaru mentioned his father. Increasing the pressure he was placing on his opponent, the ground beneath Hououmaru's armored feet cracking and then cratering downwards, Ichigo felt a burst of steam burst out of the three exhaust vents on his back and scoffed, "My dad's strong but he's a complete idiot. He couldn't train his way out of a wet paper bag."

Hououmaru grunted in exertion as she listened to Ichigo. Gnashing her teeth together as the strain of holding back Tournesol caused increasingly more cracks to cover her Écusson Raiment, the dark purple armor beginning to overheat, Hououmaru pushed forward and twisted her wrists to the right. As Tournesol fell heavily against the ground next to her, Ichigo's strength causing the Life Fiber blade to shatter the steel with ease, purple lightning covered Hououmaru's legs as she pushed her raiment to its limit. Pivoting around, her arms drawn inwards to increase her momentum, Hououmaru kicked up towards the bottom of Ichigo's chin, "Électrocution Marche."

Quickly tilting his head backwards and allowing Hououmaru's foot to barely miss hitting his chin Ichigo's eyes widened when a blast of electricity exploded out past his face. As he felt his hair standing on end from the amount of electricity coursing through the air, Mugetsu's voice complaining about the effect it was having on her Life Fibers, Ichigo nearly missed Hououmaru's subsequent attack. Pushing off the ground away from the woman, his eyes tracking the knife while it arced through the air, Ichigo skidded nearly to a stop before he raced back towards her. He couldn't afford to give someone like Hououmaru even a moment to rest.

Twisting past Hououmaru's knife, the edge of the blade coming precariously close to one of Mugetsu's eyes, Ichigo grit his teeth as he spun around. Eyes tracking the movement of her blade, Tournesol held close to his chest, Ichigo dug his feet into the stands before slamming his blade against Hououmaru's guard. With a resounding crackle accompanied by an outpouring of blue-tinged energy the dark-skinned woman was sent careening high into the stands. Panting lightly as he watched Hououmaru crash back to the ground, his breath slightly heavy, Ichigo grunted as he relaxed his stance, "Give up, Hououmaru. You can't win."

"Do not... underestimate me... Ichigo Kurosaki..."

Pulling herself out of the rubble, arcs of electricity crackling around her damaged Écusson Raiment, Hououmaru panted deeply as she tightly gripped her knife. Hunched forward, beads of sweat dripping

off her face as her visor cracked and fell to the ground before disappearing in a flash of rainbow light, Hououmaru's amber eyes glared angrily at Ichigo. She knew her raiment wouldn't be able to last long against a Kamui, let alone two, but Ichigo's skill with Tournesol was concerning. If his fighting ability had been at Lady Satsuki's level than she could have extended the battle another few minutes but at the current rate she had less than a minute before her raiment overheated and shattered.

"I have been Lady Ragyo's secretary for over twenty years," Hououmaru bent her knees as she spoke, her voice loud and clear over the sounds of the remaining battles. Staring at the cracks covering her Écusson Raiment, the familiar glow of Life Fibers shining forth, she winced in pain before continuing, "For all those years I have followed every single order and demand from Lady Ragyo. Do you think she would have allowed me to stay at her side, allow me access to the most beautiful secrets concerning Life Fibers, if she did not believe I possessed the power and will to get the job done?"

"She's trying to destroy the world, damn it!" Ichigo angrily retorted, ignoring Hououmaru's question. He couldn't understand what the hell Satsuki's mother did to have Hououmaru's loyalty. It wasn't like what happened to Byakuya, who stupidly allowed Rukia's execution to proceed out of a conflict between duty and family. Hououmaru appeared to truly want to destroy humanity for no other reason than because that was Ragyo's goal. Swinging his arm in front of his body, a scowl forming on his face, he shouted, "There's no reason you should be helping her!"

"There is no point in explaining my motives," Hououmaru grit her teeth as the strain of battle began catching up to her body. As she took a single step forward, the armor around her leg cracking in the process, Hououmaru clenched her fists and drew out the last vestiges of her Écusson Raiment's powers. If she was going to fall today than she would do so with pride and dignity. Slamming her foot into the ground as an aura of lightning, tinged with the colors of the

rainbow, surrounded her body Hououmaru held her knife in front of her face and declared, "Lady Ragyo's orders are sacrosanct. There is nothing you can say to dissuade me from following her orders."

"Then allow me to speak for Ichigo, Hououmaru!" A regal voice shouted as a shadow descended on Hououmaru. As a piercing blue light shone in the sky, contrasting heavily with the red background coming from the hovering COVERS, Satsuki spun around as Bakuzan glowed brightly from Junketsu's power, "Zenkan - Tenrai Kagai!"

Hououmaru managed to avoid the first strike by rapidly twisting her body to the side. As she watched the blue energy surrounding Bakuzan easily sever the stands in two, a line of destruction racing forth from the point of contact, the dark-skinned leader of Xcution shifted her stance and attempted to immediately counterattack before Ichigo could assist Satsuki. Caught off guard when the energy surrounding Bakuzan did not disappear as she expected, her amber eyes widening in realization of what that meant, Hououmaru desperately tried to jump away but was caught off guard when Satsuki quickly pivoted on one heel to face her. With a cold look in her blue eyes, armored hands holding firmly onto Bakuzan's hilt while twin bursts of steam burst from Junketsu's pauldrons, Satsuki's heels cratered the ground as she sprinted forward and unleashed the full force of Tenrai Kagai on her mother's secretary.

"Farewell, Hououmaru. Seni-Soshitsu."

Sliding slowly to a stop, dust rising from her heels, Satsuki closed her eyes and swung Bakuzan through the air. As the last vestiges of Junketsu's energy dissipated into the air, a light pant of exhaustion escaping her lips, Satsuki turned around and loudly slammed her sword onto the ground. Almost in time with the display of authority Hououmaru's armor abruptly cracked and shattered, rainbow light emanating from the remnants of her Écusson Raiment still clinging to her lithe body, before the leader of Xcution collapsed limply to the ground. Turning towards Ichigo, her face set into a grim scowl,

Satsuki managed to take several steps before she gasped and collapsed onto a knee.

"Stop, Ichigo!"

Satsuki's voice was firm and demanding as she gripped one of Junketsu's pauldrons tightly. Biting her lip, her long black hair hanging limply in front of her face, Satsuki's body was covered by blue light and stars as Junketsu shifted back into her normal configuration. Breathing heavily as the strain of wearing Junketsu Zenkan vanished, her arms slightly shaking from the exertion, Satsuki slowly stood back up and sighed, "Do not be worried! Junketsu shifted into Zenkan of her own accord after Hououmaru's attack. This pain is merely a side effect of my body not being used to the power."

" ***She's right, Ichigo,***" Mugetsu chimed in as she felt her wearer's suspicion. Focusing her multicolored eyes on the other Kamui, Junketsu staring back at her, Mugetsu huffed and blinked. After the events in Karakura Town she was now able to mentally communicate with Junketsu much like she could with Senketsu. The only problem was Junketsu didn't like shutting up now that she could talk, ***"Junketsu told me she changed into Zenkan on her own. Satsuki's pain was because her body was not used to the strain of the new configuration. Her body's not as durable as yours, after all."***

"What about Ryuko?" Ichigo sarcastically asked his Kamui, "If that's true than why doesn't Senketsu hurt her every time he switches forms?"

Mugetsu seemed to bristle indignantly around his body as she answered, ***"Why are you asking me? If you're so curious about Ryuko go ask her yourself."***

Ichigo grumbled at his Kamui's attitude as he turned towards the unconscious Hououmaru. Staring at the woman laying facedown to protect her modesty after Satsuki's finishing move, the remains of

her Écusson Raiment scattered around her body slowly dissolving into rainbow Life Fibers, Ichigo tried to understand what could drive someone to want to destroy humanity. Ragyo Kiryuin needed to be stopped, that he was certain of, but he had a strange feeling there was something in her past that would help explain her current motivations. Resting Tournesol on his shoulder as he looked up into the sky, bursts of rainbow light briefly disrupting the red glow coming from the COVERS, Ichigo wondered how much of his dad's past was still being kept a secret from him.

"You don't seem to be surprised by your father's strength, Ichigo," Satsuki said as she slowly slid Bakuzan into its scabbard and stared at the floor of the stadium. It was pleasing to see her Elite Four not only still alive, especially since Xcution wasn't known for being merciful, but actually winning. Half of the battles were already finished, the members of Xcution either unconscious or on the verge of defeat, with Esdeath being the only prominent member still fighting strong. Narrowing her eyes when the second strongest member of Xcution raised her arms up and slammed a massive amount of ice against the ground, the entire stadium shaking from the impact, Satsuki turned to Ichigo and added, "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Letting out an exaggerated sigh, one hand rubbing the bridge of his nose, Ichigo answered, "My dad isn't exactly the most normal man in the world."

"Ichigo, my mother is a Life Fiber Hybrid determined to feed humanity to the Original Life Fiber," Ichigo didn't miss the bitter and sarcastic tone in Satsuki's voice. Folding her arms under her chest, hands clasped around opposing wrists, Satsuki shook her head and gazed at the battle raging in the sky about Honnouji Academy. As her face was cast in a rainbow light, courtesy of her mother clashing with Ichigo's dad, she turned to him and added, "There is nothing you can say about your father that can surprise me."

"... this... isn't... over..."



Hououmaru gasped, a ragged cough escaping her lips, as she pushed her body off the ground. Planting one fist against the stands as her peripheral vision started to darken Hououmaru desperately kept her mind focused on the task at hand lest she fall into unconsciousness. The pain flowing through her body due to Satsuki's Tenrai Kagai was brutal but it was nothing compared to what the Grand Couturier or Lady Ragyo would do to her if she failed. Coughing harshly, flecks of blood coating the ground underneath her, Hououmaru stared up at the two Kamui wearers with a small smirk on her face. With every word more difficult than the last she asked, "You... really think... you've won... don't you... Lady Satsuki?"

Satsuki pursed her lips in annoyance as she listened to Hououmaru's defiance. Strutting forward, one hand placed on Bakuzan's hilt in case of a trap, she walked forward until she was standing directly above Hououmaru. Staring angrily at the fallen leader of Xcution, focused completely on Hououmaru's unsteady amber eyes, Satsuki threw her arm out and shouted, "There is a fine line between defiance and stupidity, Hououmaru! Look around you and tell me what you see! Xcution is finished! The Grand Couturier has most likely fallen at the hands of Tsumugiya and Ryuko! Even my mother will perish at the hands of Isshin Kurosaki!"

"Lady Ragyo knew..." Hououmaru gasped as she struggled to get the words out. Biting her lower lip, the pain helping to clear her mind from the fog of unconsciousness threatening to overwhelm her, Hououmaru shivered as she felt the last piece of her Écusson Raiment fall off her body. Lady Ragyo wouldn't be pleased to find that her raiment was destroyed, "... she knew I might... fall. So she... made contingencies..."

"Contingencies?" Ichigo felt something amiss as Hououmaru spoke. Looking around, his mind telling him something strange was about to happen, he was brought back to attention when a series of pained chuckles escaped Hououmaru's lips.

"You can... sense it, can't... you Ichigo?" Hououmaru's chuckles were cut off as her arms collapsed, sending her face crashing down to the ground. As the blackness began overwhelming her vision, her mind growing foggier by the second, Hououmaru managed to stare up into Satsuki's disbelieving eyes, "Your mother... tied my raiment... to the COVERS... activation signal. If I fell... they... would... activate..."

Falling into unconsciousness as the last vestiges of her energy were spent Hououmaru failed to witness a pulse of rainbow light pierce through each and every COVER floating in the air over the city. Even as Isshin continued fighting against Ragyo, the two hybrids purposefully ignored by the COVERS floating aimlessly down to the ground, Ichigo and Satsuki stared in horror as the Life Fiber beings began spreading around Honnou City.

Ichigo tightened his grip on Tournesol as he stared at the falling COVERS. He didn't know whether it was from Mugetsu or the Life Fibers in his body but he instinctively knew what the COVERS intended to do. As he saw several dozen COVERS drift towards the stadium floor and his friends Ichigo moved to help only to find Satsuki's hand clamped firmly around his shoulder.

"Stay calm and do not lose focus, Ichigo," Satsuki pulled out Bakuzan as she stared coldly at the COVERS that dared to enter Honnouji Academy. While she wished nothing more than to destroy them all she had to prioritize her fellow students. Only once the stadium and academy were both secured would she direct her forces to free the rest of the city, "Your friends are strong enough to fight off the COVERS. The battle for humanity's freedom is not yet finished. There is still one more thing we need to do."

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"Yo! This isn't over yet!"

Moe Shishigawara scoffed in annoyance and spat on the ground. Rubbing a hand against his nose when he felt something wet, a familiar coppery taste lingering in his mouth, his eye began twitching when he saw the red liquid coating his raiment. How the hell was this happening? Everyone in Xcution was granted raiment by Lady Ragyo and the Grand Couturier to fight Revocs's enemies and make sure everything went off without a hitch yet Shishigawara couldn't shake the feeling that he could actually lose this fight. Clenching a bandaged fist tightly in anger, a pulse of rainbow-tinted energy coursing through his hand, Shishigawara took his foot off the fallen form of Meninas McAllon and pointed a finger at Chad, "Hey! You payin' attention, Chad? This is where round three starts! You may be strong but the power of my Loterie Raiment is out of this world!"

Chad grunted in pain, his broken ribs beginning to irritate him, but refused to speak to Shishigawara. Turning his gaze towards the sky, the blood-red glow from the Life Fibers permeating the atmosphere bathing the surrounding city in eerie colors, Chad's eyes widened in surprise when the COVERS began floating down towards the ground. Remembering Armstrong's words about Ragyo Kiryuin's plans for humanity, spiritual energy crackling around his left hand as he tightened it into a fist, Chad's shaggy brown hair covered his eyes as he answered, "... I've fought stronger."

"What the hell was that?"

Shishigawara seethed at the dismissive tone in Chad's voice. Motioning towards Meninas, who was struggling to get back up, the member of Xcution turned around and let loose a kick that sent her flying away into the nearby wall. As hot as the pink haired Quincy looked in that white uniform and skirt Shishigawara was not about to let her get another chance to punch him. His face was still stinging from the last time he fell for her supposedly meek appearance. Pointing towards the newly formed crater, a look of irritation in his grey eyes, Shishigawara shouted, "I literally just kicked superwoman's ass! You've got nothin' on her strength!"

"Ichigo is counting on me to win... ," Chad's voice was stoic even as pain wracked his body. Bravado aside defeating Shishigawara was much easier said than done. Despite his small and lanky appearance his raiment gave him enough strength to not only fight against him but utterly decimate Meninas. Wincing as his ribs acted up again, his massive endurance helping to numb the pain, Chad wondered why she went down after only a couple of solid hits.

*" Shishigawara hit me at least twice as much yet she's the one that's unconscious..."*

Sighing deeply, his ribs protesting against the motion, Chad allowed the shield on his right arm to dissolve back into his Brazo Derecho de Gigante. Against Shishigawara defense would be pointless. Grimacing as his armor shifted back into its second form, the fin on his shoulder reappearing, Chad brought his arms up into the standard boxing stance and continued, "... he's giving everything he has to defeat Ragyo Kiryuin so as his friend I should do the same."

"Fighting for your friend, huh?" Shishigawara knew who Ichigo was the second Chad mentioned him by name. Lady Ragyo gave Xcution explicit instructions to leave him alone unless they wanted a long discussion with the Grand Couturier. He may be a member of Xcution but Nui Harime just rubbed him the wrong way. Cracking his knuckles as he confidently strutted towards Chad with a cocky grin on his face Shishigawara crouched down as a burst of rainbow energy exploded from his body, "You know what? All this talk is making me feel like I can hit the jackpot, Chad!"

Tensing as the air surrounding Shishigawara began to ripple and contort, his hair pushed back by a newly formed breeze, Chad somehow knew he wouldn't be able to dodge the attack. The only way he was going to get out of this alive was to immediately go on the offense and hope he could hit Shishigawara before he finished charging his attack. Curling the fingers on his left hand into his palm, electricity seeming to spark between the digits before enveloping the entire hand in spiritual energy, Chad grimaced as he pushed off the ground and sprinted towards Shishigawara. Leaping into the air

before reaching the Xcution member Chad roared as he swung his left arm, "La Muerte!"

"Like hell I'm going to let that hit me!" Shishigawara shouted as a nervous sweat began trickling down the back of his neck. While Meninas's strength was nightmarishly deceptive she was nowhere nearly as resilient as Chad. While it only took a few hits, mostly to the face, to bring her down Chad managed to not only stay on his feet but get in a few punches of his own. Swallowing the nervous lump in his throat, his Loterie Raiment's power extruding a rainbow aura around his body, Shishigawara shifted his stance and threw his arm forward, "My luck is always rising! Météore -"

Before Shishigawara could finish calling his attack, the energy gathered around his fists already rushing forth towards Chad, he was blown backwards as someone crashed heavily into the ground in front of him. Bouncing harshly against the floor of the stadium, cursing profusely when his face slid along the ground for a few seconds, Shishigawara didn't know who decided to interrupt his fight but he was going to make them pay. Rolling onto his back, his raiment protecting him from getting injured, Shishigawara dug his fingers into the ground as he finally managed to arrest his movements.

"Hey! Why the hell are... you...?" As the smoke and dust cleared, exposing the figure sitting on her hands and knees, Shishigawara froze in mid-sentence and sputtered, "L-Lady Ragyo?"

Ragyo Kiryuin didn't bother answering Shishigawara as she slowly picked herself off the ground, her once pristine white dress sullied and torn, and winced at the unfamiliar feeling of pain permeating her body. The last time she felt pain, and didn't simply fake it out of amusement, was more than seventeen years ago and the events of that night were still freshly ingrained in her memories. Her fight against Isshin wasn't going at all like she imagined. Even though Isshin was as strong as her, courtesy of the Original Life Fiber's splendid gift, she couldn't land a single hit on him. Every time she managed to get close enough to strike Isshin with her Needle Blade

he would dodge out of the way while throwing out a rather flattering compliment.

Standing back onto her feet, her arms quivering from exhaustion, Ragyo sighed deeply as her pulsed quickened from excitement. As the rainbow undertone in her silver hair brightened, illuminating the surrounding area in a backdrop of light, Ragyo turned her attention to Isshin hovering in the air above her. Summoning her Needle Blade, a brief burst of light appearing as her fingers gripped the weapon, Ragyo's gaze softened slightly as she stared at the blade in Isshin's hand, "You've been hiding things from me. Is that a Life Fiber blade?"

As he landed softly on the ground, his shirt torn up slightly but his appearance otherwise immaculate, Isshin allowed the Life Fiber blade in the form of a tachi to rest against his shoulder as he locked gazes with Ragyo. He may have lost Engetsu due to what the Original Life Fiber did to him but Isshin would never allow his hands to hold any other blade. While the blade in his hands was but an empty facsimile of his zanpakuto, a mockery of his old weapon, Isshin viewed it as a tribute to everything he lost.

"Are you talking about this thing?" Isshin motioned with his head towards the blade, a faint rainbow light emanating from the Life Fiber weapon, before continuing, "It must have been a week after Nui's first visit. Having her drop in unexpected like that made me think that I needed a way to dissuade her from coming back."

Chuckling at Isshin's explanation as her wounds regenerated, the dirt and grime covering her dress vanishing in seconds, Ragyo tilted her head and sighed once more. It was frustrating that every time she begins to understand Isshin he goes and pulls something like this. Lips curling up as Isshin's wounds refused to heal, no doubt due to his stupid excuse of wishing to look human in front of Ichigo, Ragyo's maroon eyes closed as she pondered her next move, "A blade of such quality deserves a name, don't you think? Have you thought of a suitable name or shall I have the honors?"

"I'll have you know I can come up with a name all on my own. It just takes me a bit longer to do so," Isshin defensive argued as he lowered the blade from his shoulder. He wouldn't admit it but even after more than six years he still hadn't come up with a name for it. Pointing at her Needle Blade Isshin scoffed and said, "I'm surprised you're so skilled with that thing. I didn't think running Revocs gave you time to practice."

Ragyo's eyes narrowed at Isshin, "Are you calling me lazy?"

Isshin stabbed his sword into the ground, the edge easily piercing through the metal, and folded his arms across his chest. Sparing a quick glance at Chad, the Mexican youth carefully watching their conversation through tired eyes, Isshin reared his head back and laughed, "Not at all! It takes a lot of time and effort to make a company successful! Why, I remember back when Revocs was just starting to branch out from Japan. Hououmaru was all nervous and exhausted from getting everything sorted out and must have passed out three or four times. Doing all that doesn't really leave much time for training."

The rainbow light shining from Ragyo's hair dimmed subtly as she continued to listen to Isshin. Tightening her grip on the Needle Blade for a moment Ragyo felt more than watched as the constitute Life Fibers dissolved into the air before flowing back into her body through her dress. Sighing deeply as the rainbow Life Fibers merged with her body Ragyo's brow imperceptibly creased into a frown as she felt the apprehension from the COVERS. While they were Life Fiber beings subservient to her will they were rightfully fearful of getting too close to Isshin. As long as he remained within the stadium the COVERS could not assimilate the students of Honnouji Academy she dealt with even before Satsuki began her little rebellion.

Caressing the side of her face, her fingers trailing down her cheek as she tilted her head to the side, Ragyo's gaze hardened as she shook her head, "You're still as stubborn as the day I met you, Isshin, but I suppose that's one of your most endearing qualities. If you continue

to refuse to let me through then I suppose I have no choice in the matter... I give up."

Isshin flinched backwards in surprise at Ragyo's words and judging by Shishigawara's sputtering it seemed the Xcution member was just as shocked. Once he managed to regain his composure he asked, "You're just giving up? I've known you for over twenty years. You don't give up on anything once you set your mind on it."

"Perhaps I should clarify this apparent misunderstanding, Isshin," Ragyo chuckled as she reached into her dress, the Life Fibers woven within parting out of the way of her hand, and pulled out a cell phone. Tapping her fingers against the phone's screen, her lips curled upwards in amusement at Isshin's bewildered expression, Ragyo's expression shifted dangerously as she continued, "I was not conceding victory, as you seem to think, but that I was giving up fighting you. It was obvious from the very beginning that defeating you in combat would be very difficult. As long as you're here the COVERS cannot enter Honnouji Academy. While I wished I had more time to deal with you it seems like my precious Nui has already fallen at the hands of my other daughters..."

"So you already know about Ryuko, huh?" Isshin ignored the sudden chill running down his spine, courtesy of Ragyo's intense glare, and shrugged, "Why are you getting angry at me? I offered to watch Ryuko for Souichiro but he refused because he said it was too dangerous."

"I'm not angry with you. Now if you can excuse me for just a minute I have to make a business call," Ragyo trailed off as she placed the phone next to her ear and turned away from Isshin. Strumming her fingers of her free hand against her wrist Ragyo's eyes widened as the call finally connected, "This is Ragyo Kiryuin. I'm forwarding another ten million to your account if you can push it up to twenty minutes from right now. You can? Ce est merveilleux. Please let me know when the job is done."



Pulling the phone away from her ear as the call ended, an unnerving smile on her face, Ragyo turned back to Isshin and asked, "How is your family, Isshin? You never did allow me to see those lovely twins of yours. Yuzu and Karin were their names, right? It's quite a shame what's about to happen to them..."

The color in Isshin's hair began to bleed away to silver as he stared incredulously at Ragyo. Pulling his sword out of the ground, the veins on his arm prominent as he tightly gripped the hilt, Isshin's tone was little more than a growl as he stepped towards Ragyo, "If you hurt a single hair on their heads I'll -"

"I would never dare to hurt your family, Isshin," Ragyo held her hand against her heart as a look of stunned shock spread across her face, "I'm insulted by your accusation. I know fully well what you're capable of doing if your family is put in danger. The assassin I hired, on the other hand, is more than willing to accomplish the deed. He is one of the best in the world and doesn't even wear any Life Fibers. That means the Anti-Life Fiber shield you erected around Karakura Town is all but useless. In twenty minutes your precious daughters are going to be -"

Ragyo was cut off when Isshin clamped his hand firmly around her throat, his fingers squeezing her neck like a vice, as he traversed the nearly twenty foot distance in less than a second. Placing the tip of his blade under Ragyo's chin, the faint rainbow sheen growing brighter by the second, Isshin didn't notice as the brown coloring in his eyes flaked away to familiar maroon, "Call him off, Ragyo!"

If she was bothered by the threatening tone in Isshin's voice Ragyo didn't show it. As her lips curled higher, a manic grin adorning her face as she watched Isshin's true appearance begin to subconsciously reveal itself, Ragyo lightly placed her hands on his wrist and chuckled, "As much as I appreciate how close we've gotten the matter is entirely out of my hands. He's already been paid to kill Yuzu and Karin. In less than twenty minutes your daughters are going to be dead even with all those nudists you have guarding them. There is, however, a way that *you* can stop him..."

Pulling free from Isshin's hand in a burst of rainbow light, the bruises on her neck healing nearly instantaneously, Ragyo leaned forward slightly as she gazed lovingly into his eyes. Folding her arms under her bosom, the white dress helping to accentuate her figure, Ragyo's silver hair seemed to brighten as she continued to speak, "If you leave Honnouji Academy right now you can make it to Karakura Town in less than ten minutes. That is more than enough time to save your daughters."

"Do you take me for an idiot?" Isshin's tone deepened as he glared at Ragyo. He could feel his disguise failing, exposing his actual appearance for everyone to see, but Isshin didn't care at this point. All that mattered was keeping his family safe, "I may not have gotten the best grades but even I can tell this is a trap. The moment I leave the COVERS will begin to devour innocent people. Nobody, not even Ichigo, will be able to stop you once I'm gone."

"All too true but flattery will get you nowhere," Ragyo answered nonchalantly with a small shrug of her head, "We both know you're the only one capable of defeating me but I wouldn't try anything if I were you. If you decide to continue fighting I'll make sure it takes you at least ten minutes to beat me, which sadly leaves you with not enough time to save your daughters. The choice is up to you - your daughters or the world. Eighteen minutes..."

Isshin hated what he was about to do but Ragyo left with him no other choices. If he wanted to save Yuzu and Karin he would need to leave Honnouji Academy immediately but the moment he did Ragyo would be able to continue her plans completely unopposed. The only glimmer of light was the certainty in his mind that Ragyo was allowing him to rescue his daughters. If she truly wished to kill Yuzu and Karin she would not have given him twenty minutes to stop the assassin. Grimacing at the probable consequences of his decision Isshin apprehensively realized that in order to make it back to Karakura Town in time he needed to completely drop his disguise. It might draw a few stares, most likely from Ichigo and Anderson, but

he was prepared to deal with the eventual fallout whenever it happened.

"You give yourself far too much credit. In a couple of years Ichigo and Ryuko should be able to give us a run for our money."

Not allowing Ragyo the necessary time to respond Isshin crouched before leaping into the sky, a vibrant trail of colors following his ascent, and spun around. Pushing off an invisible platform in the air with his feet, his now maroon eyes noticing Ichigo's perplexed gaze locked squarely on him, Isshin allowed his disguise to peel away as he flew west accompanied by a sonic boom. As the Life Fibers holding his disguise fell away, revealing a man nearly twenty years younger in appearance, Isshin bit his lip when he passed over the outskirts of Honnou City. Hopefully Nudist Beach would be able to salvage something before the battle turning into a complete massacre.

"Perhaps in another lifetime I would have been arrogant enough to assume myself invincible but I do appreciate the comment," Ragyo muttered, a sly smirk on her face, as she watched Isshin retreat into the distance. It was interesting how her life turned out after he stole her heart. So many things could have changed if Isshin never came into her life but Ragyo didn't regret a single thing. Turning around as Isshin faded away, her heart pounding from both excitement and lust, Ragyo cocked her head to the side as she closed her eyes, "Mr. Shishigawara, I need you to take note of something for me."

Standing up tall as Ragyo addressed him, his hands absentmindedly dusting off his Loterie Raiment, Shishigawara hurried towards his boss while ignoring his injuries. Usually Hououmaru was always nearby to write this kind of stuff down but he wasn't complaining. Fumbling for the notepad he kept in the pocket of his raiment, nearly dropping it in the process, Shishigawara turned to the first blank page and asked, "What do you want me to write down, Lady Ragyo?"

Ragyo looked around the stadium, which suddenly seemed full of opportunities, before responding to Shishigawara's question. When she noticed two of the Quincy fighting Yukio, his Fantasie Raiment more than a match for them, Ragyo's tone turned sadistic, "Hiring an assassin to kill Isshin's children has left a bad taste in my mouth. Can you please remind me to personally kill him once the festival is over? I wouldn't want Isshin to get the wrong impression of me, after all."

"Uh, sure," Shishigawara muttered as he quickly jotted the message down, "Is there anything else?"

"That will be all, Mr. Shishigawara. Please continue killing Mr. Yasutora at your leisure," Ragyo replied as she began walking away. Without Isshin around the COVERS could finally begin absorbing the student body and reach their full power, untethered from the Original Life Fiber. Tilting her head when she saw four bursts of reddish-white light appear around the stadium, her senses prickling from the intimately familiar power welling up around her, Ragyo could not suppress the psychotic grin spreading across her face. Isshin's perfect COVERS were truly a work of art. Already her maroon eyes could easily pick out a transformed Kon racing horizontally along the walls of the stadium, the blades jutting out from his body and tail cutting through her own COVERS with ease.

Pausing in mid-step as a series of explosions lit up the sky above her, her heel clicking loudly against the ground as she came to a stop, Ragyo watched as a COVERS with a distinctly feminine shape flew over the academy. Maroon eyes memorizing how Ririn danced through her own COVERS, enormous gusts of winds roaring from her wings as she unleashed salvos of missiles, Ragyo made a mental note to capture out of them before the festival ended. The information Isshin's COVERS contained was priceless and her mind was already visualizing what she could do with it.

"Well now..." Ragyo spread her arms outwards as the COVERS landed around her, "... what shall I do first?"

As she strummed her fingers against her wrist, several interesting ideas coming to mind about what to do first, Ragyo smirked and tilted her head to the left as a spiritual bullet rocketed past her body. Silver hair rustling from the force of the bullet tearing through the stadium's wall before continuing out into Honnou City, a trail of destruction and devastation in its wake, Ragyo knew just what she should do to help pass the time. Focusing her attention on Lille Barro, her fingers blurring as she caught the second bullet with laughable ease, Ragyo chuckled, "C'est ça... I think I will start with you, Quincy."

Lille Barro's single eye widened as Ragyo Kiryuin stepped towards him before abruptly vanishing. Standing up as he expanded his senses, his body alert as he tried to hone in on the repugnant feeling of the Life Fibers in Ragyo's body, Lille Barro froze when a burst of excruciating pain tore through his chest.

"W-What...?"

As his arms fell weakly to his sides, the spiritual rifle clasp in his hand clattering against the ground before vanishing into energy, Lille Barro coughed up blood as he tried to comprehend what was happening to him. Gasping in pain as he stared at Ragyo standing before him, her left hand buried deep in his chest, he coughed harshly and sputtered, "... I-Impossible..."

"Impossible, you say?" Ragyo smirked as he clenched her hand tighter around Lille Barro's heart, eliciting a choked gasp from the Sternritter. It seemed that even the so-called Quincy were mortal, if the look of terror and excruciating pain on the dark skinned man meant anything. As Lille Barro's blood slid like oil off her dress, the Life Fibers woven within refusing to be sullied by the blood of a mere human, Ragyo began gathering energy in her arm and laughed, "I'm sure you'll find that nothing in life is impossible, my dear Quincy. Please give me regards to your leader when I send him to you!"

Releasing the energy in her hand, the light around her body dimming for a second, Ragyo's face was ecstatic as a brilliant beam of

rainbow light tore straight through Lille Barro's body and up into the sky. As her lips curled upwards into a manic smile as she watched the Quincy turning to ash, his body lasting only a few seconds before disappearing into the wind, Ragyo realized she now had the attention of everyone still alive in the stadium. Completely uncaring of the attention Ragyo stared into Bambietta's horror-stricken eyes and quipped as she closed her eyes, "Well, that's one nuisance out of the picture."

As she slowly walked away from what was left of Lille Barro, her heels echoing loudly with every step, Ragyo reached out and trailed her fingers across one of the COVERS in her path. Ignoring the shriveled up face of the student the COVERS managed to absorb, her lips curled upwards in a pleased grin, Ragyo looked around the stadium with a discerning eye and sighed. It seemed that Xcution was doing a rather miserable job of killing Ichigo's allies. She could sense Giriko was already dead and that Ririko was close to having her Duveteux Raiment destroyed for a second time.

"Oh dear... it seems Hououmaru has fallen," Ragyo's regal voice echoed as she stepped off the stands and into the air. Ignoring the efforts of Isshin's COVERS to destroy her own, the four Life Fiber beings too few to stop tens of thousands of COVERS from descending on the academy and city, Ragyo closed her eyes and smirked when she felt Ichigo and Satsuki shift their full attention towards her. Turning in midair to face them, the rainbow undertone in her hair glowing brightly as a multicolored backdrop of light appeared behind her, Ragyo chuckled as she felt their Kamui tense in anticipation.

"La vie est drôle."

Ragyo's tone lost whatever amusement it contained as she spun around and backhanded the pulse of spiritual energy Bambietta fired at her. Silver hair blowing wildly in the wind as Bambietta's attack collided with the stadium and immediately detonated, sending Yukio unfortunately crashing into the wall, Ragyo's maroon eyes were cold as she stared at the Quincy floating in the air behind her.

"It's been than seventeen years since I last fought a Quincy. I nearly forgot you people could fly," Ragyo's grin turned predatory as she drew the Needle Blade back out of her body. Running a finger down the blade, the rainbow coloring intensifying as a result, Ragyo clenched her hand tightly around the hilt, "It is rather unfortunate you're not nearly as much of a bother as she was."

"Damn it!" Bambietta's stance was nervous and tense, sweat dripping down her face, as she pointed her bow at Ragyo. His Majesty's daten about the Kiryuin matriarch's power and strength was grossly inaccurate compared to what she was witnessing. Lille Barro, one of His Majesty's strongest Sternritter, had fallen after only a single brutal attack with his blut completely useless. Gnashing her teeth angrily, the commissioner's cap rest on her head falling forward over her eyes, Bambietta's body was enveloped in spiritual energy as she fired dozens of heilig pfeil at Ragyo, "Die! Die! Die you ugly bitch!"

"Oh my, aren't you quite the rude one?" Ragyo quipped as her arm blurred into motion, blocking and deflecting each heilig pfeil with laughable ease.

Watching as the Sternritter's anger bled away, replaced by frustration and then fear as her attacks were continuously halted, Ragyo stiffened when she remembered Ryuko Matoi. It seemed all the excitement revolving around Isshin's arrival and their subsequent argument nearly caused her long lost daughter to slip her mind. That just wouldn't do. Turning maroon eyes up towards the academy as she felt three sets of Life Fibers still lingering within the halls Ragyo blocked one last salvo of heilig pfeil from Bambietta as she snapped her fingers, "Please excuse me, my dear Quincy, but something rather important has just been brought to my attention. Mr. Vorarlberna shall be more than happy to kill you in my absence."

Turning her back to Bambietta as Yukio's knight appeared in the air above the Sternritter, Life Fiber armor glowing in the sunlight as its broadsword crashed down on the Quincy's head, Ragyo decided to take one last look around the stadium before introducing herself to

Ryuko. Satsuki's Elite Four were putting up more of a fight than she could have anticipated. Two of them, Ira Gamagori and Uzu Sanageyama, had joined forces with the Quincy fighting Esdeath and were actually causing her to slowly retreat under the powerful assault. As a silver eyebrow quirked upwards in amusement as Sanageyama managed to break through Esdeath's guard only for the blue haired woman to retaliate with a powerful kick Ragyo tilted her head when a burst of blue light exploded from the stands.

"Children just don't know when to give up," Ragyo sighed wistfully, her voice full of disappointment, as she watched Ichigo fly towards her clad in Mugetsu Gufū. As inspiring as it was to see him constantly trying to stop her even she had her limits. Taking a deep breath, her chest rising and falling dramatically, Ragyo exhaled loudly before her lips curled up into a smirk, "Nice try but you're going to have to do better than this to surprise me, Satsuki."

Twisting her body as Satsuki descended through the air towards her, Junketsu shifting into Zenkan in a burst of light and stars, Ragyo kicked her leg out and caught Bakuzan on the inside of her heel. Smirking sadistically as she watched her daughter's arms quivering, her good mood ruined slightly upon seeing Junketsu actually helping Satsuki, Ragyo quickly leaned backwards as Ichigo finally arriving. Closing her eyes as Tournesol passed overhead, the Life Fiber weapon attempting to sever her head, Ragyo let out a soft chuckle at Ichigo's continuous defiance before she vanished right before their eyes.

"What the hell?" Ichigo's eyes widened in surprise as Ragyo disappeared from right in front of him. Spinning around, the jets on Mugetsu's armor arresting his momentum, Ichigo held Tournesol's hilt in a tight grip as he searched for Satsuki's mother, "Where did she go?"

"Do not let your guard down, Ichigo," Satsuki answered as she landed on the stands in a soft crouch and immediately shifted Junketsu out of her Zenkan configuration. Wincing in pain from the strain wearing Zenkan put on her body Satsuki exhaled deeply and



firmly clenched her fingers around Bakuzan as she looked to her right, "My mother is still here."

"If you two wish to continue this fight I certainly won't dampen your enthusiasm," Ragyo shook her head as she descended down the stands towards her daughter and Ichigo. As she willed the COVERS surrounding her to other parts of the stadium, not wishing to have the Life Fiber beings unnecessarily cut down, Ragyo shrugged as she raised the Needle Blade in front of her body. As rainbow energy began wafting off the weapon, illuminating her face in a cacophony of colors, Ragyo's lips curled upwards in glee, "But you'll find defeating me to be an insurmountable goal."

"You are wrong, Ragyo Kiryuin!" Satsuki declared passionately as Junketsu began glowing with power. Shifting her right leg backwards as she brought Bakuzan up, the Life Fiber blade held horizontally near her shoulder, Satsuki's blue eyes narrowed as she shouted, "The tyranny of Life Fibers will end with your death!"

"Oh, is that so?" Ragyo pursed her lips at her daughter's declaration before taking a single step forward. The moment her heel touched down a massive amount of energy erupted from her body in the form of a brilliant rainbow aura. Smirking manically as Ichigo and Satsuki stared in awe at her power Ragyo leaned forward and laughed, "You seem rather confident about Junketsu's power, Satsuki. I can only assume you must possess the strength necessary to slay me. Well then... it would be rude not to reciprocate the gesture. If you are going to use your full power then I shall do the same. Au revoir..."

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Alexander Anderson's heavy footsteps echoed hollowly in the empty halls of Honnouji Academy. As he ran through rubble and debris strewn about the academy, boots crushing shards of glass littering the floor, his green eyes squinted in disgust when a brilliant rainbow light illuminated the stadium. Gnashing his teeth together angrily, his

lips pulled back, Anderson knew attacking Ragyo would be tantamount to committing suicide. He didn't have nearly enough bayonets or Anti-Life Fiber weapons to hope to take someone like her down. If he even tried she would slaughter him without a shred of mercy just like the monster she truly was.

Turning around a corner, his boots sliding against the floor for traction, Anderson's eyes narrowed in fury when he saw more than a dozen COVERS blocking his path. Flexing his wrists outwards, identical Tailor Bayonets flashing out of his sleeves and into his hands, Anderson bolted forward and shouted, "Out of me way!"

As the COVERS became aware of his presence, the Life Fibers extruding from their collars and sleeves twisting chaotically through the air, Anderson pushed off the ground and leapt up into the air. Roaring as he swung his bayonets through the Life Fiber beings, his specialized blades leaving blue-white trails of light in their wake, Anderson growled when one of the only COVERS to survive his rampage wrapped a sleeve around his arm and tried to absorb him. Grimacing in disgust at touching Life Fibers Anderson reversed his grip on the bayonet in his free hand before vertically bisecting the COVERS.

"Rot in the deepest pits of hell ye unholy monstrosities."

Stomping on the COVERS as it convulsed, its body falling limply to the floor before dissolving into Life Fibers, Anderson cocked his head to the side and sneered when he heard voices echoing from down the hallway. He could barely make out what was being said but that didn't matter. Taking several quick steps before breaking out into a sprint, his bayonets held tightly in his gloved hands, Anderson spun around as he approached his target and smashed his foot against the metal door, buckling it before sending it crashing wide open.

"Huh?" Ryuko blinked owlishly and looked over her shoulder as the door was slammed open. When she saw Anderson standing in the frame, his shoulders hunched forward with his bayonets gleaming

dangerously in the light, she gripped the red Scissor Blade and staggered back onto her feet. Gritting her teeth she panted from exhaustion and shouted, "You! What the hell are you doing here?"

Anderson gave Ryuko a discerning look before focusing his attention on the fallen form of the Grand Couturier. Green eyes narrowing in hatred as her wounds regenerated, the blood pooled around her body flowing back into her cuts and gashes, the Nudist Beach commander clenched his hands as he slowly shambled towards Nui Harime. This was a golden opportunity and orders or not he wasn't about to let the Grand Couturier leave Honnouji Academy alive. Flipping one of his bayonets around in his hand, the tip pointing downwards in order to pierce through Nui Harime's blackened and diseased heart, Anderson was forced to stop when he felt a sharp blade placed delicately just under the base of his chin.

"I asked you why the hell you're here!" Ryuko growled as she pushed the Scissor Blade harder against Anderson's neck, "So start talking!"

"Ye aren't trying to protect this unholy abomination, are ye Ryuko?" Anderson's tone was gravelly as he looked over his shoulder and stared into Ryuko's eyes, "I would have thought someone like ye would allow me to finish this righteous task."

Ryuko didn't flinch under the intensity of Anderson's gaze even as a burst of rainbow light illuminated the room. As the red highlight in her hair appeared to glow with a cacophony of colors, her unique blue eyes locked firmly with the former priest's, she slowly and deliberately pulled the Scissor Blade away from his neck. Eyes narrowing as she glared at the fallen form of Nui Harime, the Grand Couturier's arms limply resting on the ground, Ryuko spat on the ground and huffed, "Don't get me wrong. I want Nui Harime to pay for killing my dad but I won't allow you to kill her in cold blood. It just doesn't feel right."

"This monstrosity has killed more innocent people in the last four years than ye can possibly imagine. It would be an affront against

nature to allow her to continue living another minute," Anderson stated as he turned back towards Nui Harime. Clenching his bayonets tightly in his hands as he stalked towards the fallen hybrid, his mind trying to figure out the most efficient way to end her life, Anderson was forced to stop when Ururu slid in existence directly in front of him.

"I won't let you kill her," Ururu's soft and emotionless voice unnerved Anderson more than he dared admit. Pointing the purple Scissor Blade at his chest, the familiar weapon gleaming brightly in the light, Ururu tilted her head to the side and quietly added, "I don't want to have to kill you so please surrender."

"You heard Ururu! We're not going to let you murder Nui Harime!" Ryuko growled as she wrapped her fingers around the Seki Tekko's pin. She didn't know how long she could make Senketsu to remain in his transformed state at her current level of exhaustion but Ryuko wasn't about to let Anderson murder the Grand Couturier in cold blood before she got her answers.

Turning around, his boots stomping against the ground, Anderson's sneer slowly fell off his face as he recalled the infant Masaki left at his orphanage seventeen years ago. Allowing the tension in his arms to vanish, his bayonets hanging limply at his sides, Anderson found it disheartening that a child he watched grow up would be getting in the way of his righteous task. She had no idea of the carnage Nui Harime was capable of given the proper motivation. More than a thousand innocent men and women were dead because Ragyo Kiryuin ordered that abomination to go out and have 'fun.' Gnashing his teeth together, his mind refusing to allow the Grand Couturier another chance to kill, Anderson slid his foot back and prepared to force his way through Ryuko and Ururu.

"May God forgive me for what I'm about to do," Anderson grimaced as he slowly crossed his arms in front of his body. Flexing his wrists dramatically, the bayonets brightly reflecting the ambient light shining in through the shattered windows, the Nudist Beach commander's glasses shone malevolently as Ryuko's defiant scowl deepened, "...

but the Grand Couturier must die. If that means I must go through ye two children then so -"

Anderson was cut off as something crashed through the room behind Ryuko, dust and debris spraying against his cassock, and slammed into the far wall with a dull thump. Pushing his way past Ryuko, his body automatically moving in front of her, Anderson nearly froze in disbelief at what he saw.

"What in God's name..."

Pinned against the wall through her sternum by Bakuzan, cracks radiating outwards due to the force from her impact, was Satsuki Kiryuin. Gasping in pain, her every breath a struggle, the former heir of the Kiryuin family seemed to be using her immense will to ward off unconsciousness and death. As a flash of blue light lit up the room, Junketsu shifting back to her normal appearance, Satsuki gurgled and coughed up a large amount of blood as she raised weak arms towards the blade piercing her body.

"Oh my, if it isn't Alexander Anderson..."

Ragyo's regal voice contained a hint of amusement as she appeared in the room flanked by several fully powered COVERS. Slowly strutting forward, her visage unmarred apart from a slight cut on her arm, Ragyo quirked an eyebrow upon seeing her dear Nui slumped unconscious against the wall. It was odd seeing the Grand Couturier defeated but if anything else Ragyo was an optimist. Nui's failure to defeat her sisters would only serve to motivate her to improve her skills, which was sadly something the Grand Couturier refused to do unless ordered. Turning her attention back to the Nudist Beach commander, a hand held up as she ordered the COVERS to stay back, Ragyo smirked upon seeing his rage-filled eyes, "It's been quite a few years, hasn't it? I hope you aren't still upset about Rome. It wasn't anything personal, just business."

"Just business, ye say?" Anderson growled, his voice accompanied by a soft hiss. Tightly gripping his bayonets, his knuckles bleeding

white, he scoffed derisively and spat, "Yer a liar, Ragyo Kiryuin. It was personal and ye know it. Why else would ye travel to Rome and use Mental Refitting on the entire holy conclave?"

"It was a simple misunderstanding. The College of Cardinals for some reason believed I was an 'unholy abomination destined to scour the earth barren.' Those were your exact words, were they not?" Ragyo quipped as she lazily blocked Anderson's bayonets with her Needle Blade. Smirking as the former priest pushed down with all his might, her arm not budging an inch, the Kiryuin Matriarch stared into his piercing gaze as she added, "It was a shame what happened that day. You weren't supposed to survive, Alexander Anderson."

Anderson barely had time to react as Ragyo's leg snapped up, her knee hitting him in the chin with the force of a small explosion. As he staggered backwards, blood leaking out of his nose and mouth, Anderson quickly ducked as Ragyo's Needle Blade attempted to pierce his throat. Growling when the blade cut a large gash on his cheek, large droplets of blood splattering across the floor, Anderson seethed and ignored the coppery taste building up in his mouth. Panting as he raised his bayonets in front of his body, his shoulders lurching forward, Anderson vowed to protect Ryuko and Ururu Tsumugiya from Ragyo Kiryuin if it was the last thing he did.

"Ye shall not touch them, Ragyo Kiryuin!" Anderson hissed while flexing his wrists. As several more Tailor Bayonets appeared out of his sleeves, the blades sliding between his fingers with practiced ease, Anderson snarled and was about to charge Ragyo when she vanished from right in front of his eyes.

"I really don't think you have much of a say in the matter, Mr. Anderson."

Smashing her fist into Anderson's stomach, the ground beneath his feet cratering from the force behind the blow, Ragyo's lips curled in amusement as the Nudist Beach commander was sent careening backwards through the wall. Picking up one of his Tailor Bayonets,

the black and green metal a testament to her former husband's expertise on Life Fibers, Ragyo squeezed her fingers together and easily crushed the blade. Souichiro may have been a genius but he was a hack when it came to innovation. Most of his so-called inventions were merely applications of what Isshin and she already created. Even these tailor weapons, designed to cut Life Fibers, were born from Isshin's idea of Life Fiber containment devices.

"Now, where was I before that rude interruption?"

Confident that Anderson wouldn't be bothering her anytime soon Ragyo turned her attention to Satsuki. Snapping her fingers as she walked over to her daughter, the COVERS immediately jumping out of the academy at her mental command, the elder Kiryuin shook her head as she watched Satsuki feebly trying to pull Bakuzan out of her body. Gently clasping her fingers around the hilt of the Life Fiber blade, her maroon eyes widening briefly as she prevented her Life Fibers from connecting with the ones in Bakuzan, Ragyo stroked Satsuki's blood-stained chin and sighed, "It seems as if you've reached your limits, Satsuki. Even poor Junketsu is unable to continue fighting. I suppose all that talk about defeating me was simply bluster."

"Ragyo Kiryuin!"

Bursting out of a column of red stars and light as she activated Senketsu, the Kamui's power helping to alleviate the exhaustion in her muscles, Ryuko leapt into the air with the red Scissor Blade held over her head. Roaring angrily as she descended on the Kiryuin matriarch, her eyes noticing Ururu approaching from the other side with the purple Scissor Blade already swinging, Ryuko was caught off guard when Ragyo coldly laughed. As her eyes began to narrow in worry at what Satsuki's mother was planning Ryuko emitted a choked gasp as Ragyo reached up and clasped her hand firmly around her neck.

"I'm glad you've finally decided to introduce yourself, Ryuko Matoi," Ragyo laughed as she tightened her grip around Ryuko's throat,

causing the teenager to cough in response. Letting go of Bakuzan and turning around towards the approaching Ururu, her pinky finger hooking around the hole in the purple Scissor Blade, a deep sigh of pleasure escaped Ragyo's lips as she continued, "It just wouldn't be a proper family reunion without you."

"What... what the hell are you talking about?" Ryuko gasped as her hands futilely tried to pry Ragyo's fingers from around her throat. Ignoring Senketsu's worry, a harsh cough escaping her throat as she desperately tried to breathe, she glared at Ragyo with all the hatred she could muster and growled, "As if you're my mom! That's a load of crap! My mom died right after I was born!"

"Is that what the illustrious 'Professor Matoi' told you? I suppose my former husband thought he was rather clever taking on the name of the only man I will ever love," Ragyo frowned in annoyance as she caressed Ryuko's throat, her fingers marveling at the feel and texture of Senketsu, before remembering about Amu. Turning towards Nui's twin sister, bemused by the defiant glare in her sapphire eyes, Ragyo smirked as she twisted her hand. As the purple Scissor Blade was yanked harshly to the left, the abrupt change in momentum causing Ururu's feet to leave the ground, Ragyo reared her arm back and smashed her hand against Ururu's cheek.

"But I suppose you won't accept my word," Ragyo continued unperturbed as she watched her daughter go flying through the wall. Tilting her head down as she focused her attention back on Ryuko, lips curled upwards in a manic grin, Ragyo clenched her fingers as the Needle Blade appeared once more in her hand. Releasing Ryuko from her grip, the teenager stumbling to her feet as she gasped for air, Ragyo strummed her fingers and sighed, "So allow me to demonstrate instead, ma chère fille..."

Ryuko didn't register the pain as Ragyo swung the Needle Blade through the air and severed her left arm. One second she was preparing for whatever Satsuki's mother would try and the next her body suddenly felt a lot lighter. Eyes widening in disbelief as she saw



her arm, still clad in Senketsu's armor fall twitching to the floor, Ryuko gurgled as she collapsed to her knees and shouted, "FUCK! MY ARM!"

Pursing her lips as she watched her daughter desperately try to staunch the flow of blood with her remaining hand, the red liquid seeping between her fingers, Ragyo allowed Ryuko a few seconds to continue with the childish display. Her precious Nui had acted the same way when she severed her legs during training. After allowing Ryuko a moment to cry over the loss of her arm Ragyo rolled her eyes and asked, "Is there any reason you're still screaming, Ryuko? Surely you must have realized by now that you don't feel any pain. That is not to mention your arm is already regenerating..."

Gasping for breath as she glared at Ragyo, sweat dripping down her face, Ryuko was about to curse at Satsuki's mother when her shoulder began to shine with a fierce red light. Pulling her hand away in shock when she noticed dozens of Life Fibers emerging from her shoulder, the light causing her face to glow an eerie shade of red, Ryuko choked back a scream when she noticed she could actually still move her severed arm. Lips trembling as her arm was forcibly brought back against her shoulder, the light shining from within her body disappearing as her wound sealed shut, Ryuko stammered, "W-What the hell? I-I'm not a..."

Ragyo chuckled at Ryuko's spiraling emotions, her lost daughter's eyes betraying the terror and fear she felt, as she turned her attention back to the dying Satsuki. Gripping Bakuzan's hilt once again, her fingers flexing comfortably around the blade, Ragyo leaned in and whispered, "In the end you exceeded my expectations, Satsuki. I never expected you to put up this much of a fight. When I saw you wearing Junketsu Zenkan without dying I even felt a twinge of pride in my heart. It was all very impressive so allow me to impart unto you some final motherly advice."

Shifting her wrist ever so slightly downwards, the motion accompanied by the sound of metal groaning, Ragyo smirked as she snapped Bakuzan in half without much effort, "Much like Junketsu

you never truly mastered Bakuzan. Weapons created from hardened Life Fibers require a true child of COVERS to reach their full potential. Haven't you ever wondered while the Scissor Blades or Tournesol seemed so much more powerful than your Bakuzan? Both Ichigo and Ryuko are Life Fiber Hybrids and can draw out the full power of their blades. You may be my daughter but you are still nothing more than a human; Bakuzan brittle and frail. Au revoir, Satsuki..."

"I-Ichigo..."

Impressed that her daughter was still conscious Ragyo shrugged her shoulders as she turned around. Allowing the hilt of Bakuzan to clatter against the floor, the broken blade echoing loudly as it bounced, Ragyo closed her eyes as she answered, "Ichigo will be fine once his Life Fibers regenerate his wounds. His tenacity was admirable almost to the point of annoyance. No matter how many wounds he received he wouldn't stop attacking me. In the end I was forced to sever his legs so that I had enough time to deal with you."

"You bitch!"

"Now, is that anyway to talk to your mother?" Ragyo chuckled coldly as she slowly walked towards Ryuko. As threads of multicolored Life Fibers emerged from her fingers, her footsteps echoing loudly in the sudden silence, the Kiryuin matriarch added, "It seems like I'm going to need to weave some lessons into you when we -"

Whatever Ragyo was about to say was cut off when the floor abruptly collapsed beneath her feet. Maroon eyes narrowing in mild annoyance at the nerve of the nudists to think she would fall for such an obvious trap Ragyo allowed her body to land lightly on the ground only to notice the dozens of starch bombs and pin cushion grenades lining the walls. As the beeping grew more rapid, the sounds blurring together into almost a shrill, Ragyo narrowed her eyes and scoffed, "Merde eux..."

As a massive explosion rocked Honnouji Academy, the entire building shuddering as if it would collapse at any second, Ryuko clenched a trembling hand and growled. Like hell she was going to let something like this stop her! She may be a Life Fiber Hybrid but she wasn't about to let Ragyo Kiryuin break her. Taking advantage of the Kiryuin matriarch's momentary absence Ryuko ran forward, easily leaping across the hole in the floor, and skidded to a stop in front of Satsuki. Gripping her fingers around the broken edge of Bakuzan, the blade turning slightly red at her touch, Ryuko bit her lip as she steeled her nerves, "Don't worry, Satsuki. I'm going to save you..."

Gasping as she fought off unconsciousness with the last remnants of her energy, blood leaking from her lips, Satsuki opened her eyes and whispered, "R-Ryuko?"

"Did you just call me Ryuko? Are you sure Junketsu hasn't taken control again?" A dry chuckle left Ryuko's mouth as she braced her arm against Satsuki's body. Mentally counting to three, a cold sweat breaking out over her body at the possibility of something going wrong, Ryuko closed her eyes as she tightened her grip and pulled Bakuzan out of her sister's chest accompanied by a small spray of blood. Wrapping Satsuki's limp arm around her shoulder Ryuko frowned as she slowly walked towards the massive hole in the wall, "Just last a little longer, Satsuki. Once we're out of here I'll shift into Senketsu Shippu and get you to a doctor."

"Damn it! Please tell me I'm not too late!"

Rolling through the doorway that Anderson destroyed, his gray hair tied back into a ponytail, was a man wearing the same type of body armor Tsumugu wore when he came to Honnouji Academy. Carefully peering into the hole, his finger tapping against the trigger of the M-15 Anti-Life Fiber assault rifle in his hands, the man's grey eyes narrowed when he sensed the Kiryuin matriarch was still very much alive, "You're kidding me! I laced enough Anti-Life Fiber explosives into those grenades to blow the Grand Couturier to the freakin' moon! What the hell kind of Life Fibers are in her body anyway?"

Ryuko's eyes narrowed at the man casually ignoring her but she was forced to turn her attention to Satsuki when her sister started coughing harshly. Realizing that her sister didn't have much time left Ryuko clenched her fist and scowled at the man, "Hey! Just who the hell do you think you are?"

"The name's Batou. I'm a commander of Nudist Beach," the newly named man answered briefly as he grimaced and looked outside. Nodding his head once he felt the room was secured he pulled a flare gun out from his belt and carefully aimed it up into the sky. Closing one grey eye as Noba and Kurodo cut a swath through the floating COVERS, Isshin's Life Fiber beings more than a match for the still weakened COVERS, Batou waited until just the right moment before squeezing the trigger and sending the bright orange flare rocketing up into the sky. Shoulders relaxing as the flare pierced through the cloud of COVERS before erupting in a burst of light, bathing the stadium in shades of orange and red, Batou turned back to Ryuko and smirked, "I came to save you."

"Save me?" Ryuko blinked owlishly as she subconsciously shifted Satsuki further onto her shoulders. If Batou really was a member of Nudist Beach like Armstrong and Anderson then he had to have some sort of plan. Ignoring the wet sensation running down her arm Ryuko narrowed her eyes suspiciously and scoffed, "Just how are you -"

Ryuko's question trailed off into a whisper when she saw more than a dozen military helicopters appear over the walls of Honnouji Academy. Staring in awe as the helicopters, each bearing the Nudist Beach symbol alongside the Takarada Conglomerate logo, opened fire on the members of Xcution with salvos of starch-tipped missiles Ryuko could not help but wonder why the hell Nudist Beach hadn't helped from the very beginning. If they had this much firepower defeating Revocs should have been simple even if Nui Harime and Ragyo Kiryuin were both Life Fiber Hybrids.

When one of the helicopters appeared in front of them, the aircraft hovering several feet away from the hole in the wall as its rotors

kicked up a veritable storm in the dust-filled room, Batou grimaced and looked at his watch. Judging by the way Ragyo Kiryuin was recovering from his trap they had less than a minute before she returned and kicked all of their asses six ways to Sunday. Reaching out and gripping the handle on the side of the helicopter, his thumb pressing in the latch as he pulled it open, Batou glanced over his shoulder at the still confused Ryuko and shouted, "Do you need help carrying Miss Kiryuin, Ryuko? Ragyo Kiryuin will be back any second and I sure as hell don't want to be here when she does!"

"Ye don't need to worry about the wee lass," Alexander Anderson walked out of the adjoining room Ragyo's punch had sent him into, his cassock scuffed and torn, and spat on the ground, "I'll take care of her."

With trails of blood flowing down his left cheek onto the floor, the red liquid splattering against the ground from Ragyo's attack, Anderson stayed true to his word as he took Satsuki from Ryuko's grasp. Gingerly shifting her into a better hold while ignoring the blood beginning to coat his clothing Anderson turned around and sneered as the entire academy shook, "Ye really pissed off Ragyo Kiryuin, didn't ye?"

"I don't think she appreciates my retirement gift," Batou responded with a small shrug while hopping into the helicopter. Landing inside the aircraft with a soft thud, his boots echoing faintly on the metal floor, the Nudist Beach commander couldn't help but think that things were going too smoothly. Grimacing deep in thought as Anderson jumped in next to him, Satsuki held firmly in his arms, Batou's grey eyes narrowed as he felt something seriously wrong in the air. There was no way Ragyo Kiryuin should be taking this long to recover. If she was planning something he didn't want to stick around to find out. Leaning out of the helicopter, one hand waving to Ryuko, Batou shouted, "Get in so we can go! We need to get out of here before Ragyo Kiryuin decides to stop messing around!"

"You guys go without me! Bring Satsuki to Orihime!" Ryuko yelled back over the noise of the helicopter as she turned and looked

around, "Ururu is still around here somewhere. I'm not going anywhere without her.

"The Grand Couturier's sister is still here?"

There was no hiding the shock in Batou's voice as he leaned out of the helicopter. This was very bad. All Nudist Beach commanders were aware of the connection between Ururu Tsumugiya and Nui Harime. It was why their plan had hinged on Ururu immediately going after her sister. If Ragyo Kiryuin managed to kidnap Ururu then humanity could kiss its collective ass goodbye. Grimacing as his face creased with worry, several scenarios racing through his mind, Batou pressed a finger against the earpiece in his right ear, "All Nudist Beach forces, this is Commander Batou. As of now I am ordering a full scale retreat to Karakura Town. Unless the General countermands my orders you are to pull out of Honnou City the second everyone is on board. I don't want anyone else dying today, is that understood?"

Ryuko couldn't believe what she was hearing. Were they seriously just going to leave Ururu behind? Gritting her teeth together angrily as Batou jumped out of the helicopter, her gear-shaped blue eyes glaring harshly at the older man, Ryuko raised her Scissor Blade and pointed it directly at his face. As droplets of blood dripped off the weapon, splattering softly against the floor, Ryuko clenched her fingers as she watched Batou walk past her without care, "Like hell we're going to leave Ururu behind! She's my friend and I'm not going to let someone like Ragyo Kiryuin kidnap her!"

Batou didn't speak as he knelt down and picked up the purple Scissor Blade. Flipping the Life Fiber weapon over in his hand, the heavy blade somehow feeling both awkward to hold and unnerving to look at, the nudist knew he couldn't allow it to fall back into Ragyo's hands. The amount of devastation Nui Harime caused with the Scissor Blade in the last seven months was beyond words. Looking around for any sign of Ururu, a small sliver of hope in his chest that he would be able to find her before Ragyo, Batou mentally

cursed when his grey eyes didn't pick up anything, "I'm sorry, Ryuko, but we can't wait any longer."

"Bullshit!" Ryuko argued, "If you won't look for Ururu than I -"

There was a shimmer of red light as Senketsu was forcibly reverted back into his normal form as a school uniform. As Ryuko fell backwards, her consciousness leaving her as a result of the needle jabbed into the back of her neck, Aikuro Mikisugi quickly caught her before she could hit the ground. The undercover nudist knew he was fortunate Ryuko's exhaustion, both physical and mental, had been great enough for the sedative to work. Carrying the unconscious Ryuko into the helicopter, making sure to gently place her on the ground next to a heavily bandaged Satsuki, Aikuro didn't turn around as Batou jumped in and slammed the door shut.

As the helicopter flew higher into the sky, Ririn's raven-like COVERS form providing an escape route through the remaining COVERS, Aikuro sighed and ran a hand down his face. Leaning back against the side of the aircraft, his shaggy blue hair cushioning the impact slightly, the nudist spy couldn't believe how bad things looked. Although Nudist Beach was still at full strength, thanks to Satsuki Kiryuin changing the target of her raid trip to Karakura Town, that didn't mean much against the power possessed by Ragyo and her daughters. Tilting his head forward, his eyes downcast, Aikuro grimaced, "We need to consider the likelihood Ragyo Kiryuin will soon have control of Ururu Tsumugiyu."

"One Grand Couturier was bad enough but two is just overkill. The General is not going to like this," Batou said as he slammed a fist against the side of the helicopter. Most of Nudist Beach's defense spending went to repulsing Nui Harime. Batou didn't want to think what would happen if Ururu were to join her sister. Looking out the nearby window, the aircraft still shuddering slightly from the impact, Batou blinked as he caught a faint glimpse of rainbow light before spinning around, "Well that answers one question... Ragyo Kiryuin is completely and utterly immune to our most powerful weapons."

"Ragyo Kiryuin is a monster in human form," Anderson growled as the rainbow light in the distance reflected ominously off his glasses, "Her only purpose is the complete genocide of humanity. She cannot be allowed to live."

"That's much easier said than done, Anderson," Batou sighed as he turned away from the window and reached into his pocket for a cigarette. Glancing down at the unconscious Ryuko, her breathing slow and steady, Batou was about to light the cigarette when Anderson grabbed it out of his fingers and crushed it. Giving the former priest a frustrated look Batou sighed dramatically and grumbled, "Ragyo took everything we had and complained that it was a waste of our time. Damn, this sucks. We're going to be screwed if she sends two Grand Couturiers after us."

"What about Ichigo and the others?" Aikuro asked softly, his voice hitching for a second when the helicopter hit a patch of turbulence, "Ururu Tsumugiya falling into her hands is bad enough but if Ragyo managed to take Ichigo as well..."

"Ichigo and his friends are fine but the little bastard had to be dragged away from the battlefield as soon as he regenerated," Batou quipped as he shoved the packet of cigarettes back into his pocket. As long as Anderson was around Batou knew he wouldn't be able to properly smoke. Rubbing a hand against the bridge of his nose, the stress of the operation beginning to affect him, Batou groaned as he sat down, "Those Quincy sustained the only two casualties - Lille Barro and Meninas McAllon. Screw names if you ask me. Anyway, it seems Ragyo personally killed the first while the girl bled out internally after fighting Moe Shishigawara."

"Good riddance to unholy rubbish," Anderson growled venomously as he spat on the floor, "Those Quincy are hiding something. When I eavesdropped on them last night they kept referring to someone called 'His Majesty.' I swear on God's name they will stab us in the back the moment Ragyo Kiryuin lies dead at our feet."



Batou frowned at Anderson's warning but he knew it was better to be safe than sorry. The Quincy might have been helpful but people possessing supernatural powers not dependent on Life Fibers didn't just appear out of the shadows. If they had an ulterior motive than it would be prudent to make preparations, "I saw some of what they did and, quite frankly, it scared the shit out of me. Someone as unstable as Bambietta, or whatever her name was, shouldn't be able to create localized explosions with a snap of her fingers. Those Quincy are part of an army. The only question is..."

"... what purpose that army has, right?" Aikuro finished.

"Exactly... this entire festival has left a bad taste in my mouth," Batou grumbled as he picked the purple Scissor Blade off the floor.

As his arm struggled to hold the surprising heavy weapon, his fingers curling awkwardly around the handle, Batou spun towards the window as the entire helicopter shook. Perched on the side of the aircraft, her white claws easily digging on the metal for support, was Ririn in her COVERS form. Grimacing at the thought of a COVERS actually helping to protect humanity Batou looked at Anderson and nodded, "I'll let the General know of your suspicions about the Quincy once we get back to Karakura Town. In the meantime, while Ragyo Kiryuin might have Ururu Tsumugiyu this battle wasn't a total loss. We still have both Scissor Blades as well as Junketsu. As long as Satsuki survives her wounds Nudist Beach will have four Kamui against Ragyo and Revocs. Still... I can't shake the feeling these next few weeks are going to be nothing but bad news..."

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"The Sternritzer have failed."

"I see..." Yhwach closed his eyes in contemplation as he listened to Jugram Haschwalth's report on the Great Culture and Sports Festival. In most instances the loss of a Sternritzer would not draw

such worry from the Father of the Quincy but those that die at the hands of Life Fibers do not return to his side upon death. Every one of his children that falls to Ragyo Kiryuin are forever lost to him, their souls caught in an endless vortex of pain and suffering. Folding his hands in front of his mouth, his eyes opening slightly as his mind rapidly processed the collected Daten, Yhwach continued, "... while their deaths are a tragedy we must look forward to the future instead of dwelling on the past. Have the preparations been completed?"

Haschwalth inclined his head slightly as Yhwach rose from his throne and walked past him. Stepping into line behind His Majesty, his long blonde hair falling flat against the back of his neck, the Sternritter Grandmaster paused for a moment as he carefully constructed his answer, "Everything is as you requested, Your Majesty."

Yhwach's stride didn't falter as he pushed open the heavy doors leading from his throne room. Boots echoing hollowly against the empty halls of the Silbern, the Sternritter knowing better than to disturb him at this delicate time, he clasped his hands behind his back as his cape billowed outwards. Despite the most valiant efforts of Ichigo Kurosaki and his allies Yhwach had already predicted Ragyo Kiryuin would most likely survive the events of the day. While her death would have removed the largest obstacle from his path, enabling the rest of his plans to proceed, the Daten suggested the Kiryuin matriarch would not perish easily.

"Let us not allow the death of our allies to hinder us any longer. Ragyo Kiryuin still lives and thus we must plan accordingly," Yhwach's tone was cold as he casually brushed aside the deaths of Lille Barro and Meninas McAllon with unsurprising and characteristic swiftness. The deaths of two Sternritter had no meaning if they failed to accomplish even the most basic of orders. That none of the Sternritter sent to Honnouji Academy managed to kill anyone bothered Yhwach more than their actual deaths. Knowing that Lille Barro, one of the four elite Sternritter destined to fight against the

Royal Division, fell so easily suggested he was never fit for such a prestigious position.

Haschwalth raised a hand to his chin as he recalled Bazz-B's report on the battle. The survival of Ragyo Kiryuin and the continuation of the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet were disconcerting to say the least. Pursing his lips as he thought about the likely outcomes of this scenario, his eyes half-lidded in thought, Haschwalth asked, "Shall I order the Sternritter to reinforce Karakura Town's defenses?"

"Such a gesture would be pointless against someone of Ragyo Kiryuin's power," Yhwach replied briskly as he entered the chamber containing the Gate of the Sun. Ignoring the soldats standing at attention, their arms raised in a salute as he walked past them, Yhwach's lips curled downwards as a minor stab of annoyance course through his body. The survival of the Kiryuin matriarch jeopardized his plans concerning the Seireitei for the foreseeable future. Unlike Genryusai, who was content with leaving him for dead over one thousand years ago, Ragyo Kiryuin would not be so complacent after a simple victory against his Sternritter.

"Her death shall be left in the capable hands of Ichigo Kurosaki and his allies. As Life Fiber Hybrids they possess the only means in which to permanently kill Ragyo Kiryuin," Yhwach added after a moment of quiet contemplation. As he ascended the stairs leading to the Gate of the Sun, his cloak lightly billowing behind him, the Father of the Quincy had a grim expression in his eyes as he looked over his shoulder at Haschwalth, "Any Daten that could accelerate her death is to be given to Kisuke Urahara. Shinigami or not, his intellect is more than enough to devise counters against Life Fibers."

"I will inform the Sternritter of your decision," Haschwalth already knew some of the Sternritter would be... vocal about the decision. Bazz-B's search the other day for volunteers to take down Ragyo Kiryuin had stirred up resentment amongst the Sternritter concerning working alongside shinigami. He did not wish to see any of them foolishly throw their lives away by arguing with His Majesty, "... if I may ask, what are we to do about Uryu Ishida?"

Yhwach's face pulled into a slight frown as he recalled Bazz-B's missive, "Isshin Kurosaki has made it abundantly clear that Uryu Ishida is not to be approached. Attempting to recruit my wayward son will force us into a confrontation against a powerful adversary. No, Ryuken's son is to be left alone until the matter surrounding Ragyo Kiryuin is settled. In the meantime I am ordering the Schatten Ausrufung moved to the next phase."

The Sternritzer Grandmaster's eyes widened briefly at Yhwach's announcement before closing in approving resignation, "As you wish, Your Majesty. I shall inform the Jahrtausendarmee they have your blessing."

"Such platitude will not be necessary, Jugram. I heard every word articulated by His Majesty."

Slowly crossing through the Gate of the Sun as it activated, the shadows composing the Quincy portal briefly sticking to his uniform before pulling back, was a short and stocky man dressed in a pure white suit with a matching overcoat. Adjusting his tie as he finished passing through the shadow gate, the Wandenreich emblem easily visible on the back of his gloves, the man's yellow eyes briefly widened in joy as he gave Yhwach a polite bow, "His Majesty needn't worry about the possibility of failure. The Schatten Ausrufung has been slowly building to a crescendo over the last Jahrhundert, the indolent shinigami ignorant of our work. By the New Year, when bells throughout the World of the Living are ringing in joy and jubilation, the shadows barring His Majesty's ascendance to the heavens shall be completely and utterly destroyed!"

# Something About England

*Happy New Year (late) to all my loyal and faithful readers! I am pleased to give to you Chapter 41 of To My Death I Fight. It might be a little later than I wished but I wanted this chapter to be as perfect as possible. Several parts of the chapter just didn't want to come out correctly, which forced me to go back and revise it several times. On a separate note we are fast approaching a rather important date for this story. On February 2nd this story will be exactly one year old. In the last 365 days I have written what is perhaps the best received Kill la Kill crossover on fanfiction but you didn't come to hear about that, did you? So once again read and review and I hope you like the beginning of the second major arc of the story!*

**P.S.** *I do apologize for the lack of omakes lately but I am currently brainstorming several different ones that I'm sure you'll all enjoy. So normal omakes should resume starting in chapter 42.*

**P.P.S.** *This chapter is only around 17.500 words (compared to Chapter 40's 27.000 words) because, whether I like it or not, this is an interlude between two consecutive major arcs. You can be sure that Chapter 42 will be back up to the normal 20.000-ish word count.*

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## Chapter 41 - Something About England

*October 30th, 2002*

*[9 days after the Great Culture and Sports Festival]*

"Ugh... I hate the cold..."

Groaning as she collapsed onto Ichigo's couch, her fingers slightly numb from walking outside for so long, Ryuko Matoi cursed under

her breath at the awful weather outside. It wasn't even November yet and it felt like the middle of winter. Rubbing her hands together to warm them up Ryuko looked up when she noticed Ichigo walking back from the kitchen, "I can regenerate my arm after my... mother... cuts it off without feeling any pain but walking outside in the cold for five minutes is enough to make my fingers go numb. Being a Life Fiber Hybrid doesn't make any sense."

"Tell me about it. When I asked the old goat about it the other day he just laughed idiotically before walking away," Ichigo replied with a small scowl as he sat down across from Ryuko. He was still getting used to his dad being a Life Fiber Hybrid just like Ragyo Kiryuin, right down to the silver hair with the rainbow undertone, and was content with punching his old man in the face for hiding something like that from. As he looked at Ryuko and noticed the exhausted appearance of her Kamui, Senketsu's eye shaking subtly, Ichigo grimaced and asked, "So I take it you've been to Kisuke's place?"

Ryuko involuntarily shuddered as she remembered her encounter with the former captain of the Twelfth Division. Rubbing Senketsu's skirt in an attempt to calm the Kamui down, the memories of what he faced in that building still vivid in his mind, Ryuko glared at Ichigo and spat, "I don't ever want to be left alone with that man again! He's not a pervert like our teacher but he poked and prodded me with needles. Ugh, I hate needles. I swear I heard him cackling in the backroom as he did who knows what to Senketsu!"

***" I don't want to remember what that man did to me!"*** Senketsu's entire uniform began to shake in fear as he recalled whatever it was Kisuke did to him, ***"I can still feel his needles digging into my Life Fibers over and over again! Kisuke Urahara is a monster ten times worse than Nui Harime! Please don't leave me with him again, Ryuko!"***

Ignoring the pleading look from Senketsu, her eyes firmly locked on the far side of the room, Ryuko scoffed, "Kisuke is the guy that made Mugetsu so he can't be as bad as you say."

**"How could you say something so cruel, Ryuko?"** Senketsu's eye began watering at Ryuko's supposedly uncaring attitude towards his safety. Didn't she know of the various tortures Kisuke Urahara inflicted upon him? Staring at his wearer, who stubbornly refused to show even the smallest glimmer of sympathy for his plight, Senketsu cried, **"I thought we were partners, Ryuko? How can you so callously toss me away like yesterday's trends? What reason could you have for ignoring your Sunday best?"**

"Do you have any idea how freaking cold it gets in the winter?"

Walking over to the window, a light layer of frost covering the glass from the year's early cold snap, Ryuko pointed a finger outside as she roughly grabbed Senketsu's lapels, "I know I promised to always wear you, Senketsu, but that doesn't mean I'm going to walk around in a short skirt all winter long. I miss wearing pants, damn it!"

**"As a Kamui I do not possess the ability to feel hot or cold. My Life Fibers are more than capable of living in extreme temperature variations,"** Senketsu explained proudly as his mind was momentarily taken off Ryuko's traitorous actions. Huffing loudly, his gaze momentarily shifting upwards as he felt something strange in the air, Senketsu's entire body shook at the nerve of Ryuko's excuse. She was a Life Fiber Hybrid so something as trivial as a bitter autumn day shouldn't even bother her, **"Furthermore I have no problem with you wearing pants. Fashion trends come and go but your health and safety takes priority, Ryuko. If allowing you to wear... other clothing... keeps your health up than allow it. I'm just insulted you didn't consult me before making such a life altering decision."**

"Are you really going to start this again?" Ryuko was starting to get annoyed by Senketsu's constant whining. The entire last week she told her Kamui she was taking him to see Kisuke yet Senketsu seemed completely baffled when they actually went there. Grabbing a handful of Senketsu's neckerchief Ryuko leaned down and harshly whispered, "I told you at least a dozen times I wanted Kisuke to take

a look at you! It's not my fault if you never listened to me! What, did you think I was kidding around or something?"

Senketsu blinked as he looked straight into Ryuko's eyes, **"Yes."**

"Why you..."

Ryuko paused in midsentence, her hands already clenching part of Senketsu, when she realized something was amiss. Relaxing her grip on her Kamui, Senketsu shaking himself free with a huff of annoyance, Ryuko turned around as she looked for what was bothering her. As she scanned the room, her mind trying to figure out what didn't belong, her eyes settled on Ichigo but more specifically what he was wearing, "Hey, where's Mugetsu?"

"I locked her upstairs," Ichigo scowled as he rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration. Leaning back in the chair, an exasperated sigh escaping his lips, the orange haired teenager pointed towards the ceiling before explaining, "She tried tearing apart some of my favorite shirts this morning. I told her I'm not going to wear her again until she apologizes and promises not to do it again."

Blue eyes narrowing as a resounding crash echoed through the house, courtesy of Mugetsu attempting to free herself from Ichigo's closet, Ryuko asked, "How long has she been locked up?"

"Almost three hours now," Ichigo answered with a small sigh as he rubbed a hand across his face.

As a second loud thump reverberated from upstairs, which was quickly followed by the muffled but still quite recognizable feminine growl of Mugetsu, Senketsu shot Ichigo a scathing glare, ***"You should be ashamed of yourself, Ichigo! Wearing another set of clothing with Mugetsu's consent is the same as cheating on her. How could you break the sacred bond between Kamui and wearer like this?"***



"Don't start with me on that nonsense. Mugetsu might have been made with my Life Fibers but that doesn't mean I'm just going to throw out all my other clothes," Ichigo scoffed as he stared right back into Senketsu's eye. Sighing loudly when he heard his closet door slam open as Mugetsu finally broke out, the impact causing dust to fall from the ceiling, Ichigo was glad his sisters weren't home right now. He really didn't want to explain to Yuzu and Karin why he was fighting his school uniform.

As he listened to Mugetsu fumbling to escape his room, her sleeves having trouble turning the doorknob, Ichigo scowled at Senketsu, "Which brings up something that's been bothering me. If you get so jealous when Ryuko wears other clothes why are you letting her wear that jacket?"

Senketsu's eye widened in surprise before he quickly answered, ***"I already said if Ryuko's health is in jeopardy I will gladly allow her to wear other clothes."***

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ryuko interrupted before Ichigo could even start to contradict him. Pulling on her jacket, which Senketsu was trying his best to subtly dislodge, she angrily growled, "That's a load of crap! You fought me every step of the way when I tried to put this damn thing on! It took me ten minutes just to convince you that I wasn't going to toss you away!"

As Kamui and wearer both growled, each refusing to give an inch in the argument, they were forced to stop when a loud crash erupted from the second floor. Looking up the stairs as Mugetsu finally figured out how to use her sleeves to open Ichigo's bedroom door Ryuko was nearly bowled over when the Kamui flew down the steps and landed on her face. Careening backwards, her arms instinctively reaching for the Kamui wrapped around her head, Ryuko was shoved to the floor when Mugetsu spotted Ichigo in the living room and vaulted off her face towards him.

Twisting sideways as his Kamui flew towards him, her outstretched sleeves reaching through the air in a desperate attempt to wrap

around his arm, Ichigo quickly reached out and grabbed Mugetsu by the back of her collar. Hoisting his Kamui at arm's length, her multicolored eyes swirling dizzily, Ichigo scowled and asked, "What the hell are you doing, Mugetsu? I told you to stay upstairs until you apologized for trying to eat my clothes."

" ***This isn't fair, Ichigo!***" Mugetsu whined as she leaned forward, her eyes watering at Ichigo's refusal to wear her, "***Why do you refuse to wear me?***"

"What did I just tell you?" Punctuating each word with a shake of his arm as he attempted to dislodge Mugetsu's sleeves, the dizzy Kamui adamantly refusing to let go, Ichigo added, "I'm not going to wear you until you apologize and promise to not destroy any more of my clothes."

Mugetsu stared at Ichigo as she weighed her options. On the one hand she couldn't allow him to wear any other clothing. She was custom made for Ichigo and thus she was the only outfit he would ever need. Even knowing that he had other shirts and pants caused an involuntary growl to reverberate from her throat but on the other hand he was threatening to never wear her again. Eyes darting back and forth as she considered whether it was worth destroying the rest of Ichigo's wardrobe Mugetsu quickly when limp in his arms as she came to a decision, "***... fine. I'm sorry for eating your clothes, they were disgusting by the way, and I promise not to destroy any more of your clothes as long as your vow to never wear them. Now will you put me back on?***"

"Fine," Ichigo sighed exasperatedly as he grabbed Mugetsu and started walking towards the kitchen. As he unbuttoned his shirt, Mugetsu sitting on the kitchen table with her sleeves folded angrily across her body, Ichigo turned over his shoulder and asked, "Hey Ryuko, why did you come over anyway?"

Already recovered from Mugetsu's impromptu assault, a pissed off look in her blue eyes, Ryuko shook her head before replying, "I was looking for Satsuki. Is she around?"

One of the many things that caused Ichigo to punch out his old man after retreating from Honnouji Academy was the fact Satsuki was now living with them. While Yuzu and Karin got along with her just fine, most likely because Rukia did the same thing last year, he didn't appreciate how his dad kept trying to show Satsuki his childhood photos. If his dad tried one more time to tell Satsuki about all his embarrassing childhood moments Ichigo was going to take the Scissor Blades and kill him.

As Mugetsu's sleeves finally slid into place on his arms, the Kamui giving a small triumphant grunt at winning out over his other clothes, Ichigo walked out of the kitchen with his hands folded in his pockets, "She said she was going to train. She'll be back before dinner."

***"Ichigo brings up a good point, Ryuko. We should be training as well,"*** Senketsu paused briefly, his eye narrowing as he contemplated whether he should continue speaking. After a nearly ten second interval, the Kamui's multicolored eyes focused on one corner of the room, Senketsu looked up at Ryuko and sighed, ***"When we fought Nui Harime it took everything we had to beat her and that was only after Ururu wore her down. If you wish to defeat her a second time, without Ururu's help, than we need to train and get stronger. Unlike what some people think a Kamui's power doesn't magically keep increasing over time."***

"You don't need to tell me that, Senketsu," Ryuko argued, a sour taste in her mouth at the mention of Ururu's name, as she folded her arms across her chest. After she woke up from Aikuro knocking her out Ryuko had tried to return to Honnouji Academy and rescue Ururu only for Ichigo's dad to intervene and stop her. Glancing down into Senketsu's eye, their gazes locking as both wearer and Kamui came to the same conclusion, Ryuko allowed her lips to curl upwards into a confident smirk, "Of course I want to get stronger! The faster we get stronger the sooner we can blast a hole through that stupid barrier around Honnouji Academy and rescue Ururu! The only question is -"

"Good afternoon, Ryuko!"

Ryuko barely had time to blink and look up before Mako flew across the room, wrapped her arms around her waist, and tackled her to the ground. As she futilely struggled to pull herself free from her best friend's embrace, her vision beginning to dim from a lack of air, Ryuko noticed someone else standing in the doorway. Leveraging her arm against Mako's face and slowly pushing her away, precious oxygen already entering her lungs, Ryuko smirked and muttered, "Why if it isn't the great Maxwell Bradley Armstrong."

"My name is Ira Gamagori!" The former Disciplinary Committee Chair's voice rose towards a shout as his size doubled. Very few things existed in the world that could truly rile him up. The mere mention of his birth name was number one on his list yet Ryuko Matoi continued to call him that whenever she saw him. Folding his arms dramatically behind his back, his Goku Uniform shining brightly, Gamagori growled, "Matoi, if you continued to refer to me by that atrocious name I shall be forced to punish you for insubordination."

"Calm down, why don't you? This isn't Honnouji Academy. You can't lay a finger on me," Ryuko scoffed with a quick and obvious roll of her eyes. As she peeled Mako off her body, the peppy girl refusing to let go, Ryuko narrowed her eyes suspiciously at the much larger teenager, "I still don't know what the hell the big deal is about your name. Armstrong sounds a lot more intimidating than Gamagori."

"I've already explained the reasons why I kept my maiden name, Matoi," Gamagori growled, one eyebrow twitching, as Ryuko began to ignore him in favor of something Mankanshoku was saying. Suppressing the urge to yell at her, which would be immensely impolite as a guest in someone else's home, the large teen spared a glance around the living room before turning his attention to Ichigo, "Ichigo Kurosaki, where is Lady Satsuki? As the only member of her Elite Four within the city it is my solemn duty to make sure she is safe and sound."

Sitting back down in the chair, a light sigh escaping his lips as he felt a massive headache coming, Ichigo frowned at Gamagori's suspicious glare, "She's out training somewhere and, no, I don't

know where she goes. She'll be back in a few hours if you want to wait around."

"I see... thank you for the cooperation," Gamagori's presence deflated slightly as he lowered his massive frame onto Ichigo's couch. As the piece of furniture creaked loudly from the teen's weight Gamagori frowned while he contemplated his next choice of words. His sole purpose for coming to Kurosaki's home was in search of Lady Satsuki but since she was absent there was no purpose in staying any longer, "It is a relief to hear that she's continuing to train valiantly in order to bring an end to the tyranny of Life Fibers. Now please excuse me while I continue my search for Lady Satsuki."

"You can't go out!"

Sliding in front of Gamagori before he could so much as get up from Ichigo's couch, her hand clenched into a fist in front of her face, Mako puffed her cheeks out and pointed to Ryuko, "Ryuko and Lady Satsuki share a special sibling bond! Since they grew up never knowing each other they've developed a special connection! If Lady Satsuki was in trouble Ryuko would surely know and go help her! It's something only a true sister could understand!"

"That... that's not what I was talking about, Mankanshoku," Gamagori replied, his tone confused by the hyperactive girl's speech, "I was merely suggesting I update Lady Satsuki on the current situation."

"I understood perfectly what you meant!" Mako exclaimed enthusiastically as she grabbed Ryuko and pulled her into a tight hug, "Since I am a sister I know all about this special bond! After Ryuko came to school and started fighting Lady Satsuki for Ichigo's love I knew something strange was going on! It was as obvious as the sunrise at the North Pole in the middle of winter!"

"Hey!" Ryuko's voice was tense as she struggled to pry Mako's arms from around her chest, "What was that last part about Ichigo? I was

fighting Satsuki because I thought she had something to do with who killed my dad. It had nothing to do with love!"

"But isn't that how you feel, Ryuko?" Mako raised a finger to her lips and tilted her head in confusion. She couldn't figure out why Ryuko would be so much in denial about what she told her just the other night. Completely unaware of the deepening blush spreading across her best friend's face Mako turned entirely towards Ryuko, missing Gamagori's shocked expression, and continued speaking without pause, "Remember the other night when we were gossiping about things? You were telling me all about how Ichigo had the best -"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence, Mako!" Clamping her hand firmly against Mako's mouth, her palm growing wetter as her best friend continued to talk in a highly muffled tone, Ryuko grit her teeth as she felt her embarrassment reach new levels, "I told you that was a secret!"

"Oh yeah..." Mako blinked owlishly as Ryuko slowly pulled her hand away, "I guess I just forgot, Ryuko! I mean, that was some really juicy stuff about how you wanted him to -"

As Ryuko rushed forward to stop Mako from saying anything else, both girls ignorant of the way Gamagori had one ear listening, Ichigo was pulled away from the increasingly violent fight as his pocket started vibrating. Pulling out his cell phone, his brow creasing into a frown as he failed to recognize the number, Ichigo nevertheless flipped it open and raised it to his ear, "Hello?"

Finally pinning Mako against the couch, the cushions working to stop her best friend from exposing any of her embarrassing secrets, Ryuko stiffened as heard Ichigo speaking on the phone. Turning around, one hand keeping Mako's mouth in firm contact with the couch, she quirked an eyebrow and waited until he hung up before asking, "Who was that?"

"It was Kinue..." Ichigo answered slowly, his hand absentmindedly tossing the cell phone into the air, as he processed everything Kinue

Kinagase just explained to him. Scowling as he caught his phone one last time Ichigo ran a hand through his orange hair as he spoke, "Apparently Kisque managed to figure out what Ragyo Kiryuin's planning. He wants us to come down to his shop."

" ***B-Back to that shop of horrors?***" Senketsu entire body began to visibly shake around Ryuko as beads of sweat covered the Kamui, ***"No! I'm never going into that place as long as my fibers are stitched!"***

" ***Oh, suck it up,***" Mugetsu growled at Senketsu, completely disappointed in her fellow Kamui's behavior, and huffed derisively, ***"Why are you so scared anyway? Kisque Urahara created me and I turned out fine."***

There was a slight pause in Senketsu's shaking as he considered Mugetsu's words before his eye widened in terror, ***"Run away as far as you can, Ryuko! That man's a monster!"***

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"Are those idiots seriously considering ending the embargo?"

Olivier Mira Armstrong's boots stomped heavily as she briskly strolled down the streets of Karakura Town. Ignorant of both the bitter air settled over the city as well as the retainer of nudists marching behind her, each of whom held an M-15 Anti-Life Fiber assault rifle, the General of Nudist Beach adjusted the collar of her overcoat as she contemplated the sheer stupidity of politicians. It had taken nearly every political connection she forged over the years, as well as the intercession of Convention of Twelve, but the British government passed the five year embargo on Revocs products.

"Stimulate the economy? What a load of bull," Olivier growled into the phone as her gloved fingers clenched tightly around it. As her

face adapted a look of perpetual annoyance, her short blonde hair already beginning to grow back to its former beauty, the elder Armstrong sibling waited until the line grew quiet before speaking, "All politicians ever care about is lining their own pockets. If any of them begins complaining about the embargo I want you to put a bullet in their heads."

As she turned the corner, the cold arctic wind mercilessly beating against her face, Olivier felt her irritation at politicians growing by the second. Bureaucrats and politicians with no military experience and the backbone of a jellyfish always sweated in her presence while threatening to cut her budget unless she followed their personal agendas. The only time she would allow a sniveling politician any say in Nudist Beach's operations against Life Fibers would be if she lost her mind, which why Olivier was tolerant of Kaneo Takarada's annoying behavior. Despite all his money and political power the heir of the Takarada Conglomerate was content with simply being one of the two chief financial backers of Nudist Beach and nothing more.

Glancing upwards when the Anti-Life Fiber shield surrounding Karakura Town flickered into brilliance before fading away into the background once more Olivier quirked an eyebrow, the scowl on her face deepening more than usual, as she listened to her associate give another worthless excuse, "Whatever military operations you have in place to deal with Ragyo Kiryuin will not be enough. Bullets and missiles are worthless against the type of power that woman at her fingertips."

Olivier did not appreciate it when people lied directly to her face. As the General of Nudist Beach, leader since Nui Harime brutally murdered Professor Mato in cold blood, it was her solemn duty to defeat Life Fibers. She did not have the time or the patience to deal with her associates claims that England possessed the necessary power to repel someone like Ragyo Kiryuin. Sparing a moment to give Batou a scathing look, the gray haired man shrugging his shoulders in response, Olivier growled into the phone, "I don't care for excuses. Do whatever needs to be done on your end to keep the



embargo in place. Revocs must not be allowed back in Great Britain."

Snapping the phone shut before the woman on the other end could reply, an annoyed scowl spreading across her face, Olivier felt the need to once more express her hatred of politicians. Tossing the phone over her shoulder to Batou, the older man fumbling to catch it, Olivier clasped her hands behind her back and frowned at the situation at hand. She did not doubt the military prowess possessed by the Convention of Twelve but they were merely men and women. Even if they had an entire army, backed by the most sophisticated and advanced weaponry in the world, they would fall before Ragyo Kiryuin.

"The situation in Europe is growing more annoying by the hour," Olivier scoffed as she turned her gaze to Batou, "Ragyo Kiryuin is attempting to reestablish a foothold in Western Europe after Kinue destroyed the Paris Distribution Facility. It is only a matter of time before she moves against Great Britain."

The Nudist Beach commander scratched his chin and frowned, "I don't know if it has anything to do with Ragyo Kiryuin's recent movements but..."

Olivier's blue eyes darkened as she glared at Batou, "What do you know?"

"An old buddy of mine runs a mercenary group based in France. Black ops, assassinations, protection duty, as long as you have the money he'll take the job," Batou grumbled and folded his arms. Pursing his lips, gray eyes narrowing in thought, the older man paused before continuing, "Four days ago he took his entire group and relocated to London for a very lucrative bodyguard contract. I'm talking top level, seven figure payments. That's not the kind of money someone spends if they're looking for some extra security around the house."

The elder Armstrong sibling found the timing far too coincidental for her liking. Raising her arm when the rustic frame of the Urahara Shop came into focus, the dozen nudists around her stomping to a halt, Olivier frowned and curtly responded, "You have twenty-four hours to find out who hired your associate. Will that be a problem?"

Batou shivered slightly as the wind kicked up before shaking his head, "I'll need to make a few calls and pull some strings but it won't be easy. He might be a French bastard but he takes his job very seriously."

"I expect to have the information by tomorrow afternoon," Olivier's tone was cold as she stepped towards the front door of the Urahara Shop. Fingers gripping the wooden handle, the old wood creaking under the strain, the General scoffed and turned around, "What do you make of these shinigami?"

Batou scratched the back of his neck as he mulled over the question. He had never been a religious man but given everything he learned over the past week about the afterlife he was beginning to reconsider, "Well, after finding out the afterlife is not only someplace I can visit on the weekends but actively watches over the planet I really don't know what to think. I'm still trying to wrap my head around the fact that Hell actually exists. That being said I think we should err on the side of caution. Shinigami might have their so-called zanpakuto but Life Fiber weapons are the only things we know that can actually hurt Ragyo Kiryuin."

Grunting as she slammed the door open, the thin wooden frame cracking and buckling under her enormous strength, Olivier marched into the store and glanced around. Examining the various foodstuff and consumables lining the shelves, the interior lighting bathing the small store in a harsh fluorescent glow, the General was disappointed with what she saw. Kisuke Urahara was the man that not only created the Kamui Mugetsu but managed to break into the Kiryuin Manor under Ragyo Kiryuin's nose and nearly seal away the Original Life Fiber. Olivier had thought her brother was exaggerating

about the humble conditions the Life Fiber genius lived in but apparently she was mistaken in that regard.

Running a finger along one of the shelves, a snort of disdain escaping her lips upon seeing the trail of dust, Olivier scowled and turned to Batou, "I came all the way to Karakura Town because Kise Urahara informed me he had vital information about Ragyo Kiryuin. I do not like being kept waiting. Where is he?"

"There's no need to get all upset, Miss Armstrong, I'm right here."

Pushing aside the curtain separating the back of the building from the rest of the store, one hand pressing his bucket hat down over his face as his lips curled up into a familiar smile, Kise Urahara carefully took in the General of Nudist Beach's appearance. From just the barest of glances Kise could already tell she was a strong-willed woman much like Satsuki Kiryuin, which meant he would need to tread cautiously. He never really got along with women like Olivier Armstrong. Filing away his normally goofy introduction for later Kise stepped to the side and smirked, "Everyone's already downstairs. I think you'll appreciate the recently installed elevator."

The slow descent into the recently modified Secret Training Ground was surprisingly uneventful. Standing at the forefront of the elevator, his cane tapping lightly against the floor, Kise barely winced when the artificial sunlight of the massive room assaulted his eyes. As they stepped forth into the Nudist Beach Underground Advanced Base, most of the rocks and natural landscape already cleared out for military equipment, Batou whistled at the sheer size of the room, "The Major General said you had an entire stadium under your shop but damn... how did you fit everything down here anyway?"

"I'm afraid that is a secret, my nudist friends," Kise had a mischievously glint in his eyes as he turned away from the two humans. Geta echoing loudly on the newly installed metal floor, nudist operatives momentarily pausing as they examined state of the art Anti-Life Fiber weapons and equipment to snap a salute, the

former captain raised a hand to his chin, "Before I bring you up to speed I need to know the situation outside Karakura Town."

"Ishikawa and Toyama prefectures fell to the COVERS yesterday evening with massive casualties," Olivier replied coldly to the exiled shinigami while absentmindedly reaching to her shoulder. As the injury sustained many years ago began acting up, phantom pain shooting up her arm, the blond haired general scowled in irritation, "Since we managed to wrest control of Giku prefecture the number of COVERS killing nudists instead of absorbing them has increased dramatically. It seems Ragyo Kiryuin has decided to stop taking prisoners."

"I see...."

Kisuke's lips twisted into a frown as he pushed the bucket hat further down his forehead, "We all knew defeating Ragyo Kiryuin would not be an easy task. If I had more time Kōgō Nuno Shīru would have worked as intended. Two months just wasn't long enough."

"What about the Seireitei?" Batou asked in confusion. Placing a hand in his jacket as he turned to Olivier, the strict woman returning his gaze with a slight sneer, the gray haired man continued, "You shinigami are supposed to keep the balance of souls, right? Ragyo Kiryuin trying to feed over a billion people to Life Fibers sounds like something they would try and stop."

"You raise a valid point. The Seireitei should have gotten involved in this mess over a decade ago," Kisuke replied, his voice dropping to a low whisper, as he turned and looked over his shoulder, "In a logical world Ragyo Kiryuin's intentions would have forced the Head Captain to personally intervene. Killing a few thousand people to prevent the genocide of humanity would be a small price to pay. But then again in a logical world Life Fibers wouldn't exist, now would they?"

Batou and Olivier didn't have long to think over Kisuke's cryptic comments as they finally arrived at one of the newly built

prefabricated rooms the shopkeeper had appropriated for his own personal use. Walking in through the open door while quite mindful of the three sets of eyes immediately turning towards him Kisuke didn't break his stride as he headed over to his newly replaced computer, a generous donation from Ryuken Ishida after Nui Harime's visit, and began rapidly typing in commands on the keyboard. As data streamed down the monitor, figures and charts passing in less than a second, Kisuke waited until he heard the door close before speaking, "I'm not going to mince words. At the current pace we have maybe two months before Ragyo Kiryuin can begin the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet."

"That doesn't give us a lot of time."

Clad in nothing but Danketsu, the Kamui refusing to allow any other clothing to touch her body unless absolutely necessary, Kinue Kinagase folded purple and blue armored arms across her bosom and frowned slightly as she leaned against a large crate. For the last week the elder Kinagase sibling had been on the front lines against Revocs and the COVERS, Danketsu providing more than enough power to turn the tides against the Life Fibers, but she was only one woman. Against Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime she had no delusions about who would win, "Based on the number of COVERS floating around Honnou City one would think Ragyo Kiryuin was ready to move in a matter of days."

"I suppose we're quite fortunate COVERS are completely separate from Ragyo's final plan," Kisuke's face broke into a smug grin as he pressed a button and brought up a large holographic image of Honnou City. Thanks to real-time satellite imagery, donated by Nudist Beach and the Ishida Conglomerate, Kisuke was able to create a nearly perfect representation of the formerly rebellious city. Nearly every district, ranging from the Three-Star luxury homes to the No-Star slums, was visible in striking detail with the tens of thousands of COVERS littering the city the only thing missing from the map.

Strolling towards the holographic representation of the city, a hand reaching into his coat for a pointer stick, Kisuke coughed to clear his throat before continuing, "As we already know Ragyo Kiryuin constructed the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier within hours of the Great Culture and Sports Festival but unlike Karakura Town this particular barrier stops everything, Life Fibers or not, from passing through. Upon first glance it looked similar to the Life Fiber wards she set up around the Original Life Fiber but unfortunately this isn't a movie. Ragyo learned her lesson from my unexpected visit quite well. By using Kon and the others I've determined it now takes Ragyo Kiryuin's conscious permission to enter or leave Honnou City."

"You said you already tore through Ragyo Kiryuin's wards once before," Olivier Armstrong's stoic voice drew everybody's attention as the strong-willed woman interjected her presence into Kisuke's lecture. Claspng her hands firmly against the small of her back, cold blue eyes firmly locked on the image of Honnou City, the General of Nudist Beach pursed her lips in thought before turning her attention to Kisuke, "How much protection would you need to do it a second time?"

"That all depends..." Kisuke had a grim look on his face as his mood shifted, "With my current knowledge about the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier it should take me no less than a week of constant work to allow us passage."

"So nothing can get through that damn thing without her approval?" Ryuko growled, her chin resting on the palm of her, while shooting a harsh glare at the shopkeeper, "It's almost like Ragyo Kiryuin is scared of leaving Honnouji Academy!"

"You are more correct than you realize, Ryuko Matoi."

Slowly walking towards the image of Honnou City, her purple heels clicking softly against the floor, Kinoue pointed a finger at the main courtyard of Honnouji Academy before continuing, "The field reports from the Great Culture and Sports Festival suggests Ragyo Kiryuin

went out of her way to remove Isshin Kurosaki from the battle. The fact she went to such extreme lengths such as hiring an assassin suggests she feared Ichigo's father could stop him. It's reasonable to assume Ragyo Kiryuin created the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier specifically to keep Isshin from pursuing her."

"Getting through that barrier is going to be rather difficult..." Kisuke trailed off as he scratched the stubble on his chin. Subtly aware of the scowl on Ichigo's face upon Kinoue mentioning the assassin Kisuke made of show of humming thoughtfully before continuing, "... I don't doubt Ragyo Kiryuin increased the Life Fiber protocols for the barrier. It would be extremely surprising if she didn't randomize the Life Fiber velocity and density of the barrier. That is not to mention all the nasty surprises Ragyo Kiryuin has most likely woven into the barrier. Conservatively... if everything goes perfectly it should take four weeks or so before I can begin building the bypass. Is there anything you wish to add, Miss Satsuki?"

Wearing clothes borrowed from Orihime's wardrobe, her body bruised from hours of training, Satsuki Kiryuin did not stumble once despite the exhaustion wracking her body as she slowly walked forward. Clenching the Scissor Blade tightly in her right hand, the once purple weapon now a deep auburn, Satsuki scowled lightly as she saw the holographic representation of Honnouji Academy. It was only in hindsight that Satsuki saw the predicable conclusion for her actions over the last several years.

"My mother is not one to take unnecessary risks even with her immense power," Satsuki's tone was scornful, her eyes cold and focused, as she remembered all the students lost to the COVERS, "Call it cowardice or fear but my mother considers all possible options before making a move. The Raid Trip to Karakura Town was no exception."

"I thought that was your decision," Ichigo interrupted.

"It was... at least on the surface," Satsuki carefully corrected as she turned away from the hologram of Honnou City, "... but given the

knowledge my mother demonstrated at the festival I have reason to believe she wanted me to invade Karakura Town all along."

Kisuke's eyes were cast in shadow as he lightly pressed the bucket hat further down over his face, "I'm guessing you know something, don't you Miss Satsuki?"

"Indeed I do," Satsuki admitted without hesitation as she closed her eyes, "After the Raid Trip my mother summoned me for a report on the battle. While such a request is not unusual what struck me as peculiar was her insistence at seeing Inumuta's data on the Anti-Life Fiber shield. I assumed my mother was simply interested in the technology but now I know she needed that information to create the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier currently impeding our progress."

"That's quite useful," Kisuke muttered as he turned back to his computer and began rapidly typing on the keyboard. As various models of the barrier surrounding Honnou City appeared on the screen Kisuke raised a hand to his chin and hummed softly, "If Ragyo Kiryuin did, in fact, base the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier upon Isshin's shield than it should have the same basic design. Now then... I have a question for you, Miss Satsuki. Can you describe your mother's overall disposition after she heard about Kinue Kinagase's little excursion to Paris?"

Satsuki closed her eyes as she thought back to the events of Parent Student Day, "Approximately one hour after I announced Ichigo as the new vice president my mother received a call. She was visibly bothered by Kinue Kinagase's actions in Paris and demanded several large shipments of Life Fibers be sent immediately to Europe from the Moscow Distribution Center."

Listening attentively to Satsuki's response while his eyes remained focused on the screen in front of him, one hand covering his mouth, Kisuke scratched his chin as everything slowly began making sense, "Miss Kinagase, during your brother's interrogation of Jackie Tristan did you notice a shift in her demeanor when he informed her of the decrease in the number of people wearing Revocs clothing?"



"There was a hint of subtle fear in her eyes when my brother mentioned Revoc's loss in the European market. That one moment was the closest we ever were to breaking her," Kinue tapped a finger against the inside of her wrists as she calmly answered the shopkeeper. For nearly four days straight Tsumugu had used every technique he knew apart from torture to make Jackie Tristan talk but to no avail. The Xcution member had been far too loyal to Ragyo Kiryuin and Life Fibers to even think about turning traitor.

"What exactly are you trying to imply?" Batou asked, his tone slightly suspicious, as he stared at the image of Honnou City.

"I found it odd Ragyo Kiryuin would lose her temper over something trivial," Kisuke explained as the model of Honnou City was replaced by an image of the planet. Looking over his shoulder at the holographic projection of the Earth, various numbers hovering over each individual continent, Kisuke took a second to adjust his bucket hat before continuing, "Such unusual behavior forced me to ponder why she was so worried about what was an, at the most, temporary drop in the Revocs market share. The answer is quite simple - the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet requires a specific percentage of the human population wearing Life Fibers."

"Then what are we sitting around for?" Ryuko shouted as she jumped to her feet and pulled out the Scissor Blade, "If blowing up a few factories is all it takes to stop Ragyo Kiryuin you can count me in!"

"It's not that simple," Batou interjected with a small shake of his head as he deflated Ryuko's enthusiasm, "After Kinue destroyed the Paris facility Ragyo Kiryuin moved fast to make sure it didn't happen again - increased manpower, military grade anti-tank weaponry, tighter surveillance and even scaled down versions of the wards Kisuke discovered in her home. We would take far too many casualties taking down even one of the smaller distribution facilities. And I'm willing to bet Ragyo snuck a few COVERS around the world just in case we were stupid enough to try."

"What about us?" Ryuko glared angrily at Batou while gently patting Senketsu's eye. For the last nine days she'd been stuck within Karakura Town, fully aware of what was happening around the country and unable to do anything about it. If Nudist Beach thought she would sit back and watch as innocent people died fighting her mother Ryuko was prepared to teach them a lesson, "You know we're strong enough to take out anyone in Xcution! Even if that guy Kinue and Danketsu fought shows up... I'm sure two of us will be enough to beat the crap out of him!"

"Do you remember your first encounter with my brother?" Kinue's tone was nearly emotionless, the slight tightening of her blue eyes the only sign of her anger, as she addressed Ryuko, "Do you recall how easily Tsumugu was able to lure you into his traps? The man I fought in Seattle is a league above my brother in that department. He would be able to trap you long before you were even aware he was there."

"That is why your brother is working alongside Yoruichi Shihoin in hunting that coward down," Olivier said curtly before her pocket began vibrating. Only a select few people in the world had her number and none of them would dare call her unless it was a dire emergency. The last person to call without such a reason had been her brother but he quickly learned his lesson. Frowning in contempt when she saw who it was, her mind unable to figure out why they would be calling her, Olivier turned to Batou while she walked away, "When I return I expect you to bring me up to speed on what I missed."

As Batou nodded to Olivier, the blond woman content with his response before leaving, Ichigo frowned at Kisuke, "It can't be that simple to stop her. If Ragyo Kiryuin's entire plan hinged on people wearing Life Fibers why the hell would she push Satsuki's festival forward by a couple of weeks?"

"That's because she needed Ururu."

Kisuke's usually serious or jovial tone was subdued as he mentioned his adoptive daughter's name. Staring silently at the monitor for several tense seconds, his eyes unblinking as he collected his thoughts, the shopkeeper sighed before turning around, "Using the information Batou took from Ragyo Kiryuin's personal computer I discovered she needs two things for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. The first is having at least ninety percent of humanity wearing clothing infused with trace amounts of Life Fibers. Without this the signal from the Original Life Fiber won't be able to propagate far enough for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet to begin."

"That explains Jackie Tristan's shock at my brother's words. I had already destroyed several of Revocs's smaller facilities in Eastern Europe before heading to Paris. She must have known how important the Paris Distribution Facility was to Ragyo Kiryuin's plans," Kinue muttered as she closed her eyes and sighed gently.

"Everything's starting to make sense," Batou frowned as he leaned against a stack of crates, each labeled with the logo for Ishida Pharmaceuticals, and thought back on the dark skinned Frenchwoman's last moments, "When Jackie Tristan escaped her restraints she immediately rushed the General. No forethought or planning. It was like she had no intention of making it out alive."

Ryuko gnashed her teeth angrily as she pieced together what Batou was trying to imply. She couldn't understand why anyone, even someone working for Ragyo Kiryuin, would kill themselves just because they lost against a Kamui. The fury in her eyes dimming slightly as she remembered Gamagori's actions after she defeated him during the Sudden Death Runoff Elections, Nui Harime's untimely appearance stopping him before he could try, Ryuko sighed loudly to calm down before turning back to Kisuke, "You said Ururu was involved. How does she have anything to do with all this?"

"From what I could ascertain Ururu is an integral part of Ragyo Kiryuin's plans," Kisuke explained as he gave Ryuko, and by proxy Senketsu, a piercing look. The shopkeeper and former captain found it quite intriguing all four Kamui, created by at least three different

groups, not only shared similar weave patterns but the propensity to evolve into a stronger configuration. It was almost enough for him to ask Kinue and Ryuko to run a few tests on Senketsu and Danketsu respectively.

"Upon my mother's arrival during Parent Student Day she consistently referred to Ururu Tsumugiya as Amu Harime," Satsuki interjected as the holographic projection of the planet quickly shifted into a high resolution model of Honnouji Academy accompanied by a brief burst of static. Folding her arms behind her back, her lips curling into a small scowl, Satsuki paused to gather her thoughts before finishing, "Amu means knitting and Nui means sewing. My mother is a romanticist and thus would not have named them as such without good reason."

Kisuke looked at Satsuki, mildly impressed by her deductive skills, before reaching into his coat. Pulling out a small device, a faint glow emanating from the center, he began fiddling with it before responding, "To be perfectly honest it only took me two days to figure out the first requirement for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. That was the easy part. The second prerequisite for Ragyo Kiryuin's plan is, quite unfortunately for all of us, something far more serious than anything I could have anticipated."

Ichigo stared at the image of Honnouji Academy, his eyes focusing on what Ragyo Kiryuin was building in the formerly empty courtyard, before frowning, "I'm guessing Ragyo Kiryuin somehow needs Ururu for that, right?"

"More than you think, Ichigo..." Kisuke trailed off as he finished working on the small device held delicately in his hand. Glancing over his shoulder at his computer, newly obtained data streaming down the screen, the exiled shinigami hummed as he pulled the brim of his bucket hat down over his face, "After using one of my very handy portable gigai to survive Nui Harime's impromptu visit I began researching everything I could about Life Fibers. Two months later, when I was dismantling the wards in the Kiryuin Manor, I discovered a peculiar strand of Life Fibers leading upstairs into Ragyo Kiryuin's

private study. After avoiding a variety of traps I discovered her personal journal cleverly concealed in the wall next to the desk."

"Hold on a second," Batou scoffed before incredulously asking, "Ragyo had a journal?"

"The contents were fairly mundane. I expected to find pages of insane rants about the glory of Life Fibers. The most disturbing thing I did find was several rather... graphic paragraphs about what Ragyo Kiryuin would do to your father if she ever managed to get him alone, Ichigo." A sly smirk spread across Kisuke's face as he watched Ichigo's reel backwards in a mixture of disgust and horror. Laughing lightly at his former student's reaction to Ragyo Kiryuin's imagination Kisuke sighed as his expression shifted, "That being said there was one particular phrase that Ragyo Kiryuin repeatedly referenced in her entries - Shinra Koketsu."

"Why the hell would she need a Kamui?"

Batou's gruff and direct question helped to break the nearly palpable silence that directly followed Kisuke's declaration. Even though the Nudist Beach commander might not have actually seen Ragyo Kiryuin fighting during the Great Culture and Sports Festival he witnessed enough of the aftermath to know how strong she truly was. Briefly looking over his shoulder towards the door, the faint sounds of the General's conversation reaching his ears, Batou grumbled and shared a glance with Kinue before turning to Kisuke, "This doesn't make any sense. Why would Ragyo need to create something like Shinra Koketsu?"

" ***That name sounds fucking pretentious,***" Danketsu's multicolored eyes narrowed as she listened to Batou's concern about Ragyo Kiryuin. Ignoring the twin glares originating from Senketsu and Mugetsu, the two Kamui obviously finding her annoying, Danketsu scoffed in response before turning her attention to Kinue, ***"I don't like that Ragyo Kiryuin is saying Shinra Koketsu is better than me. Please tell me we're going to kill that bitch as soon as possible."***

"Danketsu brings up a valid point," Kinue's eyes narrowed imperceptibly at her Kamui's choice of language. Taking note of the way Mugetsu and Senketsu were staring at her Kamui, Danketsu's own anger starting to bleed through their mental connection, Kinue closed her eyes and calmly exhaled, "There must be a reason Ragyo Kiryuin would go through the effort of creating a Kamui like Shinra Koketsu. Anderson and Batou's field reports indicated she was already powerful enough to defeat three Kamui without receiving more than a superficial wound to her shoulder. If Ragyo Kiryuin is creating a Kamui it can't be for the power."

"I do not believe Shinra Koketsu is a Kamui," Satsuki closed her eyes, her face expressionless, before finishing, "Ryuko, if I were to refer to Senketsu by his full name it would be Kamui Senketsu. The same naming principle applies to Junketsu, Mugetsu and Danketsu. If my mother constantly refers to Shinra Koketsu by its full name it must belong to an entirely different class of Life Fiber clothing."

"An entirely different class of clothing... that's quite the quandary, Miss Satsuki," Kisuke complimented before inspiration struck. Quickly jotting down the idea about alternating Life Fiber rotations, his genius mind already figuring out methods to use it, the shopkeeper turned back to the computer and resumed typing, "If you are correct than Shinra Koketsu is likely different from any of your Kamui. What this means in terms of possible abilities and configurations puzzles me but I have a theory. Ichigo, do you still have the journal Yoruichi gave you?"

Ichigo's eyes widened at the mention of the old journal before shaking his head. He had tried reading it several times after Parent Student Day but it was too complicated for him to even begin to understand, "It's still in my room at Honnouji Academy. Don't tell me you need it for whatever plan's going through your head."

"Why would I need something I already memorized?" Kisuke gave a smug chuckle as Ichigo scoffed in annoyance, "I was simply going to tell you to ignore everything Souichiro wrote in it. His theories and postulates were brilliant for the time but they are over fifteen years

old. Although he was a genius Souichiro lacked a key piece of information needed to bring everything together."

"You had my father's journal?" Satsuki took a step towards the shopkeeper, her blue eyes cold and focused, and turned to Ichigo while her gaze softened, "I was under the belief my mother burned all of my father's possessions after Kuroido failed to kill him thirteen years ago. After his betrayal she went out of her way to destroy all traces of his existence from Revocs. If I had my father's journal Iori could have used the information to more effectively counter the COVERS invasion. Where did you get it?"

"Isshin gave it to me a month after the Winter War," Kiske replied matter-of-factly as he examined the recently acquired data appearing on his computer. Humming approvingly at what he saw the shopkeeper typed in a few commands before continuing, "If I had known of its importance to you, Miss Satsuki, I would have made a copy. Now then, as I was saying Souichiro was on the right track but he was missing one important detail."

Ryuko looked over at Ichigo before asking, "Which you have, right?"

"No, but I'm really close," Kiske paused in mid-sentence and raised a hand to his chin. As the shadows from his bucket hat covered his eyes, clashing with the harsh glow emanating from the computer, he leaned back and let out a loud huff, "In his notes Souichiro referred to something he called 'Absolute Domination' that would grant someone control over all other Life Fibers."

"Let me take a guess where you're going with this. Ragyo Kiryuin needs Shinra Koketsu in order to use this so-called Absolute Domination," Batou sarcastically muttered before slamming his fist against the wall, "This day just keeps getting better and better. The General is not going to like this."

"There is something else," Kiske's voice dropped to a low timber as he looked over his shoulder at Batou, "When I tried to seal the Original Life Fibers I took a few samples for study. Even if Shinra

Koketsu was woven from the most powerful Life Fibers in the world it would not possess even the smallest fraction of Absolute Domination. It appears a catalyst of some sort is needed for Shinra Koketsu to reach its full power. What this catalyst might be, I'm afraid, eludes me."

"So how does this have to do with Ururu?" Ryuko demanded as she glared at the shopkeeper, "We already know Nui Harime is her sister!"

Kisuke pursed his lips as he mulled over Ryuko's question, "I'm not one hundred percent sure why Ragyo Kiryuin risked capturing Ururu but it leads back to Shinra Koketsu. Despite her young age Nui Harime is the Grand Couturier of Revocs, which is a fairly prestigious position. I'm more than sure her skills originate from the Original Life Fiber."

"You are suggesting Ururu Tsumugiya has the same skill with Life Fibers as Nui Harime," Satsuki frowned as she mentally recalled everything Inumuta captured with the hundreds of cameras hidden throughout Honnou City, "During her time at Honnouji Academy I did not witness any abilities pertaining to Life Fibers. Tsumugiya certainly possessed the Grand Couturier's strength, speed and natural regeneration but she lacked her sister's more potent Life Fiber techniques."

"If Ragyo Kiryuin needs both Ururu Tsumugiya and Nui Harime than a second option available to us," Kinue explained while raising two fingers on her right hand, "Taking either sister out of the equation will permanently prevent the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet from coming to fruition."

A loud echo reverberated through the room as Ryuko slammed her foot against the ground and glowered at Kinue, "There's not a chance in hell I'm going to let you kill Ururu!"

"I did not say that, Matoi," Kinue calmly shook her head, her black and red hair subtly shifting, and lowered her hand, "Although killing



either of them would be the most expedient method to ensure Ragyo Kiryuin cannot succeed I refuse to murder an innocent girl, even if she is a Life Fiber Hybrid of the same weave as Nui Harime. The last time we met I acted rashly and without forethought and for that I apologize."

"The only problem is how to do it," Ichigo mentioned as a frown appeared on his face, "If Ururu's important to Ragyo Kiryuin there's no way she'll let us get anywhere close to her."

"That can wait!"

Slamming open the door as she stormed back into the room, her normally beautiful face scrunched into a scowl, Olivier narrowed her eyes in irritation and whipped her head toward Batou, "We have more pressing matters at the moment than the unlikely recovery of a Life Fiber Hybrid. Approximately thirty five minutes ago a member of Xcution was seen arriving at London Heathrow Airport before abruptly vanishing into thin air. I want you to call that friend of yours and find out who the hell Ragyo Kiryuin sent to England!"

"I'll go give him a call. If he tries screwing with me I have enough dirt on the guy to make him talk even if he uses the 'client confidentiality' card," Batou answered with a slight nod as he turned to leave.

Snapping her attention over to Kinue as Batou left the room, his hand already reaching for his phone, Olivier spared Kisuke a brief glance, "You will inform me of everything I missed once I am finished here. What is Aikuro's latest report on the Brazil situation?"

"There have been several large shipments recently delivered to the Rio de Janeiro Distribution Facility," Kinue answered as she walked over to Kisuke's computer, the shopkeeper politely moving out of the way, and started rapidly typing on the keyboard. As several satellite images appeared on the monitor, courtesy of Houka Inumuta being granted access to the Ishida Pharmaceutical servers, the elder Kinagase sibling folded her arms and explained, "Over the last three days nearly one hundred identical air-tight crates were sent to the

facility yet not a single one was delivered to local stores. Based on the timing of the shipments and the increased security we can assume Ragyo Kiryuin is planning to unleash the COVERS on Brazil during Rio Fashion Week."

The General of Nudist Beach grimaced at the latest update. Even with the assistance of Kisuke Urahara and Isshin Kurosaki it was taking everything Nudist Beach possessed just to keep Life Fibers contained in the northern part of the country. Ragyo Kiryuin might be an inhuman monster hell-bent on feeding all of humanity to the Original Life Fiber but there was no denying her tactical brilliance. If the COVERS were to appear during Rio Fashion Week, when the city was packed full of idiots wishing to see the latest trends from Revocs, Nudist Beach would be helpless to stop tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of people from being absorbed.

"I find it difficult to believe Ragyo Kiryuin would stop at sending just one member of Xcution to London," Olivier scowled at the high resolution images, her eyes narrowing at the dozens of military trucks parked within, before leaned back and adjusting her gloves. Turning around to leave, her overcoat billowing behind her, she turned to Kinue and added with a grimace, "With Alex somewhere on the front lines and Batou needed back in Osaka the only commander available for this mission is Anderson. That's going to be a pleasant conversation."

"That lunatic has a problem with England?" Ryuko folded her arms across Senketsu, a faint growl from the Kamui reaching her ears, and glared at the older blonde woman, "Why the hell would you send him if he'll go nuts as soon as he gets there?"

"He won't dare step out of line if he wants to keep breathing," Olivier replied with a dangerous hint to her voice as her hand subtly moved towards her sword. When Anderson had joined Nudist Beach his hatred of England, and Protestants, had been nearly as prevalent as his loathing of Life Fibers. In most cases Olivier wouldn't have cared what Anderson said so long as he completed his missions but eventually his constant rhetoric started getting on her nerves. After

proceeding to beat Anderson to within an inch of his life Olivier had stood over the gravely injured man and gave him two choices. Either he could shut up about Protestants and continue working for Nudist Beach or she would come back and finish the job.

"Sending Anderson is risky. If the Vatican finds out he's still alive they might try to apprehend or kill him. It might be better to send someone else," Kinue informed in a stoic tone causing Olivier to momentarily stiffen.

"Unfortunately we don't have a choice. Anderson is the only commander available at the moment. If my brother was good for anything besides fighting I would send him but he's too thick-headed to stay out of trouble. Sending Alex to London would be the same thing as allowing Ragyo Kiryuin to win," Olivier scoffed derisively before her mood abruptly worsened. Twisting around as her blue eyes narrowed the nudist General took a deep and calming breath before raising her voice and shouting, "Kurosaki! Matoi! Gather what little belongings you have and be at the airfield near Ishida Manor tomorrow at noon! Do not make me come looking for you."

"You want us to go to London?" Ryuko didn't bother hiding the sarcasm in her voice. Cocking her head to the side and rolling her eyes Ryuko scoffed, "There's not a chance in hell you're going to make me -"

"Are you questioning my orders, Ryuko Matoi?"

Olivier Armstrong's presence permeated the room as she slowly stalked towards Ryuko. Eyes gleaming with an unholy yellow light that caused Senketsu to begin visibly shaking around Ryuko's body the General stomped to a halt directly in front of her and growled, "I gave you an order and unlike my pathetic excuse of a nephew I'm not content with simple threats. You will go to London and protect those senile old men until they vote on the embargo. Is that clear, Matoi?"

For several long seconds Ryuko stared daggers at Olivier, her gear-shaped eyes glaring harshly into the older woman's cold blue, as she refused to bow to the woman despite the overwhelming presence filling the room. Folding her arms across her chest in an attempt to calm Senketsu down Ryuko snorted and turned her head to the side when it became clear Olivier wasn't going to back down anytime soon, "Alright fine, I'll go to London! Just stop staring at me like that."

Lips curling downwards in annoyance at Ryuko's rude behavior, her eyes narrowing slightly at the delinquent teenager, Olivier didn't bother giving Ryuko a second glance as she marched towards the door with Kinue quickly falling into line behind her. Tightly clenching the handle of the door, the brass actually creaking under her Armstrong strength, Olivier momentarily paused before looking over her shoulder, "I will be returning to Osaka within the hour. Anderson will have your orders when you arrive tomorrow. Do not screw this up!"

Eyes reflexively flinching as Olivier slammed the door against the frame, her heavy footsteps fading slowly into the distance, Ryuko waited until the General was out of earshot before snorting, "Like hell I'm going to London!"

"***It might be nice to go,***" Senketsu commented as he took several calming breaths. As the fear of imminent death at the hands of Olivier left the Kamui, the quivering in his Life Fibers fading by the second, he pausing thoughtfully before adding, "***I remember reading about London in your world history class. I want to see Big Ben.***"

"Wait a second!" Ryuko scoffed as she pulled at her Kamui, "Since when can you read?"

Senketsu looked up at Ryuko with his one good eye before stoically replying, "***As a school uniform I could always read. If I had hands I could write too.***"

Sitting down in a chair, his fan whipped back out in front of his face, Kisuke's lips curled into a bemused grin as he watched Ryuko bicker back and forth with Senketsu. It was mildly annoying to the scientist that despite creating Mugetsu he was unable to hear her voice, which was apparently something only Kamui and Life Fiber Hybrids possessed. After patiently listening to the argument for more than a minute Kisuke clapped his hands loudly and smirked, "While this little act has been fairly amusing I believe some congratulations are in order! It's not every day you win a free flight to dreary old England!"

"This is just great," Ichigo sighed and leaned his head back against the wall, "What the hell am I going to tell the old goat?"

"I wouldn't worry too much about Isshin although he might get a little jealous. Apparently he really wanted to go to Europe for the honeymoon but your mother shot him down" Kisuke answered before snapping the small fan shut, "Ichigo... you probably expect me to give you some cryptic advice about what dangers you might face in London. In any normal circumstance that would be correct but my expertise outside of Japan is dangerously inadequate. Quincy aren't the only humans with significant spiritual energy. Many myths and legends were founded on reality after all..."

As the shopkeeper turned around to let his words sink in, his fingers already gliding across the keyboard, Satsuki looked at her clothing and frowned softly, "Kisuke Urahara, have you finished working on Junketsu?"

"That's quite the tricky question, Miss Satsuki," Kisuke commented with a heavy sigh. Typing in several commands into the computer, a three-dimension model of Junketsu appearing on the screen, the shopkeeper adjusted his bucket hat as he stared at the image, "Your initial treatment of Junketsu damaged her stitching rather badly. Her Life Fibers were considerably frayed while her Banshi were almost ten percent weaker than normal. That is not to mention the trace amounts of Ichigo's Life Fibers still woven within her stitching. I've

managed to repair most of the damage but it's hard to say when she'll wake up."

"I am content with waiting as long as Junketsu is fully restored," Satsuki calmly stated as she looked away from Kisuke, her voice empty of the guilt she felt at Junketsu's condition, and turned to her sister, "Ryuko, you should return home and inform Mankanshoku of your departure."

Ryuko blinked owlishly, her mind requiring a moment to process Satsuki's orders, before she slapped her face, "I completely forgot about Mako! It's going to be impossible to convince her to stay here!"

"Just promise Mako you'll bring back snacks or something," Ichigo helpfully offered with a small shrug before his mood soured. He still had no idea how he was going to break the news to his family about leaving for London. Yuzu and Karin would be devastated he was leaving Karakura Town but the issue was telling his old man, "Now I have to track down the old goat and tell him I'm leaving. That's just great... it's going to take me all day to find where he's hiding. He's probably going to shout at me for leaving."

***"If you're worried about what your dad will say I can always tell him for you,"*** Mugetsu helpfully pointed out, ***"Since he is a Life Fiber Hybrid he can hear my voice just fine."***

Ichigo scowled as he stared down at his Kamui, "If you say one word about this to my old man I'm going to throw you in the washer and set the spin to high."

***"Y-You wouldn't dare!"*** Mugetsu's multicolored eyes quivered in fear as memories of the machine washer filled her mind with dread, ***"Don't do that! I won't say a word to your dad! I promise!"***

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Iori Shiro shivered as the wind whipped across the nearly vacant runway, dull blue skies falsely bathing Karakura Town in an eerie twilight, and pulled the pure white parka further up his neck. Nearly unrecognizable without the clear orange air filter he wore at Honnouji Academy, the lack of particulate-sized strands of Life Fibers negating the need for such precautions, the former President of the Sewing Club tightened his grip on the metal briefcase in his right hand when he spotted Ichigo Kurosaki's distinctive orange hair near the small private jet owned by Ishida Pharmaceuticals.

"I've been looking for you, Ichigo Kurosaki," Iori's tone was firm and polite as he approached the former substitute shinigami. Waiting patiently in the cold as Ichigo tried extracting himself from Yuzu's surprising tight hug, the younger sister apparently afraid of letting her brother leave for London, Iori sighed and adjusted his oval-shaped glasses. In the aftermath of the Great Culture and Sports Festival nearly half of the Sewing Club had been lost before reaching Karakura Town, devoured by the outpouring of COVERS, and it was only thanks to Kisuke Urahara's supernatural abilities that the rest of them weren't absorbed as well.

"What are you doing here Iori?" Ichigo folded his hands in the pockets of his jacket as he looked around, "Did Satsuki send you?"

"Lady Satsuki did not send me," Iori replied as he knelt and carefully placed the briefcase on the ground. Pausing momentarily before entering the seven-digit passcode, the three thick latches unlocking with a barely audible hiss, the former club captain reached inside and pulled out a small silver watch-like device, "I'm actually here to give you this."

Taking the small device from Iori and flipping it over in his hand, the Honnouji Academy symbol etched on the back, Ichigo frowned as he tried to figure out what it was, "So... what exactly is this thing?"

"Think of as a rudimentary form of GPS," Iori explained as he pulled a PDA from his pocket. Amber eyes twitching at the data streaming down the screen, courtesy of Inumuta's new-found access to the

Ishida Pharmaceuticals system of satellites, Iori snapped the briefcase shut and pointed to the device in Ichigo's hand before continuing, "During the festival Ryuko Matoi was able to land a blow against the Grand Couturier. By extracting the trace amount of Life Fibers from the Scissor Blade I was able to get a rough estimate of her energy signature. The device in your hand should be able to detect Nui Harime if she comes within five kilometers of you."

As impressed as he was with Iori's invention Ichigo could sense a 'however' in his explanation. Something like this didn't come without drawbacks, "So this thing can track down Nui Harime if she gets that close to me? That seems a little too convenient."

Iori sighed, his breath coming out in a cloud of fine mist, and shook his head, "Despite years of study and experimentation there is still much about Life Fibers that I do not know. Even with Kisuke Urahara offering his expertise on Life Fibers I wasn't able to increase the sensitivity of the device. While it cannot pinpoint her exact location it should give you enough time to prepare when she appears. I'm sorry but this was the best I could do in such a short amount of time."

"Don't worry about it," Ichigo scoffed and waved off the teenager's concern. Watching as Yuzu looked in awe at the device wrapped around his wrist, Karin shivering nearby with her arms folded in embarrassment at her twin's excitement, Ichigo added in an annoyed tone, "Nui's little surprise visits at Honnouji Academy were really starting to piss me off. If this thing can detect her then it's perfect."

" ***What about Ururu?***" Mugetsu blinked before looking up at Ichigo, ***"She is Nui's twin after all."***

"You have a point," Ichigo muttered quietly. If Iori could make something that can pinpoint Nui Harime before she pops out of the woodwork it stands to reason he can do the same for Ururu. Aware of Yuzu staring in amazement at Mugetsu's eyes, his Kamui blinking nervously at his sister's close contact, Ichigo turned back to Iori and asked, "Hey, can your invention track down Ururu?"



Iori's eyes narrowed slightly as he pondered Ichigo's question. Raising a hand to his lips, his mind racing as he considered the possibilities, the blond haired teenager thought over his answer for nearly half a minute before answering, "Theoretically it should since both Ururu and Nui Harime have identical Life Fibers. However it might be more complicated than that. Even though most people believe twins have identical DNA they actually have slight variations in their genetic structure. This small difference might limit the effectiveness of my invention or it might just make it useless. I won't know for certain without extensive testing."

"Damn it," Ichigo growled before sighing. Running a hand down his face, memories of what he saw in Satsuki's mind returning to him, Ichigo's scowl softened at the worried look on Yuzu's face, "Just let me know the moment you figure something out. I don't want to think about what Ragyo could be doing to Ururu..."

"I'll inform you once I have a working prototype," Iori nodded, slightly perplexed by Ichigo's wording, before turning around to leave. Adjusting his parka while picking up the briefcase, his blond hair blowing erratically as the wind temporarily picked up, the club captain looked at his watch and frowned. If he hurried he could assist Kisuke Urahara on modifying theoretical Life Fiber stitch patterns for practical applications.

As the three Kurosaki siblings watched Iori walk down the runway towards an idling jeep, the nudist driver managing to snap off a quick salute before leaving, Karin turned around and stared at the enormously expensive private jet. Folding her arms, both out of annoyance and to keep warm, she rolled her eyes and commented, "At least you're traveling in style."

"Don't be so rude, Karin!" Yuzu complained worriedly, "Ichigo is going across the world to fight Life Fibers. What if he doesn't come back?"

Karin quirked an eyebrow at her sister's overly worrying attitude, "I'm sure Ichigo will be fine. What's the worst that could happen to him?"

His Kamui can already kick ass so don't worry about it. Hey, where's the old goat anyway? Shouldn't he be here to say goodbye?"

Mugetsu hummed, her eyes blinking owlshly, before shifting her gaze from Karin to Ichigo, ***"Didn't you tell your dad the flight was at two?"***

"I didn't want to deal with any of his nonsense before we left," Ichigo grumbled and took a deep breath. Even after being exposed as a Life Fiber Hybrid of comparable strength to Ragyo Kiryuin his old man still acted like a child half the time. Shrugging his shoulders as he walked towards the jet Ichigo added, "With any luck I'll be long gone before -"

"Did you seriously think you could just leave without saying goodbye to your old man, my foolish son?"

Body already in motion the second he heard the voice, one hand already drifting towards Tournesol's scabbard strapped to his back, Ichigo was caught completely off guard when his father appeared in a burst of rainbow light. Momentarily taken aback by brightness of the attack, both his and Mugetsu's eyes nearly forced shut by the intensity of the light, Ichigo found his back slamming against the asphalt as Isshin tackled him. Sitting on top of Ichigo, one arm hooked around his son's neck while the other pinned his arms to the ground, Isshin grunted in disappointment, "It was quite savvy of you to try and trick your old man with a false departure time but I'm not that stupid! You can't fool Isshin Kurosaki with the same trick twice!"

"Give me a damn break!" Ichigo didn't hesitate before smashing his head against Isshin's nose hard enough to break it. Watching as his dad dramatically clutched his nose, Isshin's immense Life Fiber regeneration healing the damage within seconds, Ichigo scowled irritably and dusted Mugetsu off, "How the hell did you find out we were leaving?"

"You made quite a few blunders, my overconfident son," Isshin answered unabashedly, completely ignorant of the tick-mark

developing above Ichigo's eye, and smugly scratched at his chin. With the perpetual stubble gone along with his disguise, leaving nothing but smooth skin, Isshin turned around and chuckling sagely, "The first was Satsuki leaving at the same time as Yuzu and Karin. If you truly wanted to avoid my suspicion you should have told Satsuki to leave a bit earlier. Your second mistake was not informing your girlfriend about your little plan! Ryuko told me everything, Ichigo, and I must congratulate you! She's a fine catch. There aren't that many woman in the world that willingly put up with your nonsense so don't screw it up or -"

Luckily for Ichigo his dad's advice was cut off when a silver guitar case, dented and scratched from months of wear and tear, smashed into the side of Isshin's face with enough force to send him soaring through the air. Watching as Ichigo's dad crashed to the ground before sliding to a halt, small wisps of smoking lazily rising from his head, Ryuko let her old guitar case loudly hit the runway and spat, "Give it a rest, will ya? I could hear your idiotic shouting from over a mile away."

"Oh, hey Ryuko," Ichigo gave Ryuko a curt wave as he turned away from his dad's trembling body. Noticing the black and dark red pants Ryuko was wearing under Senketsu's skirt, the newly added clothing matching the Kamui's coloring perfection, Ichigo quirked an eyebrow, "So Kisuke finished your pants?"

"I take back everything I said about Kisuke," Ryuko grinned smugly as Ichigo finally noticed her new pants. Running a hand down the newly woven fabric, Senketsu bristling irritably around her body, Ryuko stopped when her fingers brushed her Kamui's skirt. Although Kisuke had been able to weave the pants using Senketsu's Life Fibers, enabling them to transform when she transformed, the shopkeeper had refused to modify his original uniform. Attempting to do so, Kisuke had warned her, would most likely result in severe damage to Senketsu's Banshi.

Gently placing her hand against Senketsu's eye, his trembling slowing down from the comforting gesture, Ryuko stared at Isshin's

prone body, "Is your dad going to be alright? I didn't hit him too hard."

"You and I both know he's faking it," Ichigo scornfully replied as he shot his dad another glare. Noticing the slight growling coming from Senketsu, the Kamui's form rippling around Ryuko's body, he asked, "What's wrong with Senketsu?"

**"I'm upset Ryuko threw me to the wolves!"** Senketsu's entire uniform shivered over Ryuko's body as he angrily stared into her eyes, **"My Life Fibers are more than sufficient to keep Ryuko warm but she betrayed my trust by having that monster create other clothing! Who knows what that man did to me when I was asleep?"**

Ryuko grumbled at her Kamui's constant whining before folding her arms across her chest and rolling her eyes, "I told you already Kisuke didn't do anything 'vile or unholy' while you were sleeping! I was standing next to him the entire time. All he took was a few of your Life Fibers to make these pants. If he tried to do anything else to you I would have killed him. Do you want another apology?"

Senketsu's eye narrowed as his entire body, save for Ryuko's new pants, bristled in indignation, **"Your new pants may have been made with my Life Fibers but they aren't a part of my body. I can't feel a thing below my skirt and it ruffles my stitching to know you don't trust me to keep you warm in the winter."**

"Of course I trust you, Senketsu! If Kisuke wanted to change anything about you I would have said 'screw you' and left!" Ryuko immediately responded in a shocked tone. Biting her lip as she felt Senketsu's sense of betrayal creep into her mind Ryuko added in a slightly softer voice, "You said as a Kamui you can't feel the cold, right? I might be part Life Fiber but I'm still human. I'm tired of freezing my ass off whenever we're not synchronized."

His anger abating slightly at Ryuko's explanation Senketsu waited a moment before bluntly stating, **"The solution to this problem is**

***quite simple, Ryuko. Simply stay synchronized with me all winter. You won't be cold and I won't have to deal with you wearing other clothes."***

"It's great to see you again, Ryuko!"

Appearing next to Ryuko in the blink of an eye before she could respond to Senketsu's ridiculous request, both Kamui and wearer flinching back in surprise, Isshin folded his arms across his chest and laughed heartily, "You should come over our house more often! Yuzu is always complaining how none of us appreciate her cooking! Now then... as the only parent within earshot, and since I don't trust my son around any beautiful women, it is my responsibility to lay down a few ground rules for your trip to England!"

"Ground rules?" Ryuko muttered before tilting her head in confusion. Frowning as she tried to figure out what Ichigo's dad was suggesting, Senketsu equally perplexed by the situation, several tense seconds passed before Ryuko growled and tried to smash her guitar case against Isshin's face a second time, "What the hell does that mean, you damn pervert?"

Nimble dodging around the improvised weapon, one hand reaching out to push the guitar case away from his body, the rainbow glow from Isshin's silver hair briefly intensified as he raised a finger, "Rule number one - there will be no drinking during your trip! The drinking age might be seventeen in England but it's still twenty here! Anderson's promised to scold you two severely if you try to sway from the path of sobriety! Do either of you know what rule number two is?"

Rolling his eyes in annoyance at his dad's behavior Ichigo scoffed, "Alright, I'll bite. What's rule number two?"

"I'm very happy that you asked, my wayward son!" Isshin exclaimed before pulling Ichigo into a tight one-armed hug. Looking suspiciously around the runway, his maroon eyes narrowing slightly, Isshin leaned in close and whispered, "I know that you have feelings

for Ryuko but don't forget about Satsuki. It's not every day you have sisters pining for your attention but if anything happens with Ryuko don't forget to wear -"

Surprisingly enough it wasn't just Ichigo that turned and belted his dad in the face. Ryuko, who managed to hear every single word Isshin whispered with her enhanced hearing, clenched her fist tightly and smashed it into his dad's face at the exact same time. Huffing loudly as Isshin soared through the air, a steady stream of blood leaving his face before crashing violently against the runway, Ryuko had a visible blush on her face as she shouted, "S-Shut the fuck up about something so goddamn embarrassing!"

" ***Your blood pressure and heart rate just spiked, Ryuko,***" Senketsu informed stoically while slightly confused about the situation, "***Are you alright?***"

"I'm fine, Senketsu," Ryuko scoffed, her head tilted towards the ground to further hide her embarrassment.

Staring at Isshin's seemingly unconscious form, her multicolored eyes intrigued by the wisps of smoke rising from the back of the man's head, Mugetsu blinked in confusion as she asked Ichigo, "***What did your dad mean about wearing something?***"

"Don't worry about it," Ichigo hastily answered, his eyebrows twitching in annoyance, before shooting his dad a scathing glare, "Did you actually have something to say or are you going to lie there like an idiot all afternoon?"

"Be careful in London, Ichigo," Isshin warned as he sat up and ran a hand through his silver hair. The amount of strength Ichigo and Ryuko possessed without activating their Kamui was actually quite impressive and could only mean they were coming into maturity as Life Fiber Hybrids. Waving off Yuzu's attempts to examine his injuries, her cheeks puffed out at his supposed rudeness, Isshin rubbed the spot where Ryuko decked him and added, "Ragyó is

quite the intelligent woman. She'll probably realize you're gone within three days."

"Like there's anything to worry about," Ryuko snorted as she turned her back to Isshin and spat on the ground. As phantom bouts of pain coursed through her shoulder, memories of her mother severing her arm vivid in her mind, Ryuko scoffed derisively while placing a hand on Senketsu's lapels, "If she tries to send Nui Harime I won't go easy on that blonde psycho a second time! Ragyo Kiryuin needs her to complete Shinra Koketsu, right? If that's true then I'm going to use all of Senketsu's power to put her down once and for all!"

Isshin grunted as he stood up and scratched the back of his neck, "You're certainly stronger than when you fought Junketsu but you shouldn't underestimate Nui just because you beat her once. Do you remember what Satsuki said about Nui and Ururu?"

"Yeah..." Ryuko looked away from Ichigo's dad as she remembered everything Satsuki said about the Grand Couturier. The Seki Tekko on her left hand crinkling as she clenched her fist, Senketsu's curious worry filtering through her frustration, Ryuko growled and nearly shouted, "Twin Life Fiber Entanglement, right? Are you saying we can't even hurt Nui Harime without Ururu's help?"

"I'm just saying Nui might be a little stronger now that she doesn't have to worry about Ururu but there are other ways to hurt a Life Fiber Hybrid," Isshin answered mysteriously while brushing dirt off his leather jacket and fixed his collar. It was moments like this that Isshin wished he could tell Ichigo and Ryuko everything they needed to know. Lamenting his situation once more, mentally cursing as he held the Original Life Fiber had on his mind, Isshin turned and began walking back towards his car, which was conveniently parked on the other side of the runway.

"We're leaving?" Yuzu whined as she looked back and forth between her dad and Ichigo, "But Karin hasn't even said goodbye to Ichigo yet!"

"I said goodbye on the way over," Karin rolled her eyes at her twin sister's behavior. They were both twelve, practically teenagers given everything they've gone through, yet Yuzu was still too soft-spoken to survive their father's increasingly childish antics. Pointing over her shoulder at Ryuko with a detached expression on her face Karin added, "I was kind of hoping Ryuko would change her mind about going. Since she moved in with Mako down the street the old goat hasn't been bothering us as much."

"That's not very nice, Karin!" Yuzu complained loudly.

"There's no need to worry about Karin's scathing and hurtful remarks! I'm tough enough to weather whatever she tries to throw at me!" Isshin chuckled loudly while continuing to walk away. As Yuzu hurried to catch up to her father, one hand frantically waving goodbye to Ichigo and Ryuko, with Karin slowly following at her own pace Isshin spun around and pointed a finger at Ichigo, "London is a really nice place to visit, my son. Make sure to take some time off from your mission and visit a few of the sights! I expect you to come back with a few dozen pictures!"

Ichigo frowned at his dad's final words but refrained from saying anything. After years of dealing with Isshin's childish and idiotic behavior, more than one morning completely ruined by an impromptu assault, Ichigo could sense the worry in his old man's words. Folding his hands in his pockets, the frown on his face briefly reappearing when he remembered his dad's stupid rules, Ichigo shivered as a burst of wind tore down the empty runway, "Hey Mugetsu, during the festival could you hear Junketsu's voice at all?"

" ***She wouldn't shut up,***" Mugetsu scathingly replied before closing her eyes and scoffing. One would think being the first Kamui created would grant Junketsu some measure of maturity but the Kamui acted like a child. As Ryuko slung the guitar case over her shoulder and made her way towards the private jet, faint curses muttered under her breath at Ichigo's dad, Mugetsu paused thoughtfully, "***Why do you want to know?***"



"Could you tell if she was upset with Satsuki?"

Mugetsu looked up at Ichigo, her multicolored eye closed, before answering, ***"Unlike our first encounter I didn't sense Satsuki struggling against Junketsu for control. The fact that Satsuki could use Zenkan means Junketsu was willingly working with her. An advanced configuration can only be used correctly if both Kamui and wearer have full trust in each other."***

Ichigo sighed in relief as he turned and followed Ryuko into the private jet. Walking up the bare metal steps, his single bag of luggage slung over his shoulder, Ichigo stopped as he stood inside the luxurious aircraft and looked around the spacious interior. Aside from the eight plush leather seats, each of which had a built-in massage feature and could fully recline, there was a small bar in the back stocked with at least a dozen different brands of liquor.

"Don't even think about it," Alexander Anderson's thickly accented voice warned as he appeared behind Ichigo, the large scar on his left cheek making him appear even more intimidating than normal, before walking past him. Cassock fluttering behind him as he sat down in the nearest chair, Tailor Bayonet flashing out of his right sleeve, Anderson's glasses reflected the ambient light from inside the aircraft as he began polishing the Anti-Life Fiber blade, "It's about time ye two got inside. I just spoke with the pilot. Unless ye two have any other unfinished business we're taking off immediately."

Deliberately walking as far away from Anderson as she possibly could, the silver guitar case interposed as a makeshift shield, Ryuko quirked an eyebrow and asked, "You're not going to go nuts or start ranting about us for being Life Fiber Hybrids, are you? Because if you try anything funny..."

"I have no intention of piercing my bayonets through yer bodies," Anderson growled as he flicked his wrist and drew the bayonet back into his sleeve before adjusting his gloves. Eyes glancing across the sealing matrix recently etched onto his gloves the former priest found

himself impressed with Kisuke Urahara and Tessai Tsukabishi's ability to create a pocket dimension using their so-called kido. Where he once could carry no more than thirty bayonets before the additional weight began affecting his speed Anderson now had a potentially unlimited number of blades at his disposal, "For the moment I will not move against ye. The real threat is that abomination of a monster in human flesh - Ragyo Kiryuin. Until she is buried six feet under, the ground thoroughly salted while her soul is forever tormented in the pits of hell, ye are safe from my righteous weapons."

Ryuko snorted at Anderson as she unstrapped the guitar case from her back, the silver metal slamming into the floor of the plane with a loud bang. Folding her arms as she plopped into the seat directly across from the former priest Ryuko crossed her feet over the guitar case and narrowed her blue eyes in suspicion, "Something's been bugging me since the festival. You've been acting like you know me but I sure as hell don't remember you. What's your deal?"

Anderson didn't utter a word as the plane lurched forward, the twin jet engines revving into life as the pilots finished the last preflight checks and gained clearance to leave. Leaning forward, his gloved hands folded tightly in front of his face, Anderson's mouth twisted into a grimace as he stared out the window, "For a few years yer father couldn't afford to watch over ye. It was much too dangerous with that abomination against God and nature hunting him down. That is why until ye were four ye lived at my orphanage with all the other children. It's a shame ye were dragged into this mess. Ye were always one of the best behaved children."

"I grew up in an orphanage?" Ryuko's mouth hung open in shock before she angrily gnashed her teeth, "Like hell I did! I think I would remember spending four years of my life living with the bastard who tried to kill Ichigo and me!"

"Whether ye believe me or not doesn't matter. There are more important matters to worry about at the moment," Anderson snorted as the plane shuddered when it impacted the Anti-Life Fiber shield,

the hundreds of COVERS floating just outside the barrier reacting far too slowly to notice the aircraft, and quickly ascended higher into the sky. Reaching into his cassock, his fingers tightly gripping a thick manila folder, Anderson's glasses gleamed brightly from reflected light as he turned his focus to Ichigo, "Get over here and sit down because I don't like to repeat myself. The moment we arrive in England that abomination of a woman will turn her corruptive gaze upon us with all the evil and darkness she can muster. We will need to move swiftly, our speed bolstered by the divine power of God, if we are to eradicate those that sold their souls to Life Fibers."

Ichigo grabbed the folder from Anderson and began leafing through the stapled pages, "It's going to be hard trying to find one person in London. There has to be more than three million people in the city."

Anderson leaned forward, his mouth twisting into a slightly psychotic grin, and coldly chuckled, "This is not the first Life Fiber hunt I've participated in. If ye two do not deviate from my instructions we shall not only prevent that Life Fiber monstrosity from setting foot in England but kill one of her unholy followers as well..."

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Integra Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing frowned softly as she lowered the phone away from her ear. Slowly collapsing into her plush leather chair, the moonlight streaming through the spacious windows casting a pale white light over the darkened office, she clasped her hands in front of contemplative blue eyes before turning her attention to the only other occupant in the room, "It would seem a new problem has emerged, Walter."

Leaning forward and allowing the moonlight to reflect brightly off the monocle covering his left eye Walter C. Dornez, retired vampire hunter and Hellsing butler, paused briefly before addressing his master, "I assume Ms. Armstrong finally deigned to explain her rather rough and uncouth behavior?"

The only surviving member of the Hellsing family was silent as she reached for the box of Hendri Winzerman cigars on her desk. Biting down on the cigar, the familiar taste of tobacco spreading through her mouth, Integra pulled a lighter from her coat and leaned back against the chair. Taking a long drag from the cigar, the nicotine-filled smoke permeating her lungs, Integra exhaled slowly and muttered, "In a manner of speaking although I find her claims surrounding Ragyo Kiryuin quite farfetched."

Walter's entire body momentarily tensed at the mention of the Kiryuin matriarch before turning towards the windows overlooking the London skyline. As a twinge of apprehension flooded his veins, the memory of his brief encounter with the CEO of Revocs nearly five years ago fresh in his mind, the aged butler quickly became aware that his abrupt shift in behavior had caught his master's eye, "Oh, please forgive my rudeness, Miss Integra. I was simply recalling my rather... illuminating encounter with the illustrious Ragyo Kiryuin."

The reaction from her butler puzzled Integra, "What are you not telling me Walter?"

"Let's just say I would rather not meet Ragyo Kiryuin alone at night," Walter replied curtly as he absentmindedly adjusted his gloves. Frowning thoughtfully as he regained his composure, years of servitude and loyalty to the Hellsing family helping to put a clamp on his emotions, he turned back to Integra and added, "Perhaps it would be best if I started at the beginning. As you already know five years ago the English government passed an embargo on all Revocs products... with some subtle prodding from your associates, of course."

"Sir Irons filled me in on the details," Integra commented, her fingers pulling the cigar out of her mouth, before adding, "From his report it appears the Convention of Twelve didn't need to resort to the usual tactics."

The case against Revocs had been weak even from the very start, substantiated solely by Olivier and her organization's vague

warnings about Ragyo Kiryuin, and would never have obtained the Convention of Twelve's assistance if not for the international outrage. Within hours of the first stories about a possible embargo hitting the presses dozens of countries, both friendly and antagonistic, spoke against the embargo and the unjust prosecution of Revocs. It was the sheer amount of international resentment, coupled with the reactions from Her Majesty's American allies, which caused Sir Irons to use all available assets in order to make sure the embargo passed.

"Sir Irons and myself were in attendance that day, as a sign of support from your family, when Ragyo Kiryuin strolled into the chambers of Parliament," Walter folded his hands behind his back as he fully turned towards Integra, "She was there to plead her case, as was her right, but the moment she began speaking I realized something was amiss."

Integra's eyes narrowed slightly as she placed the cigar back in her mouth, "What did you detect?"

Walter raised a hand to his mouth as he struggled to look for the proper words, "I've been fighting vampires and other supernatural creatures for more than sixty years, Miss Integra, and if I've learned anything from countless near-death encounters it is to trust my instincts. When I briefly met eye contact with Ragyo Kiryuin, and her maroon eyes somehow stared back at me despite the improbability of the situation as well as the distance separating the two of us, my instincts told me in a rather loud and crisp voice that she was not to be underestimated."

Folding her hands once more in front of her face, the cigar in her mouth crumpling as she bit down on it, Integra scowled as she compared Walter's experience with Olivier's description of the CEO of Revocs. Inhaling sharply as she stood up and walked to the row of windows behind her desk, one hand pulling the cigar from her mouth, Integra stared out over the city of London for more than a minute as her mind pieced everything together, "Walter, answer me this. If I were to describe someone with superhuman strength and

speed, nearly instantaneous regeneration and the ability to levitate who would be your first guess?"

The aged butler frowned at the question, "I would, of course, suggest Alucard but I'm quite positive you are referring to someone else."

Integra tightly clenched her fist, her teeth nearly biting the cigar in two, as she turned to Walter, "Those are the exact words Olivier used to describe Ragyo Kiryuin. If she spoke the truth we may be dealing with a vampire that not only has considerable power but has set her sights on this country... how absolutely troublesome."

"She is not just a mere vampire..."

Phasing through the walls of Integra's office, his red frock overcoat shimmering malevolently in the moonlight while his boots barely echoed against the floor, Alucard chuckled as he walked towards his master, "... within Ragyo Kiryuin's body beats a living heart but she is neither human nor vampire. She is something far more ancient than even me."

"It does not matter whether Ragyo Kiryuin is a vampire or not. She has proven herself a threat to this country and it our sacred duty to exterminate our enemies," Integra crushed the cigar between her fingers before twisting around, "If I ordered you to go to Japan and kill her could you accomplish such a task?"

"Kill her, you say... that is an interesting question," Alucard's grin widened, his sharp fangs visible in the pale light permeating the dark office, before pulling the Jackal forth from his overcoat. Staring reverently at the black weapon, created specifically to counter regenerators like that priest from Iscariot, the king of vampires smirked as he continued, "My usual weapons probably won't work on something like her. I've met quite a few supernatural creatures throughout my existence but nothing quite like Ragyo Kiryuin. Her presence five years ago filled my black soul with both anticipation and trepidation."

Integra scowled as the beginning of a plan came to mind, "Am I to assume you can sense Ragyo Kiryuin's presence?"

"But of course," Alucard's red eyes briefly shone through his orange sunglasses, "I will never forget such an ugly feeling for as long as my cold, rotten heart rests within my body."

A long silence followed the vampire's response, the shadows in the room twisting and turning around themselves, as Integra mulled over the events of the past nine days. The mercenaries she hired after the Valentine Brother's decimated Hellsing's forces weren't yet up to speed with her expectations. Anger coursing through her body when she remembered the upcoming meeting with Enrico Maxwell, the head of Iscariot, Integra hardened her expression before addressing Alucard, "Olivier Mira Armstrong believes Ragyo Kiryuin will attempt to disrupt the upcoming extension on the Revocs embargo.

Therefore your orders are as follows. Upon sensing the presence of Ragyo Kiryuin or anyone like her you are to immediately execute them with extreme prejudice. Do you understand, Alucard?"

The king of vampires grinned savagely as he removed his fedora and bowed deeply, "I shall do as you command, my master."

# The Guns of Brixton

*Chapter 42 of To My Death I Fight is rather interesting because it signifies a major departure from the Honnouji Academy Arc. One of the main premises of Kill la Kill was that nearly all of the combat and screen time took place inside and around Honnouji Academy. Even the one month time skip was treated as nothing more than a 5-10 minute scene in the anime. The Hellsing Arc is a departure from that. It takes places in a variety of locations including Great Britain, Karakura Town, Osaka and Brazil. Ragyo Kiryuin's war against humanity is in full swing and Nudist Beach, under the leadership of Olivier Mira Armstrong, is at full power to push her back.*

*Don't forget to read and review this chapter and once you've done that you should go back and reread Chapter 5. I spent a few days revised, editing and rewriting most of it in order to fix many grammatical errors, plot holes and internal inconsistencies. Even if you don't review Chapter 5 you should all at least go back and take another read through of the chapter just to see the difference in the quality of writing from nearly a year of work.*

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## Chapter 42 - The Guns of Brixton

Alexander Anderson's fingers tightened instinctively around the thick metal suitcase in his right hand as he marched past the rows of closed shops and restaurants lining either side of London Heathrow Airport. His glasses shining malevolently as an arc of blue-white lightning tore across the sky, the raging thunderstorm appearing to grow in intensity, the former priest's lips pulled upwards into a slight sneer as he gazed through the rain-soaked windows out to the city beyond. While his feelings for Protestants had decayed over the years from outright hatred to mild annoyance Anderson found the



notion of willingly walking into the heart of Protestant England to be laughable.

"It doesn't matter whether someone is Protestant or Catholic. Against abominations like Life Fibers all of humanity is a blade, sharpened and honed to absolute perfection," Anderson muttered quietly before perking up and looking over his shoulder. Watching with narrowed green eyes as Ryuko and Ichigo tried to catch up to him, their shoulders slumped in exhaustion, a growl escaped Anderson's lips as he pivoted around and continued to walk away, "Quit dragging yer feet and get a move on. This is not the time to be dawdling."

Yawning loudly as she readjusted the silver guitar case strapped against her back, her unique blue eyes drooping from exhaustion, Ryuko glared at Anderson with annoyance, "How the hell is he still awake?"

"I have no idea," Ichigo replied tiredly, one hand rubbing the back of his neck, and turned his weary eyes to the deluge of rain battering the windows. Glancing down at Mugetsu's eyes, the Kamui fast asleep, he sighed as he added, "I didn't see him sleep on the plane, that's for sure."

"He spent half the flight staring out the window and the other half glaring at us," Ryuko drawled irritably, her sneakers squeaking lightly against the polished floor. Yawning again, Senketsu having long since lost the battle against unconsciousness and fallen asleep, she tilted her head up towards the ceiling and huffed, "And like hell I believe his story about the orphanage! My dad would never have left me with an asshole like him. It just doesn't -"

"Commander Anderson!"

Marching down the terminal towards them, twin pairs of military boots echoing loudly against the ground, were two men clad in full military fatigues reminiscent of what Tsumugu wore during his first assault on Honnouji Academy. Similar in stature to the former priest, the kanji for 'naked' stitched onto the left sleeves of their jackets, the

two men stomped to a halt several feet from Anderson before snapping their arms into a salute, "The General informed us of your arrival. Echo November Two is at your command."

"This is no time for pleasantries," Anderson's voice came out as little more than a growl as he observed the two nudists standing at attention. Nearly every country in the world contained at least two, sometimes three, small groups of undercover nudists that constantly relayed information about Revocs back to Osaka headquarters. Echo November Two might be stationed in the only country nearly free of Life Fibers but they were amongst the best in Nudist Beach.

Lips pulled into a grimace as he walked between the two nudists, the men lowering their arms and falling into step on either side of him, Anderson waited several seconds before asking, "Have ye managed to pinpoint the unholy bastard's location?"

"Our Life Fiber sensors haven't been able to detect anything since his arrival," the nudist on the left answered, his eyes hidden behind black sunglasses, before continuing, "It's likely he's removed his raiment to evade our efforts to track him..."

"... which is why we've randomly shifted the sensory net over the last few hours," the second nudist finished as he reached into his military vest and pulled out a PDA. Handing it to Anderson, the screen flashing to life as it displayed a map of the city, he pointed towards one of the red dots and explained, "After Agent Kinagase informed the General about what happened in Seattle we began randomizing our sweeps. Unfortunately we haven't been able to find any sign of this man."

"Well now... it seems that abomination of a woman thinks she's quite clever," Anderson's free hand clenched tightly into a fist as a huff of air escaped his lips, "Luckily we have a few tricks of our own. Inform headquarters to spread photographs of the Xcution members who appeared at Honnouji Academy throughout the city. We'll need to move swiftly if we want to deal with this bastard before he strikes. Is there anything else I should know about?"

The first nudist's mouth pulled into a grimace as he marched alongside Anderson. Sparing a glance over his shoulder at Ryuko and Ichigo, the two Life Fiber Hybrids trying to pay attention to the conversation despite their exhaustion, he turned his attention back to the commander, "As the General suspected our covert movements and operations throughout London have been compromised for the immediate future. Seven days ago a group of terrorists unaffiliated with any known organization stormed the Hellsing Manor."

Anderson's gait momentarily staggered as distant memories came to the forefront of his mind, "... their purpose?"

"From the military chatter we've been able to intercept their goal was the military and political figures convening somewhere within Hellsing Manor," the first nudist explained, his face briefly illuminated by a crackle of lightning, before adding, "From what we could gather none of these people were killed or even injured by the terrorists. Both Interpol and Scotland Yard have yet to ascertain possible motivation."

"Their goal was the Convention of Twelve," Anderson answered without hesitation. As a commander of Nudist Beach he was well acquainted with all of their allies, both domestic and foreign. The moment the nudist mentioned Hellsing Manor Anderson had already begun piecing things together, "It appears Ragyo Kiryuin will not stop until all of humanity is devoured by Life Fibers. Did you search the scene for trace Life Fibers similar to the Marionette Threads that abomination of a woman uses for her Mental Refitting?"

The group of five passed through a set of automatic doors leading towards the exit of London Heathrow Airport before the second nudist answered, "Our contacts in Scotland Yard forward their report three days ago. The Hellsing Organization listed eighty-eight casualties, not counting the terrorists. The patterns of the wounds and injuries match the Grand Couturier's modus operandi yet none of the remains contained even a trace of Life Fibers."

Anderson didn't care what the forensics report said. Only a monster like Ragyo Kiryuin could have profited from the slaughter of so many innocent men and women, Protestants or not. Folding his free hand into the pocket of his cassock, his fingers twitching angrily at the senseless loss of life, Anderson cursed as his glasses shone menacingly, "It may seem cruel and crass but it is fortunate the Convention of Twelve survived. If they had perished there would be nothing standing in Ragyo Kiryuin's path of death and destruction."

"Wait just a damn second!"

Ryuko found the exhaustion plaguing her body momentarily forgotten as she angrily raised her voice. Folding her arms across her chest, an annoyed expression visible in her blue eyes, her glare intensified when the two men flanking Anderson turned around to face her. Ignoring the two nudists, her attention focused exclusively on Anderson's back, Ryuko sneered irritably and spat, "Like hell I'm going to be kept out of the loop again! What the hell is the Convention of Twelve?"

"They are a group of Protestants that controls Great Britain from the shadows," Anderson answered as he stepped out into the raging storm. Flinching as a cold wind assaulted her face, Senketsu briefly shivering around her body, Ryuko continued to stare at the former priest when he continued, "... politics, the economy, military actions and even the press. Everything England does is controlled by the whims of those twelve people."

A scoff escaped Ryuko's lips as she folded her hands into the pockets of her jacket, "They sound shady as hell."

"Do not concern yerself with those Protestants." Rivers of water ran down Anderson's cassock as he walked through the rain. Shoulders slumped forward as his glasses briefly fogged up from the change in humidity, the two nudists running towards the truck parked in the distance, Anderson's face lit up as lightning flashed across the sky, "They have done their part to keep Ragyo Kiryuin out of the country."

Our purpose is to make sure that monster of a woman never comes back no matter the cost."

"No matter the cost?" Ichigo's eyes narrowed at Anderson. As he stood in the rain, his orange hair matted against his head while Mugetsu's Life Fibers easily repelled the droplets of water, the former substitute shinigami's lips pulled into a grimace as he scowled, "I'm not going to kill people just because this is a war. The only ones that need to be stopped are Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime."

"This is not Honnouji Academy!"

Anderson pivoted around, his boots kicked up streams of water, as his lips pulled back into a sneer. Rivers of rain streaming down his face, green eyes narrowed dangerously, the former priest scoffed loudly before cocking his head to the side and growling, "There are no regalia or raiment to fight. Our adversaries are humans, people Ragyo Kiryuin enthralled to throw away their humanity for power. They will attack us with bullets and blades, weapons that won't even leave a scratch against creatures like yer Kamui. Do not show pity or remorse for them for they will not hesitate to throw themselves in our path even while yer blades cleave through their flesh and armor."

"I kicked a lot of ass at Honnouji Academy without killing anyone!" Ryuko spat angrily, her entire body shaking in frustration. Pulling the Scissor Blade out of her pocket, the hardened Life Fiber blade quickly expanding into its full glory, she pointed it at Anderson and snapped, "Even before Senketsu and I fully synchronized I never killed anyone with this Scissor Blade! I'm not a murderer! I've never killed anyone! Not even... Nui Harime..."

The former priest's expression softened momentarily at Ryuko's outburst before he scoffed once more and turned around. As the sound of engines flared into life, the headlights of the truck piercing through the pouring rain, Anderson took several steps away before speaking, "I've slaughtered dozens of people, men and women who sold their souls to Life Fibers for the barest taste of power. No matter

how righteous the cause or mission the sin of murder is something that never fully washes off the soul. Seireitei or not, we must all answer for our crimes in the afterlife. It is not a burden I wish for ye to bear."

A pensive look appeared in Ichigo's eyes as he contemplated Anderson's words, "I get what you're saying but I've fought a lot of people. I'm not going to start killing people."

"Do ye know how sharp yer blades truly are?"

Anderson's question caused Ryuko's eyes to widen and stare at the rain-soaked blade held tightly in her grip. Flipping the red Scissor Blade over in her hand, blue eyes scanning over every inch of the specialized weapon, she opened her mouth to answer but was forced to stop when she found Anderson standing in front of her. Tearing the Scissor Blade out of her grasp, his strength more than enough to wield the normally heavy weapon, the former priest's mouth twisted into a sneer as he held Ryuko's blade over her heart, "One lapse in judgment or errant swing is all that's need for ye to take a life. Compared to creatures like ye, who can regenerate from nearly everything, a human being is but dust in the wind. When that time comes, when ye find yerself standing over the bloody corpse of a human being with blood dripping down yer blade, will ye let the guilt transform ye into a monster that will need to be put down once and for all?

"Like hell that's going to happen!" Ryuko, starting to get pissed off by Anderson, reached out and tore the Scissor Blade out of his hand. Dexterously flipping the red blade around her wrist, a slight whistling noise accompanying the motion, she slid her foot back and held the tip of the Scissor Blade under Anderson's chin, "I'm never going to hurt Senketsu like that ever again!"

Heedless of the weapon in Ryuko's hands, his lips pulled back into a derisively grimace, Anderson scoffed as his eyes narrowed into a glare, "Believe whatever ye wish but ask yerself how many innocent men, women and children will perish if ye go berserk again. If ye lose

control a second time there is no telling what may happen before Ichigo can bring ye back to your senses."

Ryuko's eyes widened as memories of Mako lying dead with Nui Harime laughing in her face assaulted her mind. Fingers clenching around the red Scissor Blade's handle, her knuckles bleeding white, Ryuko's gaze shifted to the ground as her throat suddenly dried up, "I..."

Stepping in front of Ryuko, his hand tightly clenching the front of Anderson's cassock, Ichigo scowled as he stared directly into the former priest's eyes, "She only lost control because Nui Harime tried to kill Mako! It would have been wrong if Ryuko didn't get pissed off at her!"

"It won't take much to set her off a second time," Anderson's face was emotionless as he reached up and pulled Ichigo's hand off his cassock. Turning around as the trucks came to a stop behind him, the sprays of water kicked up miraculously managing to miss him, Anderson placed one hand on the door before looking over his shoulder at Ichigo, "What's to stop Ragyo Kiryuin from trying the same thing again? It's already worked once, hasn't it? The less time ye spend in yer Kamui the better. So unless that witch's unholy follower deigns to knock on our front door ye two are forbidden from activating yer Kamui."

Standing silent as Anderson opened the car door, the resulting blast of warm air causing the windows to quickly fog up, Ichigo frowned and turned to Ryuko, "Don't listen to him. He's just being an ass."

"Yeah. I know," Ryuko answered with a small sigh. Placing a hand over Senketsu's lapel, the slumbering Kamui oblivious to the conversation that just transpired, she propped the Scissor Blade against her shoulder and looked at Ichigo, "But he's right. The only reason Senketsu got hurt was because I couldn't control my anger when Nui Harime killed Mako. What's to stop her from trying to pull the same crap a second time?"

Ichigo shrugged his shoulders before an odd feeling suddenly appeared on the peripheral of his senses. Looking off into the distance, his sight hampered by the downpour from the storm, he gave up when the feeling abruptly vanished, "You already kicked her ass once, right? Nui Harime probably won't want to fight you again, especially if I'm around to back you up. And if she tries to get Mako she'll have to go through my dad. He may be a complete idiot but there's no way she could win against him."

"I suppose you got a point," Ryuko mumbled before her mouth suddenly opened into a yawn. Stretching her arms outwards, the red Scissor Blade collapsing down into its miniature form with but a thought, Ryuko sighed as she picked up her silver guitar case. Strapping it around her back, one hand running through her black hair, she rolled her eyes upon noticing Anderson staring at them, "We should probably get moving before he tries to slay us or something. Huh, what's wrong Ichigo?"

"Nothing," Ichigo muttered as the feeling came back a second time, weaker than the first, but still out there, "Damn it, I hate the rain."

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"One of them managed to sense my presence..."

Standing on the edge of the roof, his red overcoat billowing outwards as the raging storm momentarily intensified, Alucard chuckled in amusement. Hands folded neatly in his pockets, the brim of his fedora pulled over his hidden eyes, the vampire king felt anticipation course through his body. It had been so long since he found someone that could potentially put up more than the barest traces of a fight. Euphoric at finding someone worthy to fight, lips curling upwards and exposing sharpened white fangs glistening in the ambient light, Alucard's blood red eyes widened as he focused upon the two beings in the distance. As his senses wrapped around the



airport, the shadows themselves bending to his unholy power, Alucard's smile slowly fell off his face.

They were too weak.

Although the two creatures were certainly quite powerful, stronger at least than the pitiful and worthless vampires he'd been killing lately, they *paled* in comparison to Ragyo Kiryuin's power. That brief glimpse of eldritch power five years ago, that incomprehensible void of alien and aberrant energy dwelling just beneath Ragyo's skin, had been unlike anything Alucard felt in his more than five hundred years of undeath. She was a woman who willingly threw away her humanity for power, making her a true monster in every sense of the word. The two beings below might possess that same aura of eldritch power and energy but Alucard could not sense the overwhelming malice towards humanity that had permeated every fiber of Ragyo Kiryuin's being.

"Police Girl!"

Seras Victoria had been standing behind her master, the yellow raincoat pulled tightly over her body despite being unable to feel the cold, when Alucard's annoyed voice cut like a blade through the raging wind. Immediately straightening her back, one hand patting the raincoat flat over her chest, Seras turned towards her master, "Yes, Master?"

"Tell me, Police Girl," Alucard growled as he asked, "Can you sense anything in this storm?"

Seras blinked in mild confusion before she understood what her master was asking of her. Turning her attention towards London Heathrow Airport, the rain coloring the landscape in various shades of dark blue and black, the recently turned vampire's eyes bled red as she focused her gaze upon the two teenagers in the distance. As her vampiric senses pierced the stormy veil Seras couldn't figure out what she was supposed to be looking for. Aside from the unique orange colored hair of one of the teenagers as far as she could tell

they were three normal people standing in the rain. Eyes narrowing as she quickly squashed that train of thought, the knowledge that her master would never have her do something pointless, Seras pushed her senses just a little bit more and immediately felt it.

"They feel... different," Seras muttered as she shifted her attention from Ichigo to Ryuko. Slightly bewildered by the single lock of blood red hair hanging limply over Ryuko's rain-soaked face, her eyes momentarily focusing on the uniform she was wearing, Seras blinked before turning to her master, "... like there's something inhuman about them."

Alucard's lips pulled into a grin at his fledgling's astute observations, "Well done. These creatures are rather unique, aren't they? Even those shinigami four hundred years ago didn't possess such strange and exhilarating power."

"Uh... shinigami?" Seras asked while wracking her brain for the meaning of the obviously foreign term.

"A group of supernatural creatures that thought they had the power to kill me," Alucard replied in amusement while turning away from the edge of the building, the surprised expression on the Police Girl's face all too apparent. Boots stomping through the puddles of water collecting on the roof, streams of water falling off the brim of his fedora, Alucard's lips curled into a smile as he reminisced on that battle four centuries ago. Three shinigami, captains they had called themselves, had appeared from the ether outside the gates of his castle in Wallachia. Upon greeting them, their power at the time comparable to his own, the shinigami did not hesitate to draw their blades while professing that their mission was to slay him.

The battle that followed, which lasted for more than fifteen hours and left much of his once pristine domain in ruin, still brought a manic grin to Alucard's face.

For hours he clashed blades with the three captains, their so-called zanpakuto equal in strength and durability to his own sword. As the

battle dragged out of the early dawn into midday, the landscape scoured by the many spells the captains had used against him, Alucard felt a rush of adrenaline in his undead body. The feeling of battle, fighting against beings that could actually kill him, was something he hadn't experienced again until that fateful battle more than one hundred years ago. Grunting as one of the captain's magical spells tore into his chest, destroying several of his organs in a burst of blood, Alucard retaliated before his wounds even began healing by stabbing his hand through the chest of the shinigami calling himself Kenpachi.

"It was quite the... exhilarating battle," Alucard chuckled coldly as he remembered the towering monstrosity the last remaining captain had summoned from her sword, a being composed of fire and shadow woven with a construct of bone. He had been greatly exhausted by that point, the majority of the forty thousand souls resting inside his body already consumed to regenerate his injuries, but it was still enough to deal with the gravely injured captain and what she referred to as her bankai.

"Come, Police Girl!"

Seras perked up at her master's voice as she snapped to attention. Reaching down and wrapping her fingers around the grip of the Harkonnen, her vampiric strength easily lifting the massive Anti-Tank rifle, Seras quickly fell into line behind Alucard. Using her free hand to pull the raincoat further over her head, an arc of lightning briefly illuminating the darkened skies, Seras glanced back at the airport before asking, "Where are we going, master?"

"Do you really need to ask such a ridiculous question?" Alucard derisively asked. Reaching inside his overcoat and drawing the Jackal, black gunmetal glistening in the rain, the vampire king's annoyed expression twisted into a predatory smirk, "We are going to kill them, of course. You've already sensed it. Underneath their skin lies something that has never been human. I am going to enjoy finding out how powerful these creatures truly are."

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When Olivier Armstrong ordered her to go to London, whether she wanted to or not, Ryuko assumed she would be staying in a Nudist Beach safe house or even a secret underground base like the one underneath Osaka. Since Ragyo Kiryuin's plans involved taking over England it made logical sense to stick below the radar and not draw too much attention. So as she stood in the entrance of the extravagantly opulent hotel suite, the far wall covered in windows overlooking the city, Ryuko spun around on one foot and scoffed, "*This is where we're staying? It looks like Satsuki's room!*"

"Not really. Satsuki's room wasn't this gaudy," Ichigo answered as he stumbled past Ryuko, a yawn escaping his mouth, and dropped his bags on the floor.

Glancing around the expensive suite, his eyes noticing the wine cabinet full of century old brands near the kitchen, the orange haired teenager found it hard to imagine Nudist Beach would spring for a place like this. Olivier Armstrong didn't come across as the type of woman who would spend money on something as frivolous as a hotel room. Rubbing the back of his neck Ichigo shook his head, "Damn, I feel like I'm wasting money just standing here. How the hell could Nudist Beach afford a place like this?"

"As if I know," Ryuko's voice softened slightly as everything in the suite, from the crystalline chandelier in the middle of the room to the marble floor, reminded her of her old home. Although she lived year-round at Ox Elementary School, her dad paying the school to keep her over the summer, Ryuko looked back on the time she spent with her dad with nothing by fondness. When he wasn't busy with his work or speaking to strangers in his office he was dotting on her, showering her with presents or toys, and spending as much time as possible with her.

Calming down when she felt Senketsu twitching around her body, the bright lights of the suite beginning to disturb his slumber, Ryuko

crossed her arms and took a deep breath. Sighing loudly as she walked further into the suite, her sneakers squeaking against the marble tiles, Ryuko clicked the latch on her guitar case and allowed it to smash into the ground with a loud and reverberating crash. Rubbing the nape of her neck, the muscles sore from carrying the case for so long, Ryuko folded her hands inside the pockets of her jacket as her lips curled into a mischievous grin. Looking over her shoulder at Ichigo she asked, "So how much of Satsuki's room did you see?"

"Don't you start that again," Ichigo grumbled frustratingly, the slight hint of embarrassment on his face expertly hidden as he collapsed onto the couch. The two weeks he spent living with Satsuki as the newly inducted Vice President of the Student Council ranked amongst the most awkward periods of his life. Every single day involved another attempt by Satsuki to sway him to her cause. Ichigo would rather spend a month locked in a room with his dad, embarrassing and childish behavior included, than repeat those fourteen days.

"I don't see what the big deal is. It's not like something really embarrassing happened in Satsuki's room..." Ryuko trailed off with a nonchalant shrug.

Ichigo sighed exasperatedly as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. This was at least the tenth time Ryuko asked about what happened in Satsuki's quarters and Ichigo was beginning to get annoyed. Sitting up on the couch, the smile on Ryuko's face growing larger, he turned around and scoffed, "I'll tell you all about my time living with Satsuki if you explain why you were so angry when you couldn't move into my house."

Ryuko sputtered indignantly at Ichigo's comment, her cheeks flushing to a faint shade of pink, before she stomped her foot against the ground and turned away. Glowering as she looked out the windows, London vibrantly lit despite the early hour, Ryuko huffed loudly and glowered, "I-I'll just ask Satsuki when we get back to

Karakura Town. I'm sure she'll be more than happy to tell me everything that went on."

"You do that," Ichigo replied sarcastically, too tired to notice the expression on Ryuko's face. Grunting as he pushed himself off the couch, his muscles protesting the motion, Ichigo yawned as gave Ryuko a curt wave before heading to what he hoped was his bedroom, "In the meantime I'm going to get some sleep. I feel like I'm going to pass out any second."

"Do not leave just yet."

Anderson's voice was little more than a deep growl as he marched into the suite, his boots echoing softly against the marble floor with every step. Tightening his fingers around the handle of the silver suitcase, his glove crinkling from the grip, the former priest knew it was only a matter of time before Ragyo Kiryuin realized they were in London. Taking a private jet, one belonging to the only man richer than the CEO of Revocs, was inherently risky. If the Xcution member hiding like a coward somewhere in the city was even half as intelligent as his abomination of a boss they might already be aware of their arrival. While the changes Echo November Two made to the Life Fiber sensor network might flush him out Anderson knew that would not be enough to actually put them down.

Dropping the suitcase on the nearest table, a small cloud of dust rippling outwards upon contact, Anderson's glasses shone with a reflective shimmer as he inputted the correct thirteen-digit code and the two latches unlocked with an audible snap. As he opened the suitcase, the starch plastic explosives and spool grenades causing Ryuko's eyes to narrow as she remembered Tsumugu's visit to Honnouji Academy, Anderson pulled out several photographs and turned to Ichigo, "Sleep can wait. We have two, perhaps three, days before that monster of a woman realizes ye two aren't in Karakura Town. When she finds out ye can be certain all hell will break loose."

"You think Ragyo Kiryuin will send Nui Harime?" Ichigo didn't miss the Ryuko's shoulders stiffening at the mention of the Grand

Couturier. Fishing around in his pocket for the watch-like device Iori Shiro gave him just before they left Karakura Town, the invention silent and dead in his hand, Ichigo was silent for a few more seconds before adding, "Even if she does come Iori's invention should buy us enough time to come up with a plan to stop her."

"If the Grand Couturier does deign to show herself yer orders are to kill her," Anderson growled as he thought of all the innocent men and women Nui Harime murdered over the last five years. A creature like the Grand Couturier, a monster that thrived on misery and death, did not deserve mercy or life. Examining one of the Anti-Life Fiber weapons inside the suitcase, the power and potency enough to seriously damage a Three-Star Goku Uniform if hit point blank, Anderson continued, "The moment either of ye see that demon ye are to activation yer Kamui and wipe her existence from the face of the earth."

"That shouldn't be too hard," Ryuko irritably commented while slamming a fist into her open palm, "I already kicked Nui Harime's ass once."

Anderson decided to ignore Ryuko's exact choice of words for the moment. Giving the photographs in his hand one final look before tossing them back into the suitcase the former priest leaned over the table as his face pulled into a grimace, "Tomorrow afternoon I will be rendezvousing with our liaison from the Convention of Twelve. Before we arrived she graciously decided to allow one of her men, one Walter C. Dornez, to hand over files on which members of Parliament are most likely being bribed or blackmailed by Revocs, which leads to yer -"

*"... me? I repeat, do you read me, Commander Anderson?"*

The cut-off voice of the nudist coming across the connection quickly drew Anderson's full attention. Turning around, Ichigo and Ryuko curious about the former priest's sudden shift in behavior, Anderson pressed a finger against the receiver in his ear and growled, "What's going on down there?"

For nearly ten seconds nothing could be heard through the receiver apart from the sound of sporadic gunfire. As the Nudist Beach commander's attitude grew darker, lips pulled back exposing white teeth while his glasses gleamed malevolently, the connection blared back to life in a burst of static, *"... the grenade on my mark! Don't let him get too close! Commander, something's coming up to you!"*

Anderson's green eyes widened as his mind quickly pieced together what Echo November Two was telling him. Storming towards the suite's exit, his left wrist flexing outwards as a tailor bayonet slid out of his sleeve, the former priest's shoulders hunched forward as he assessed the situation, "The Grand Couturier's here? Why haven't we heard from Olivier?"

*" This man isn't the Grand Couturier,"* The nudist replied, his heavily breathing audible, before his voice was temporarily drowned in a sea of static when an explosion detonated in the background. A dull drone reverberated through the walls of the hotel, the chandelier above them swinging slightly, before the nudist continued, *"All of our Anti-Life Fiber rounds are completely ineffective against him! He just regenerates from the damage after a few seconds! We were forced to fall back and regroup."*

"By the grace of God," Anderson gnashed his teeth as he tried to understand what sort of monster was making its way towards them. The only abominations that could regenerate from Anti-Life Fiber rounds were creatures like Nui Harime. If Kisuke Urahara's words were to be taken at face value shinigami and Quincy possessed no enhanced regenerative abilities. Even the demonic hollows only had enhanced healing or mild regeneration. Nothing like what the monster down in the lobby possessed. Sparing a quick glance at Ichigo and Ryuko, the look in his green eyes telling the two Life Fiber Hybrids all that they needed to know about the situation, the former priest kicked open the door to the suite and glanced into the hallway, "Richards, what does this monster look like?"

*" He's at least six and half feet tall wearing a full red overcoat and fedora,"* Richards replied before his voice was cut off by a loud



thump. As static blared through the receiver in Anderson's ear, the commander's lips pulling upwards into a snarl at the most likely scenario, the connection to the nudist was quickly reestablished in a burst of noise, *"... to the lobby! Don't let him reach the elevators! Commander, his regeneration's a nightmare but his pistols pack enough of a punch to destroy solid concrete! He almost... fuck! He just vanished into the stairwell! We're going to try and cut him off!"*

Anderson stood silently in the door of the suite for barely a second before pivoting around towards Ichigo and Ryuko. Flicking his other wrist, a second bayonet sliding into reality, the former priest's glasses reflected the intense light of the suite as the emotion bled from his voice, "It seems Ragyo Kiryuin has decided to send us a welcoming present. Activate yer Kamui and - "

Years of fighting against Life Fibers afforded Anderson the awareness to notice the brief flash of light in the distance the moment it burst into existence. As his mind rapidly calculated the height of the light source, green eyes widening in astonishment, the nudist commander burst into motion. Pushing off the ground as a barely visible cloud of smoke drifted upwards into the night sky Anderson sprinted towards Ichigo and Ryuko, who still had their backs to the windows, while reaching for their Kamui. Entwining his fingers within the two Life Fiber uniforms, Ryuko's face rapidly blushing from the contact, Anderson dove towards the ground as the suite erupted in fire and acrid smoke.

The Harkonnen Arms Anti-Tank Rifle, designed and built by Walter C. Dornez, had one singular purpose - the complete eradication of heavily armored supernatural targets. Each of the Harkonnen's 33 mm depleted uranium shells, coated in blessed Macedonian silver, contained enough penetrative power to easily pierce half a foot of solid military-grade armor. The round fired by Seras Victoria from a rooftop more than a kilometer away, the thunderstorm helping to conceal her position, rocketed above the London cityscape and slammed into the suite occupied by Nudist Beach with enough force to shatter every window for several floors.

"God... damn it!"

Ignoring the persistent ringing in his ears, the minuscule cuts and abrasions covering both his body and Mugetsu quickly regenerating. Ichigo groaned softly as he pushed himself back to his feet. For once he was actually thankful for the Life Fibers woven within his body. If they hadn't regenerated the internal damage from being so close to the explosion's epicenter he would probably still be unconscious. Shaking his head to dislodge a piece of stubborn rubble, the acrid smoke permeating the formerly extravagant suite stinging his eyes, Ichigo coughed and raised a hand to his mouth, "Ryuko! Anderson!"

**" *What's going on?* "**

The drowsiness in Mugetsu's multicolored eyes vanished the moment she noticed the roaring flames surrounding them. While she wasn't worried about her uniform being burnt by the flames, both her and Ichigo's composing Life Fibers more than able to survive heat several orders of magnitude greater, the Kamui was still very much concerned about what was happening. Shifting her gaze upwards towards Ichigo, the trepidation pumping through his veins easily coming across their mental connection, Mugetsu's voice was tinged with worried as she asked, **"*What happened? Where are Ryuko and Senketsu?* "**

"Somebody just tried to kill us," Ichigo's lips tight into a grim expression before he pivoted around when an outpouring of crimson energy and stars repulsed the smoke filling the suite. Orange hair whipping backwards as Ryuko emerged fully clad in Senketsu, her uniquely shaped blue eyes promising pain to whoever attempted to kill her, Ichigo mentally sighed in relief, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Ryuko growled as she stomped over to the newly formed hole in the wall. Leaning out the shattered windows, Senketsu's armor easily protecting her from the jagged shards of glass, Ryuko stabbed the red Scissor Blade into the floor and spat, "But when I find the bastard that did this I'm going to introduce him to a world of pain! How the hell did Ragyo Kiryuin find us so damn fast?"

**" Ryuko... my stitching is quivering,"** Senketsu's eye narrowed as the first droplets of rain impacted his activated form. The Kamui couldn't explain the bad feeling permeating his Life Fibers and involuntarily shivered around Ryuko's body, **"Whatever hit us didn't have any Life Fibers but it still packed enough of a punch to damage a Three-Star Goku Uniform. I have a bad feeling about this."**

Ryuko blew a strand of rain-soaked hair off her face before she reached over and yanked the Scissor Blade free from the floor. Resting the hardened Life Fiber weapon against her shoulder, droplets of water cascading down the surface of the red blade, Ryuko narrowed her eyes as she looked for the bastard that tried to kill them. Aware of the police sirens growing louder by the second, her eyes catching shades of red and blue lights in the distance, Ryuko scoffed and turned to Senketsu, "Damn, I can't see anything in all this rain. Can you sense anything, Senketsu?"

The Kamui hummed for a moment, his eye closing deep in thought, before answering, **"I'm sorry Ryuko but I cannot sense anything out there. As far as I can tell we -"**

"I'm glad to see ye two are perfectly fine."

Stepping forth from the smoldering remains of the once blazing inferno, his gray cassock singed and burnt, Anderson looked barely worse for wear as he stalked towards the two Life Fiber Hybrids. Hands clenched into shaking fists as he took in the destruction and devastation surrounding them, a thick trail of blood oozing down from his blonde hair and over his left eye, the former priest snarled when he saw Ryuko's current state of attire. Wiping the blood leaking out of the corner of his mouth out the back of his sleeve Anderson stomped to a halt in front of Ryuko and sneered, "Why have ye activated yer blasted Kamui?"

"Are you kidding me?"

Ryuko nearly dropped the Scissor Blade out of sheer shock at the ridiculousness of Anderson's question. Pointing towards the gaping hole in the suite, the rain beginning to form puddles on the once immaculate marble tiles, she shouted, "You can't be that blind! Some asshole took a potshot at us and you're asking me why I'm wearing Senketsu? We were lucky not to be killed!"

"It will take more than a simple explosion to kill the likes of ye," Anderson responded, his glasses gleaming with a malevolent shimmer, before turning his attention to the storm raging outside. Despite the pouring rain hampering visibly to nearly zero he managed to ascertain the probable origin of their assailant in the brief instant before the missile slammed into the room. Rubbing his left shoulder, the joint flaring in pain from the contact, Anderson grunted before flicking his wrists and summoning a new pair of bayonets. Gripping the blades tightly the nudist commander looked over his shoulder at Ichigo, "Activate yer Kamui and hunt down the bloody bastard that did this to us. Ryuko and myself will stay here and... greet the monster coming for us."

"Come on!" Ryuko growled irritably at Anderson as she tightened her grip around the Scissor Blade, "Why can't I -"

"He actually has a point," Ichigo rubbed his temple, a slight headache beginning to form, and stared out into the stormy night. As much as he hated agreeing with the former priest Ichigo could see the logic in Anderson's argument. Reaching towards the spaulder on his left shoulder and pressing down on it, the two needles within instantly puncturing his skin, Ichigo's body was enveloped in sapphire light as Mugetsu transformed into her active configuration. Stepping out of the light, one hand pulled Tournesol from its scabbard, Ichigo grimaced before scoffing, "One of us has to stop whoever's out there before they fire another missile at us. I'll try to come back as soon as possible but be careful, Ryuko."

"Don't worry about me." A smug smirk broke out across Ryuko's face as her anger devolved into mild irritation. Tapping a hand against Senketsu's eye, the Kamui beaming under the attention, Ryuko

chuckled and raised her Scissor Blade, "We both know Senketsu's strength is greater than Mugetsu's. I'll have this bastard knocked out cold in under five minutes."

Mugetsu bristled around Ichigo's body at the unintentional slight from Ryuko, **"Who are you calling weak?"**

**" I'll admit you are faster but when Ryuko wears me she's stronger than Ichigo,"** Senketsu gloated proudly while purposely ignoring the growl emanating from his fellow Kamui, **"That makes me the better Kamui."**

**" Say that again and I'll pull your threads out one by one,"** Mugetsu was not about to let Senketsu get away with such slander. While his strength was certainly greater than hers, not that she would ever admit such a thing, it meant nothing if Ryuko couldn't hit her opponent. Speed was much more important than raw strength when fighting people like Nui Harime and Ragyo Kiryuin.

"Don't encourage him, Mugetsu," Ichigo lightly chided, causing his Kamui to look at him in betrayal, before focusing his attention back on Anderson. Gripping Tournesol tightly when he saw the stern expression on the former priest's face, the wailing sound of the police sirens in the background continuously growing louder, Ichigo turned to the shattered windows with his objective clear in mind. As he felt Mugetsu's power coursing through his body, his feet crunching upon the broken glass littering the floor, Ichigo looked at Ryuko and gave her a confident grin, "Don't worry about me. I'll be back before you know it."

Ryuko's lips curled upwards into a smirk before she playfully scoffed and motioned at Anderson. Propping the Scissor Blade behind her neck, her left hand carefully holding onto the sharpened blade, she took a few steps away from Ichigo before answering, "Like I'm actually worried about you. You're not the one that's going to fight an 'unholy monster' or something equally stupid -"

The thunderous echo of gunshots piercing through and shattering the mahogany door of the suite, the blasts punctuated by a reverberating clap of thunder from the storm raging outside, harshly cut off Ryuko before she could finish her snide comment. Pirouetting on her left heel when she noticed four bullets spiraling through the air directly to her left, blue eyes barely catching sight of the 13 mm rounds, Ryuko spun the Scissor Blade around her wrist as she prepared to engage the shooter but before she could so much as take a single step towards the door she froze when her ears picked up a strangled gasp from Ichigo.

"ICHIGO!"

Stumbling backwards, his hand covering one of the gaping wounds in his body, Ichigo's face was pulled into a grimace as he stared at the holes in his body with disbelieving eyes. As crimson blood pooled on the ground around his feet, his left arm hanging up by a few pieces of glowing flesh, the orange haired teenager couldn't figure out what the hell actually hit him. Even with Mugetsu screaming in his ear, the Kamui perturbed that a weapon not containing Life Fibers was able to penetrate her armor, Ichigo was still fully conscious of his surroundings. Brown eyes widening when he noticed a glint of metal in the shadows Ichigo ignored the normally lethal wounds covering his body and pushed Ryuko out of the way as a fifth round screamed through the air and carved a hole through his right lung, sending him stumbling out of the hotel and into the dark storm raging outside.

"Damn it!"

Ryuko rushed forward as she watched Ichigo fall into the darkness outside, her fingers barely missing his wrist. Hyperventilating as she lost track of Ichigo, the anger and fury coursing through her body tempered by both Senketsu's comforting words and the knowledge that Ichigo couldn't have been killed so easily, Ryuko gnashed her teeth and spun around towards the door. As her body glowed with a faint red aura, Anderson at her side with his bayonets raised in front

of his face, Ryuko took a ragged breath and shouted, "Get out here you stupid fucker so I can kill you!"

"If you insist..."

His footsteps slow and methodical as he walked out of the shadows, wisps of blackness holding tightly onto his form as smoke lightly wafted up from the muzzles of the Jackal and Casull, Alucard's lips were pulled upwards into a psychotic grin as he felt the power rolling off the creature standing before him. It was much greater than what he felt at the airport, perhaps even enough to entertain him.

Chuckling as he noticed Anderson's exposed teeth, the human's eyes betraying the desire to kill him, Alucard held his arms out to the side and grinned, "You are an interesting creature. I've been around for a very long time and I've never met anything quite like you."

Opening her mouth to retort to the vampire, fingers clenching the Scissor Blade tightly, Ryuko was interrupted when Anderson spat, "Do not waste yer breath on this creature. He is an abomination. It is our sacred duty to send him to the pits of hell!"

Alucard's red eyes widened momentarily at the sudden influx of power wafting off Anderson, his thoughts drifting back to the Judas Priest he encountered in Ireland, before another chuckle escaped his lips. Grinning maliciously, his sharpened teeth gleaming in the ambient light, Alucard raised his pistols at Ryuko and laughed, "Very well then! Let us see what you can do, you pathetic excuse for a monster."

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A saccharine smile graced Nui Harime's face as she yanked the purple Needle Blade out of the unfortunate member of the Sewing Club.

As blood sprayed from the dying teenager's back, the crimson liquid falling like rain on the ground, the Grand Couturier's mind had already moved onto new and better things. Pirouetting around and strolling past rows of mentally refitted members of the Sewing Club, the Marionette Threads visibly glowing within their brains, Nui tucked the blood-soaked Needle Blade back inside her dress before raising her arm and snapping her fingers. As a large COVERS descended from the shadows, its white body illuminated by a faint red light, Nui's sapphire eyes widened with mirth before pointing to the cooling corpse, "I'm really busy so please take out the trash."

Pink boots tapping lightly against the metal floor as she turned away from the COVERS, sickening squelches betraying what the Life Fiber being was doing, Nui hummed while reaching inside her dress for a pair of normal-sized pink scissors. Reprimanding that idiotic naked pig for his atrocious work had taken too much of her valuable time. Any more delays and she would get behind schedule, which would be really bad. Sitting back down at her station, a cute huff escaping her lips, Nui's legs playfully kicked through the air as she leaned over the massive sheet of pure Life Fiber fabric stretching before her and began cutting.

"Killing the help again, are we?"

Ragyo Kiryuin stepped carefully around the pool of blood on the floor, a COVERS instantly obeying her mental command to clean it up, as she slowly strutted towards the Grand Couturier. Maroon eyes glancing over at the bare outline of Shinra Koketsu, the glowing red fabric the precursor to the end of humanity, the Kiryuin matriarch found herself surprised when Nui didn't answer. A silver eyebrow arching as she walked closer to the Grand Couturier, Nui's fingers deftly weaving and cutting the Life Fiber fabric with masterful grace, Ragyo grinned as she saw the glazed look in Nui's sapphire eyes.

"Oh, how I wish I could see what's going on through your mind," Ragyo sighed wistfully, jealous of the knowledge coursing through Nui's mind.



For reasons she did not question the Original Life Fiber hadn't implanted the knowledge of weaving Shinra Koketsu into her mind that fateful night twenty years ago. Something that precious, which would lead humanity to its destiny, was reserved for the true Daughters of the Original Life Fiber. Stroking her fingers across Nui's shoulders, the Grand Couturier not flinching as she continued to work, Ragyo leaned downwards until her mouth was against her daughter's ear, "Your work is as magnifique as always... my precious Nui."

Nearly two minutes passed before Nui's body stiffened as she came out of her trance and looked around. Sapphire eyes regaining a hint of life when she noticed Ragyo hovering over her, the Kiryuin matriarch's delicate fingers pressing against her shoulders as she stared at her work, the Grand Couturier's lips curled upwards into a wide smile, "Thanks a bunch, Lady Ragyo, but these stupid humans are really dragging me down. Gosh, I thought Satsuki knew how to pick out talent but I suppose I was wrong."

"No human could ever equal your prodigious skill," Ragyo replied with a light smirk before standing up and turning away from Nui. Running a single finger against the massive sheet of Life Fibers, the threading responding to her will and desires, the Kiryuin matriarch's eye twitched when she noticed a spot of blood only a few feet away from Shinra Koketsu. Stomping her heel against the drying liquid with enough force to dent the metal floor Ragyo folded her arms under her bosom and leaned her head back, "That was the fifth one you've killed in the past two days. Any more and we risk falling behind schedule."

"Something like that will never happen!"

There was a hint of anger and derision permeating Nui's every word despite the childish and saccharine tone. Craning her head towards Ragyo while leaning forward, her chin propped cutely on top of her hands, the Grand Couturier cutely stuck her tongue out of her mouth and smiled, "Allowing a stupid human to mess up even one stitch on our masterpiece would ruin everything. Shinra Koketsu is supposed

to be the ultimate dress so we can't have any imperfections, now can we?"

Ragyo smiled at Nui's question before the rainbow light emanating from her hair intensified. Heels clicking against the ground as she walked back towards the Grand Couturier, maroon eyes full of mirth and amusement, Ragyo let out a wistful sigh and shook her head, "Of course not, my dear Nui. As an artiste you have free reign to satisfy whatever whims you possess. These naked apes are barely worthy of assisting with the initial cutting before their usefulness comes to a tragic end."

Beaming at the praise, her feet playfully kicking through the air beneath her, Nui clapped her hands together and listening to the background hum of the mentally refitted students silently working, "Gee, I really expected more from Satsuki's Sewing Club. Years of planning and it all came tumbling down in less than an hour! It's so cliché and disappointing that I wouldn't even feed her to Shinra Koketsu. Gosh, I wonder what Satsuki blabbed to those naked pigs?"

"Nothing we've not predicted."

The mirth on the Kiryuin matriarch's face didn't so much as falter at the mention of her eldest daughter. Despite leaving her treacherous daughter bleeding to death, impaled ironically upon her own blade, Ragyo knew Satsuki would survive the Great Culture and Sports Festival. Her daughter was too stubborn and prideful to let the cold embrace of death envelope her soul. Ragyo knew the moment Satsuki recovered from her wounds she would tell Nudist Beach everything she knew, which meant the Kiryuin matriarch would need to adjust her strategies accordingly.

Even after Ginjo's betrayal Kisuke Urahara posed the greatest threat to the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. That insufferable genius of a man far outstripped Souichiro in terms of knowledge about Life Fibers. While he was still beneath Isshin and herself, the knowledge imparted unto them by the Original Life Fiber something humans

could never hope to comprehend, Ragyo refused to underestimate the shopkeeper a second time. Given enough time and resources a genius like Kisuke would figure out a way through the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier, which would allow Isshin to come straight for her.

"Whatever my foolish daughter says doesn't matter. Our number one concern remains Kisuke Urahara," Ragyo's maroon eyes narrowed as her face tightened into a scowl. Strumming manicured fingers against the top of her breast, Nui's own expression darkening at the mention of the shopkeeper that tricked her so many months ago, the Kiryuin matriarch waved a hand through the air before continuing, "Ignoring that man will most likely lead to trouble in the future and the possibility he'll figure out a way to bypass the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier."

"That's why you had us build a super special surprise into the barrier, right?" Nui added helpful while tucking her knees against her chest and spinning around in her seat. Tilting her head backwards, blonde pigtails nearly touching the ground, the Grand Couturier smirked childishly, "If anyone tries to go through without your permission they'll blow up but I know what you're about to say, Lady Ragyo! I was careful to make sure Isshin, Ichigo and Ryuko wouldn't be too hurt by my special something!"

Ragyo's lips curled upwards into a sly smirk at the mention of the two Life Fiber Hybrids. After their wondrous showing at Honnouji Academy, where they exceeded her greatest expectations, she wished nothing more than to see what they were capable of doing given the right motivation. It was a shame Life Fiber Hierarchy would most likely fail to influence either Ichigo or Ryuko. Unless she could somehow emotionally crush them, driving them to the pits of despair and self-loathing, their minds would be too intact for such a wondrous ability to have any effect.

"It's quite a shame I wasn't able to get my hands on Ryuko," Ragyo sighed at the missed opportunity with a small shake of her head, "A daughter shouldn't be forced to fight against her own mother."

"Forcing family to fight family is really wrong!"

Nui huffed lightly as she leapt off the chair and floated down next to Ragyo, her hands clasped together once more, and laughed, "I mean, I really wanted to make Ryuko pay for beating me but now that I know she's my long-lost sister everything's fine! It makes perfect sense why she could defeat me now! Even if she's been brainwashed into serving those stupid humans Ryuko is still family and one should always love their family!"

"I'm sure Ryuko will come around to the truth of the world eventually... as will Ichigo," Ragyo smirked as she ran her fingers delicately against Shinra Koketsu's fabric. While Kisuke was the most dangerous threat to her plans Ichigo and Ryuko could cause their share of trouble if left to their own devices. Such insolence, from her own child no less, could not be tolerated. Stepping around Nui, the Grand Couturier beaming at the attention, Ragyo smirked and added, "No one ever said raising four daughters would be easy but I have plans in the works to deal with such rebellious behavior. Speaking of which, how is everything... my dear Amu?"

Without any warning a slender feminine figure emerged from the shadows behind Ragyo into existence. Amu Harime, formerly known as Ururu Tsumugiyu, formed a dark purple facsimile of Nui's traditional attire. Her black hair, formerly tied into short pigtails, now reached below her shoulder blades and was styled in a manner reminiscent of her sister's. Silently walking away from her mother, her purple boots failing to echo against the thin metal flooring, the creature now known as Amu didn't utter a word as she strolled towards Nui. Drawing her face level with her sister, lips curling into a stiff and alien smile, Amu's twin, emotionless eyes reflected Nui's saccharine grin as she turned back towards Ragyo.

"Everything is fine, Lady Ragyo," Amu's smile did not falter as she answered Ragyo, her tone flat and empty of feelings, "Sister and I are working around the clock to finish Shinra Koketsu. Our progress would be greater if these humans were better at sewing."

Clasping her hands against the small of her bare back Ragyo reminisced about the difficulty she experienced in reeducating her lost daughter. It hadn't been easy to erase everything that made up the false persona of Ururu Tsumugiya, which was compounded by her misguided daughter fighting her every step of the way. Whatever Kisuke Urahara taught her precious Amu was quite effective in helping her retain her sense of self but even such mental barriers crumpled after nearly three hours of constant mental intrusions and assaults. Once her dear Amu could no longer put up a struggle Ragyo quickly proceeded to erase everything composing Ururu Tsumugiya - memories, feelings, familial ties and techniques. Her precious daughter had no need for remnants of a personality completely infected by humanity. Once she finished her task, and Ururu Tsumugiya no longer existed, Ragyo began implanting everything Amu would need to know.

"Merveilleux... unfortunately an issue has arisen and I don't trust *that* coward to see things through," Ragyo's smile fell off her face as she walked away from her daughters. With the rainbow light shining from her hair dimming slightly, the shadows in the room creeping forward, the Kiryuin matriarch's maroon eyes narrowed coldly as she looked over her shoulder and grimaced, "Events in England aren't going according to plan. I thought for sure those idiotic pigs in Parliament would see things my way but it seems Nudist Beach is determined to be a continuing thorn in my side."

"You want one of us to go and deal with them?" Nui asked cheerfully with a beaming smile on her face. As she felt her Life Fibers resonating with Amu's the Grand Couturier looked thoughtfully to the side before adding, "That's sound like a lot of fun but..."

"... we have to stay here and finish Shinra Koketsu," Amu finished robotically, her voice lacking any of the emotion filling her sister's every word, "This is what we were born for, after all, and leaving now..."

"... would give the stupid humans a chance to come up with some desperate last minute plan to stop us!" Nui finished proudly while

clasping Amu's hand tightly.

"I would never force my precious daughters to stop working on Shinra Koketsu," Ragyo sighed wistfully as a smile graced her features at the enthusiasm emanating from her daughters. Leaning her head against the palm of her hand she closed her eyes and smirked, "I'm sure Isshin would simply love to get his hands on one of you but I do need one of you to go to London and straighten things out in the usual way. Luckily I have something in mind to alleviate this problem..."

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"Give me a fucking break already!"

A soft grunt escaped Ryuko's lips as she sprinted vertically up the side of the hotel, Senketsu's heels digging small furrows into the concrete for balance. Chancing a glance over her shoulder when an arc of lightning illuminated the skies, worried blue eyes staring deeply into the darkness for any sign of Ichigo, Ryuko stiffened as an increasingly familiar sensation coursed through her body. Noticing the shadows surrounded her shifting chaotically, her Kamui's sole eye focusing on the writhing darkness, Ryuko clenched her fingers tightly around the red Scissor Blade and twisted her body around. As a small burst of steam shot out from the vents on her back Ryuko growled before swinging the Life Fiber weapon through the air and deflecting the incoming projectiles.

*"What the hell kind of bullets is this guy firing?"*

Ryuko grimaced upon feeling her arms beginning to tremble slightly. She didn't know how the hell this guy could fire such a powerful gun with a single hand but Ryuko wasn't about to go and ask him. Shifting her arms closer towards her body for better leverage, showers of sparks cascading off the Scissor Blade as several bullets shattered against it, Ryuko's eyes widened when she

saw the shadows stretching up the side of the building towards her. Crouching before quickly leaping away, the glass beneath her heels shattering into myriads of pieces, Ryuko cursed when a familiar gunmetal black weapon emerged from the shadows.

"Not this time, you asshole!"

Acting instinctively Ryuko reached behind her back and gripped the edge of the roof with one hand, her fingers easily digging into the concrete foundation. Shifting her momentum as she drew her knees against her exposed stomach and vaulted backwards, her feathery black hair whipping against her face as a bullet soared into the sky, Ryuko stabbed the Scissor Blade into the roof as she skidded to a stop. Taking a deep breath as she knelt on the slick roof, Senketsu's red and black form glistening from the rain, Ryuko gritted her teeth and stared out into the storm. Sliding her left foot backwards while readjusting her grip on the Scissor Blade, the Life Fibers within the weapon resonating with those in her body, she whispered, "Senketsu, any idea on how to beat this guy?"

Senketsu kept his single eye trained on the edge of the roof as he answered, **"No, but be careful Ryuko. This guy is causing my Life Fibers to quiver strangely. I -"**

There was a brief flash of light before a sharp sensation shot through Ryuko's leg, the force causing her body to violently lurch forward. Confused by her sudden lack of balance Ryuko glanced downwards and saw to her growing horror that everything below her left knee had been obliterated in a spray of blood and thread. Mouth open in a silent scream as the sound of a single gunshot finally reached her ears, the reverberating echo coinciding with a loud thunderclap, Ryuko felt the barest sensation of unimaginable pain before the autonomic reaction was harshly cut off by the Life Fibers in her body.

**" Ryuko!"**

"Not... now, Senketsu!" A deep growl escaped Ryuko's lips as she stabbed the Scissor Blade into the rooftop for balance. Leaning

heavily onto the weapon while breaking out into a light sweat, her breath ragged despite the lack of pain, Ryuko was acutely aware of the faint ruby glow emanating from her missing leg and could not help but be thankful she wasn't completely human. If it weren't for the Life Fibers composing her body, both stopping the pain and regenerating the wound, Ryuko was certain she would have passed out from the pain. Fingers clenched tightly around the Scissor Blade as crimson blood oozed from her wound, strands of glowing red Life Fibers already emerging from her knee, Ryuko bit her lip and softly spat, "Come on already! What does it take to actually regenerate when I need to?"

"How *amusing* . You're still conscious..."

Alucard's voice resonated with a deep demonic echo as the ancient vampire emerged from the shadows, tendrils of darkness retreating from his red overcoat. Pointing the Jackal towards the sky, wisps of smoke lightly rising from the muzzle, Alucard's lips curled into an amused smirk as he beheld Ryuko's current condition. As he slowly walked towards the injured teenagers, his steps slow and methodical, Alucard sarcastically chuckled, "Your pain tolerance must be exceptional for you to remain conscious... so what are you going to do, monster girl? You're going to die in a few minutes if you don't staunch the bleeding."

Ryuko decided not to answer her assailant's mocking question as she tightened her grip on the Scissor Blade. Forcing her body to stand despite missing a leg, sanguine blood pooling while the ruby light shining from her knee grew in intensity, Ryuko's uniquely shaped eyes narrowed dangerously at the approaching vampire, "You god damn bastard! What the hell's your problem?"

"That's a ridiculous question," Alucard scoffed as he came to a halt several meters in front of Ryuko and lowered his arm, the Jackal's muzzle aimed at the center of her forehead. Tapping his finger lightly against the trigger, droplets of rain cascading down his clothing, Alucard found himself curious about Ryuko's apparent lack of pain. Blowing her leg off should have garnered at least somewhat of a



reaction from the teenager. Taking notice of the peculiar outfit and Senketsu's multihued eye Alucard cocked his head slightly to the right and said, "... but your outfit intrigues me, monster girl. It's no ordinary fabric, is it?"

"Like hell I'm going to tell you anything," Ryuko growled as anger coursed through her veins.

Breathing heavily as she clenched her free hand into a fist, the pouring rain forcing her feathery bangs to lie flat against her face, Ryuko ignored the blood leaking from her left knee in order to focus on coming up with a plan to defeat Alucard. She already knew his guns were powerful enough to tear through Senketsu's armor and he could somehow control shadows but Ryuko had a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach that Alucard was holding back. Ignoring the fluttering feeling in her mind Ryuko decided to go with the straightforward approach.

As a faint ruby aura surrounded her body, causing Alucard's hidden eyebrows to rise slightly at the sudden increase in power, Ryuko reached over and tore the Scissor Blade out of the roof. Crouching down on her right leg without taking her eyes off the vampire in front of her, steam wafting off her Kamui as their synchronization increased, Ryuko pushed off the roof with enough force to crater it. Leaping high into the air, the Scissor Blade clasped firmly in both hands, Ryuko was illuminated by a flash of blue-white lightning as she shouted at Alucard, "This is for what you did to Ichigo!"

"How pathetic..."

A disappointed scowl spread across Alucard's face as he took a single step backwards and avoided Ryuko's attack with laughable ease. Given the familiar sensation pulsing in his rotten black heart he thought fighting her would prove to be more of a challenge but as he continuously dodged Ryuko's strikes, his red overcoat gaining several small tears in the process, Alucard's scowl deepened. Compared to the woman from five years ago Ryuko Matoi was nothing but trash. Leaning backwards while allowing Ryuko's Scissor

Blade to pass harmlessly several inches from his face Alucard snapped his arm upwards and pressed the Jackal's muzzle against her forehead.

"I suppose this has been a rather eventful night," Alucard scoffed derisively as his finger tightened around the trigger, "But compared to *that* woman five years ago you are -"

A resounding crackle echoed across the rooftop as Alucard found himself violently cut off midsentence, blood gushing from between shattered fangs, when Ryuko's left foot slammed into the bottom of his chin. Red eyes widening in genuine surprise as the force behind the blow knocked him into the air, his red fedora blowing off in the storm, Alucard glanced down and saw the bloody remains of Ryuko's severed leg dissolving into strands of red thread that quickly vanished into nothingness. Lips curling up into the faintest of smirks, blood spewing from his mouth in the process, Alucard did not try to dodge when Ryuko appeared before him in a burst of speed.

"That was for Ichigo!"

Letting the Scissor Blade to fall to the ground as she reared her arm backwards, her hand clenching into a fist, Ryuko roared as it collided with Alucard's face. Time seemed to freeze as Ryuko's fist connected with Alucard's nose, the shattered remains of his orange glasses reflecting each individual droplet of rain. As her momentum continued to carry her forward, the vents on Senketsu's back blasting out colored energy, a sonic boom rippled outwards from the point of impact before Alucard was sent careening backwards across the rooftop and into a wall.

"And that..." Ryuko panted lightly as she landed in a crouch next to the Scissor Blade, a victorious smirk on her face at finally shutting the bastard up, while glaring into the rising cloud of smoke and dust obscuring her opponent, "... was for calling me a fucking monster!"

" ***Are you alright, Ryuko?***"

"Yeah..." Ryuko nodded solemnly, one hand absentmindedly pulling the Scissor Blade free from the roof, before glancing down at her recently regenerated leg. Running her fingers across the thigh-high boot, the armor extending above her knees as flawless as ever, Ryuko's lips pursed into a grimace as she was confronted with the reminder that she wasn't technically human. An angry glint entered her blue eyes when her thoughts involuntarily drifted to the events of the Great Culture and Sports Festival, the memory of her mother severing her arm still fresh in her mind.

Propping the Scissor Blade on her shoulder as she turned around and began walking away, a loud scoff escaping her lips as she mentally pushed the memories into the deepest abyss of her mind, Ryuko stared up into the stormy skies. As droplets of rain cascaded down her face, heels clicking against the wet rooftop, an arc of lightning lit up Ryuko's face as she looked into Senketsu's eye, "I don't know what you were worried about. That guy was a real asshole but he wasn't that bad."

**"He shot your leg off,"** Senketsu replied matter-of-factly, ***"It would have killed you if not for your regeneration."***

"Whatever," Ryuko grumbled while making a point to ignore the logic in her Kamui's words, "I already kicked his ass so let's focus on finding Ichigo. I bet he's starting to get real -"

"Ha... ha... ha..."

The sinister laughter echoing across the rooftop caused Ryuko's eyes to snap open while a cold shudder ran down her spine. Instinctively clenching the Scissor Blade's grip as she twisted around, frustrated blue eyes narrowed as they tried to pierce the veil of smoke and dust obscuring her vision, Ryuko knew she should have kept her big mouth shut. Curling her other hand around the Scissor Blade as the vampire strolled into view, his body and clothing free of any damage, Ryuko growled as she realized defeating her opponent wasn't going to be as easy as she first thought.

"I'm impressed, monster girl. Your regeneration is remarkable and your strength far surpasses the limits of a mere human," Alucard complimented as he slowly made his way back towards Ryuko, his long red overcoat billowing outwards in a nonexistent wind. No longer wearing his fedora and orange sunglasses, the latter shattered by Ryuko's previous attack and exposing his blood red eyes, the vampire's lips curled into a pleased grin as he stared at the teenager. Stretching his arms outwards, his black hair writhing like shadows, Alucard's eyes widened manically as a psychotic chuckle passed through his lips, "You were able to regenerate your leg in only a few seconds, which automatically makes you a far more interesting adversary than a piece of dog shit."

"What the fuck did you just call me?"

Ryuko's face twisted into a scowl as she slid her right foot back and readjusted her grip on the Scissor Blade. Her gaze shifting towards her opponent's currently empty hands, the weird and intricate patterns etched on the back of his gloves beginning to glow with an angry red light, Ryuko felt Senketsu's irritation at the man merge with her own as she snarled, "I've had enough of your stupid crap! I don't care if you can regenerate! I'll just keep kicking your ass until you finally stay down!"

"Oh? How rude of me..." There was no missing the amusement in Alucard's deep voice as the vampire swept one arm across his chest and gave Ryuko a sarcastic bow. Chuckling softly as he kept eye contact with Ryuko, his fangs visible to the teenager, he added, "You wished to know my name, monster girl? I am known by many names but you may call me Alucard."

The Jackal and Casull slid into Alucard's hands so quickly that Ryuko nearly missed them. Dodging to the right moments before bullets shot past her face, the rooftop behind her exploding in a cacophony of orange and yellow, Ryuko didn't flinch when part of her arm disintegrated in a spray of crimson blood. Scissor Blade arcing through the air, deflecting a shot from the Jackal as her arm regenerated in a flash of ruby light, Ryuko knew she couldn't stay on

the defensive forever. Digging her heels into the rooftop as she quickly skidded to a halt, one hand dragging along the ground for balance, Ryuko didn't pause before pushing off towards Alucard less than a second before a bullet pierced the space her neck had just occupied.

"I'm getting really sick of your stupid bullets!"

Roaring as she sprinted across the rooftop towards the vampire, the steam blasting forth from Senketsu's vents helping to momentarily boost her speed, Ryuko instinctively leaned to the side when the grin on Alucard's face grew twisted. Barely avoiding a point blank shot from the Jackal, a long and jagged cut appearing due to the concussive pressure from the projectile, Ryuko spun around and planted a heel into the concrete. Glowering at the taller vampire while the cut on her cheek quickly healed, the blood on her skin reabsorbed into her body without leaving a trace, Ryuko gripped the Scissor Blade with both hands before swinging down with enough force to bifurcate Alucard at the waist.

Leaping away from Alucard the moment she finished attacking, a deep crevasse cut into the rooftop from her attack, Ryuko glanced at the dark blood dripping off the Scissor Blade before grimacing. She hadn't wanted to bisect the vampire but since he could regenerate attempting to hit him with anything less would be completely useless. Sliding to a stop as she landed back on the roof, blue eyes carefully watching Alucard as he fell to the ground in a pool of his own blood, Ryuko was taken by complete surprise when Senketsu violently shuddered around her body.

" ***Disgusting!***" The Kamui made a retching noise before several droplets of crimson liquid were forcibly expelled from his form. Mentally growling as he temporarily made his Life Fibers impervious to blood, the liquid dropping from the Scissor Blade onto his form violently repelled away, Senketsu's eyes narrowed as he gagged, ***"Ugh... that was the most foul blood I ever tasted. Ryuko, please don't get any more of that man's blood on my uniform."***

"That's because you only like my blood, right?" Ryuko shivered when another shiver jolted down her spine. Flipping the Scissor Blade over in her grip, armored hands clenched tightly around the handle, she scoffed before grinning, "Don't worry, Senketsu. I'll try not to get you too dirty."

A series of psychotic chuckles, interspaced by bloody laughter, caused every muscle in Ryuko's body to tense. Spread out in a pool of his own blood, bone and visceral leaking from his severed waist, Alucard's light chuckle quickly evolved into fully blown maniacal laughter as he turned his head towards Ryuko. Sharpened white fangs glistening in the ambient light of the storm, his blood-red eyes piercing through the shadows, Alucard's voice echoed as he spoke, "You are truly an interesting creature, monster girl..."

Shadows contorting and twisting around Alucard as his muscles and bones knitted back together, the blood covering the rooftop flowing like water into his wounds, the vampire never stopped laughing as he stood back on his feet. This night was turning out to be the most fun he had in decades. Not even the short battle against Luke Valentine was able to excite him this much. Spreading his arms out to the side as he slowly walked towards the teenager, the darkness of the storm moving like water at his feet, Alucard's grin grew psychotic as he stared eagerly at Ryuko, "Your regeneration is equal to my own and that blade is quite unique. This feeling coursing through my rotten heart... this sensation of trepidation. Tell me, monster girl, are you related to Ragyo Kiryuin?"

"How..." The words were lost in Ryuko's throat the moment Alucard mentioned her mother's name, "How the hell do you know that name?"

"You have proven to be a most formidable opponent, able to fight against even experienced vampires..." Alucard's smile grew wider upon seeing Ryuko's shock, her expression all that was needed for him to know the answer. Slowly raising his arms into the air, the seals etched onto the back of his gloves glowing with a harsh red light, the ancient vampire felt anticipation course through his veins at

the prospect of releasing his true power against a worthy opponent. Hands held lengthwise in front of his face, fingers extended outwards as the shadows enveloped his body, Alucard's voice echoed across the rooftop as he spoke, "Releasing Control Art Restriction Systems three... two... one, approval of Situation A recognized. Commencing the Cromwell invocation. Ability restrictions lifted for limited use until the enemy has been rendered silent."

"What the fuck...?"

Ryuko involuntarily shivered nervously when dozens of red eyes, each much larger than normal, appeared on Alucard's shadowy form. Taking a step backwards when the shadows surrounding her began warping and convulsing, dark forms and creatures rising from nothingness only to quickly vanish, Ryuko growled as she suppressed the shudder of fear running through her body. There was no chance in hell she was going to be scared by this guy, not after everything she experienced fighting Nui Harime and Ragyo Kiryuin. Tightening her grip on the Scissor Blade as a fang-filled maw of teeth erupted from the ground, piercing red eyes glaring at her, Ryuko spat and whispered, "This might be bad, Senketsu."

" ***Yes, I can feel the power coming from this man,***" the Kamui replied with a hint of worry of his own, "***Be careful, Ryuko. He's much tougher than he looks.***"

"He looked pretty tough to begin with," Ryuko replied sarcastically, her confidence bolstered by Senketsu's words, before staring at where she thought Alucard was hiding. Eyes narrowing as she shifted her stance, the Scissor Blade held parallel to the ground at her shoulder, Ryuko scoffed, "Here he comes. Get ready, Senketsu."

"Now then... monster girl," Alucard's already demonic voice was warbled and distorted, faint screams barely audible in the background, as the vampire emerged from the mass of shadows and creatures. Clad in nothing but a black straightjacket, his unkempt hair writhing in the air around him, the vampire's red eyes seemed to pierce through the stormy veil while his tone grew more pressing and

excited, "Show me the full extent of your powers! Transform your body and attack me with everything you got! Pierce my heart with your blade and try to put me down!"

"Heh..."

Thrusting the Scissor Blade out to the side, the hardened Life Fiber weapon doubling in length as it extended into Decapitation Mode, Ryuko smirked as the nervousness and fear washed away. Alucard may be a tough bastard but there was no way in hell he was any stronger than Ragyo Kiryuin. Her body glowing with a ruby light as twin bursts of steam shot out from her back, Senketsu's armor tightening around her body, Ryuko slid one foot back and shouted, "I don't need permission to kick your ugly ass! Let's do this, you bastard! Senketsu Senkou!"

A low thump echoed outwards as Senketsu shifted configurations, steam wafting off the Kamui's armor as every drop of moisture covering him instantly evaporated from the intense energy. As a clap of thunder roared in the heavens above, the shadows briefly retreating away from Ryuko's new form, Alucard whistled at the power radiating from the teenager. Based on her belligerent and annoying behavior he expected Ryuko to be all talk but knowing she actually had another transformation up her sleeves fascinated him. He could feel the sheer potency of Ryuko's energy from across the roof, the familiar scent of blood in the air causing his mouth to twist into a predatory smile.

"I thought you were bluffing, monster girl, but it appears I was mistaken..." Alucard laughed as his eyes widened psychotically and hunched over, his shoulders morphing into a mass of shadows. Staring intently at Ryuko as the Baskerville hellhound emerged from the darkness, acidic saliva dripping from its toothy maw, Alucard chuckled before suddenly shouting, "Yes! This is what I've been waiting for! A real battle between monsters!"

"For the last time..." Ryuko ignored the screams emanating from Alucard's shadows as the grill on her back burst into life. Flexing her



fingers around the handle of the Scissor Blade, the jagged red and black lines pulsing with power, she took a deep breath before charging towards the vampire. Heels clicking softly against the wet concrete while she dodged shots from the Casull, sparks of light dancing around her feet as she avoided the projectiles, Ryuko narrowed her eyes when the mass of darkness attached to Alucard's shoulder convulsed before emitting an unearthly roar. Pushing off into the air as the Baskerville slammed into the roof, acidic saliva bubbling away on the concrete, Ryuko stomped down hard on the hellhound's head before sprinting towards the amused Alucard, "... I'm not a fucking monster, you asshole! Ichiban Genkai!"

A sonic boom rippled through the atmosphere as the invisible energy protruding from the Scissor Blade connected with the shadows composing Alucard's body, the liquid-like mass of darkness temporarily managing to push back before Ryuko's attack overwhelmed it. Flame-like wisps of shadows dissolving into nothingness as Ryuko's blade pushed forward, red energy exploding outwards as she sprinted straight towards Alucard's main body, the teenager growled when she saw the wide smirk on the vampire's face. Adjusting her grip on the Scissor Blade as she leapt above several tendrils of shadows, the darkness shifting into toothy maws, Ryuko roared as she severed the vampire's head in a spray of crimson blood.

"Is that all you got, you bastard?" Ryuko mocked sarcastically, heels digging up twin trenches as she landed back on the roof. Turning towards the writhing mass of shadows, her ears barely able to pick up the faint screams under the constant roaring and moaning, Ryuko huffed confidently and said, "You're not so tough to beat once I get past your sorry -"

Ryuko gagged harshly, spittle flying out of her mouth, when a fist emerged from the shadows and slammed into her stomach with enough force to send her flying backwards along the rooftop. As the teenager bounced along the concrete, the darkness tinting the edges of her vision retreating, she barely managed to catch a glimpse of

Alucard's blood-red eyes before the vampire disappeared from sight. Grunting angrily before twisting around as she tried to regain her balance Ryuko's eyes widened in shock when the vampire appeared less than a foot in front of her, a sadistic grin on his pale face, and clenched his fingers around her throat.

"Is this the extent of your power, monster girl?"

There was no hiding the derision in Alucard's voice as his grip upon Ryuko's throat tightened, gloved fingers easily digging into Senketsu's armor. As the shadows around his form contorted and pulsed, blood red eyes narrowed angrily at the teenager within his grasp, Alucard felt nothing but disappointment at his opponent. With her strength and regeneration Ryuko should have been a much more formidable adversary, someone able to give him a worthy challenge. Ignoring Ryuko's Scissor Blade as it cleaved through his neck, blood spewing forth before the flesh rapidly knitted back together, Alucard clenched his teeth before summoning the Jackal forth from the shadows.

"Come on! What are you waiting for? Draw out your full power and break free from my grasp! Cut off my arms and pierce my heart! Hurry! Do it!"

Ryuko coughed harshly, a trail of spittle leaking from the corner of her mouth, as she struggled against the vampire's supernatural strength. Fingers tightly gripping Alucard's arm, her mouth pulled into grimace, Ryuko gritted her teeth and glared at the vampire, "Y-You're insane!"

Alucard's eyes widened at Ryuko's statement before his face twisted into a snarl, glistening fangs clenching loudly. Pressing the Jackal against Ryuko's bare stomach, the teenager's struggles immediately intensifying, a brief flash of light illuminated the rooftop as the high caliber bullet tore through her body. Fury coursing through every fiber of his soul as he watched the gaping wound begin glowing with a ruby light, tendrils of thread-like material quickly regenerating the

damage, Alucard silently allowed the Jackal to slip from his fingers only to quickly clench his other hand around Ryuko's throat.

"You might have been an interesting opponent, monster girl..." Alucard's demonic voice grew darker as he hunched over, the shadows enveloping the rooftop writhing angrily around him. Unperturbed by Ryuko's constant attempts to pull herself free, her kicks barely even causing the vampire to flinch, Alucard's mouth opened widely while saliva dripped off his fangs, "... but in the end you were nothing but garbage..."

Adjusting his grip on Ryuko as he forced her head to the side Alucard didn't hesitate before biting down harshly on her neck, supernaturally sharpened fangs easily penetrating Senketsu's normally durable armor. Drinking as much of the blood spraying from the teenager's neck as he could, Ryuko's hands still beating against his body despite the amount of crimson liquid pooled around her feet, Alucard was caught completely off guard when his throat erupted in torturous pain. Fingers involuntarily releasing Ryuko as he staggered backwards, a series of harsh and bloody coughs escaping his mouth, the vampire's red eyes were wide in genuine surprise as several large and jagged wounds opened on his body. With gallons of his own blood spewing forth onto the ground, rivers of life liquid coating his black straightjacket, Alucard grunted as dozens of crimson Life Fibers emerged from his body and floated back towards Ryuko.

Collapsing to her knees as the vampire suddenly released his grip, one hand instinctively rising to her torn throat as the damage rapidly healed, Ryuko's eyes quivered from a mixture of shock and astonishment at what just transpired. Surprise quickly turning into rage, blue eyes seething with hatred, Ryuko bit her lower lip as she forced herself back onto her feet. As a pulse of power radiated from her body, the Scissor Blade in her grasp glowing with a deep red aura, Ryuko growled as she stalked towards Alucard, who was still retching blood onto the roof. Clenching her free hand into a fist as colored steam wafted off Senketsu's armor, the red undertone of

her feathery hair glowing brilliantly, Ryuko's voice hitched in her throat before shouting, "Did you just try drinking my blood, you goddamn son of a bitch?!"

A chocked gurgle left Alucard's mouth as he threw up the last of Ryuko's blood, the liquid rapidly dissolving back into its constituent Life Fibers. Panting slightly as he pushed himself back onto his feet, the damage to his body already healing, the vampire found the surprising reaction to Ryuko's blood quite the quandary. Lips stretching into a wide grin while blood leaked from the corners of his mouth and nose Alucard stared at the approaching Life Fiber Hybrid and chuckled, "... your blood is something special, monster girl. I don't think I've ever met anything quite like you. My body feels as if it's tearing apart as we speak... how *intriguing* ."

"So you don't like the taste of my blood, huh?" Ryuko spat on the ground, her eyes never leaving Alucard's prone figure. Raising the Scissor Blade above her head, the hardened Life Fiber weapon glowing with power, Ryuko tightened her hands around the grip and snarled, "Well too fucking bad! Go to hell you bastard! Niban -"

Ryuko paused just as she was about to swing the Scissor Blade at the vampire, a flash of lightning arcing across the sky, when a bayonet appeared in Alucard's chest accompanied by a spray of blood. Stance faltering slightly when Alucard was pierced by nearly a dozen more bayonets, several of the blades stabbed completely through his head, Ryuko was nearly knocked off her feet as explosions detonated underneath the vampire. Squinting at the suddenly intense source of light, one hand held protectively in front of her face, Ryuko nearly jumped out of her skin when Anderson landed next to her, his gloved hands clenched tightly around two bayonets.

"Are ye alright, Ryuko?"

The mentioning of her name by the Nudist Beach commander snapped Ryuko out of her shock. Relaxing her grip on the Scissor Blade, the energy coursing through the weapon slowly being

reabsorbed by Senketsu, she turned to the former priest and growled, "Where the hell have you been? The pale bastard tried drinking my blood!"

Anderson's shoulders stiffened, a motion that wasn't missed by Ryuko, as he asked, "Did he manage to do so?"

"Heh. I don't think my blood agreed with him," Ryuko answered smugly, a grin on her face as she flipped the Scissor Blade over in her hands, before swallowing the dry lump in her throat. Although thankful that Anderson was here to help, his skill with bayonets slightly unnerving the teenage girl, Alucard wasn't a normal opponent. Muscles tensing as she noticed Alucard had nearly finished regenerating, her eyes narrowing upon seeing the grin on the vampire's shadowed face, Ryuko took a step back and grimaced, "Damn it, just what the hell is this guy?"

"He's a vampire..."

Boots stomping heavily against the concrete as he walked towards the prone form of Alucard, rain running down the creases of his cassock, Anderson's lips twisted into a sneer as he finally managed to get a good look at the vampire. Flicking his wrists as he summoned several more bayonets from within the seals on his gloves, green eyes narrowing behind opaque glasses, the former priest continued, "Fifteen years ago, before working for yer father, I belonged to another organization designed to hunt, counter and eliminate supernatural threats against the Catholic Church. An organization I'm sure our vampire knows fully about..."

"A former member of Iscariot working together with a monster... now I've seen everything," Alucard grinned as he stood back up, his white gloves digging grooves into the concrete.

This night was just full of surprises and revelations.

As a loud clap of thunder temporarily deafened the city, arcs of lightning following soon after, Alucard reached into his shoulder and

pulled out one of Anderson's bayonets lodged firmly in his body. Running a finger along the blood-soaked blade, the light contact enabling the vampire to instantly confirm it wasn't composed of silver or blessed with holy water, Alucard's expression tightened imperceptibly when a very familiar sensation spread up his arm.

"Such unique and interesting weapons... you people continue to surprise me," Alucard admitted with a light chuckle as he tossed the bayonet to the ground. Red eyes widening in excitement as he beheld the determined expression on Anderson's face, the shadows already beginning to contort into familiar maws of teeth, Alucard's body was enveloped in a faint red aura as he shouted, "That look in your eyes... tell me your name, human!"

"Ye wish to know my name, vampire?" Anderson's shoulders hunched forward as he stalked towards the ancient vampire, "My name is Alexander Anderson and I shall be yer judge, jury and executioner!"

Just as Anderson began charging towards Alucard, twin bayonets flashing in the ambient light as he spun them around in his grip, there was a burst of intense ruby light before he suddenly found himself pulled off his feet. Her hands gripped firmly around the back of the former priest's cassock, jets of energy rocketing out of her legs as Senketsu shifted to his Shippu configuration, Ryuko made sure Anderson wasn't about to fall before looking over her shoulder and shouting, "Don't think you won this fight, you undead bastard! I'll get you next time!"

The psychotic smirk fell off Alucard's face as the vampire watched Ryuko and Anderson disappear into the night. Rain falling mutely around him as he stared at the pinprick of light vanishing into the storm, rapid flashes of blue and red illuminating the street below, Alucard could not help but curl his lips into a small grin. Things seemed to be getting very interesting lately. First there was the paladin in Ireland, a member of Iscariot strong enough to blow his head off in a single gunshot, then there were the Valentine Brothers

and now a being of unknown origin and superior regeneration arrived at his doorstep.

Alucard chuckled in amusement as he reined in his power, the shadowy creatures barking and roaring before merging back into his body. Turning around, his newly reformed red overcoat fluttering in the rain, Alucard moved to leave but paused in mid-step before he remembered something important. Staring off into the distance, a curious expression on his face, the vampire muttered, "I completely forgot about the other teenager. I wonder how the Police Girl is handling him."

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"Please don't let him find me..."

Seras Victoria adjusted her raincoat's hood, water dripping from wet blonde hair onto her face, as she crouched behind an air conditioner duct. Hugging the Harkonnen tightly against her chest, the massive Anti-Tank Rifle barely fitting behind the cover, the fledging vampire pressed one hand firmly against her mouth when a soft tremor reverberated across the rooftop. Quietly moving towards the edge of the duct, her vampiric senses on edge for anything that might happen, Seras took a calming breath before glancing around the corner at the orange haired teenager standing just a few meters away.

Despite having recently been inducted into the ranks of the undead Seras still remembered her training as a member of the London Metropolitan Police. Blue eyes examining the teenager standing nearby, her mind memorizing one of the strangest suits of armor she'd ever seen, Seras slowly began moving one hand towards the Harkonnen's trigger. Her master was depending on her to occupy one of the creatures while he dealt with the second and Seras was not about to let him down. As she carefully maneuvered the Harkonnen with her feet shifting slightly in order to more easily roll

out from behind her cover Seras paused when the teenager began talking to someone.

Ichigo scowled as he landed on the roof, his hand already pulling Tournesol out of its scabbard. Looking around the empty rooftop, the faint pitter-patter of rain falling upon concrete and steel the only sounds he could hear, his brown eyes narrowed angrily. After falling for nearly two hundred feet before his injuries regenerated and Mugetsu forcibly shifted herself into her Gufū configuration Ichigo had flown back into the air only to spot a glint of metal rapidly moving away in the distance. But now that he was there he couldn't see anyone nearby.

"Hey Mugetsu," Ichigo muttered as he stared into the shadows, "You sense anything?"

***" No. I cannot sense anything nearby in the rain."***

Any confusion Seras felt about why Ichigo was talking to himself quickly turned to shock when a feminine voice replied. Goose bumps breaking out along her arms at how alien the voice sounded, the inflections and tone nothing a human could have ever produced, Seras swallowed nervously and decided to try and get a closer look. Inching closer towards the edge of the duct, her fingers curled delicately around the metal for support, Seras peered out from behind her cover and was forced to stifle a gasp upon seeing the eyes on Ichigo's armor blinking and looking around.

"Damn..." Ichigo cursed under his breath. Looking one final time around the rooftop, his gaze focusing for a few seconds on the air conditioning duct before moving on, Ichigo perked up when a brilliant flash of crimson light illuminated the skies. Brown eyes quickly turning back towards the hotel, the familiar feeling of Senketsu's power permeating his body and resonating with his Life Fibers, Ichigo grimaced and added, "She's using Senkou already? I should go back and -"

"Might I enquire as to a moment of your time, Ichigo Kurosaki?"



Seras nearly jumped out of her skin when a man appeared on the other side of the rooftop in a burst of speed her eyes had barely tracked. Focusing her attention on the man's pristine white uniform, his short black hair cropped neatly above his glasses, Seras was surprised when Ichigo turned to the newly arrived man and scoffed, "You? How the hell did you find me?"

"That is not the proper question!" Quilge Opie smirked as he raised a gloved finger in front of his lips as he stared at the former substitute shinigami with amusement. Rain pelting his white Wandenreich uniform, the spiritual material repelling the water, the Sternritter sighed sarcastically before continuing, "The correct question you should ask is why I am here."

Lowering Tournesol's blade towards the ground, his hand still firmly clenching the hilt, Ichigo scowled, "Alright. Why the hell are you here?"

Quilge lowered his finger and looked over Ichigo's shoulder as a wave of spiritual energy washed over the city. Ryuko Matoi was putting up a much greater fight against Alucard than the Daten predicted. Gently removing his hat, one hand wiping away the rain collecting on his forehead, the Sternritter smirked before answering, "Now, that is quite a rude thing to say. I would think after our contributions in Japan you would have developed some modicum of respect for my organization. But perhaps I should get straight to the point. We are both busy people and I'm sure you wouldn't like to waste time speaking to someone that has vital information about the man Ryuko Matoi is currently fighting..."

Ichigo's mouth pulled into a grimace as he realized Quilge had a point. Even though the Quincy hadn't divulged any information about his organization or goals he had been truthful about reinforcements arriving to help fight against Satsuki Kiryuin and her mother. Looking over his shoulder back at the hotel, the power radiating from Ryuko and Senketsu slightly concerning, Ichigo scowled before turning back to the Sternritter, "What do you know?"

"I'm glad we could come to an understanding, Ichigo!" Quilge replied bombastically, one finger held in front of his smiling face, "My superior wishes to continue our current partnership into the future. Thus I have been given permission to divulge what we know about the creature eloquently dubbed Alucard."

"Alucard?" Ichigo replied in a perplexed tone, oblivious to Seras's breath hitching in her throat upon hearing them mention her master's name.

The Sternritter clapped his hands together enthusiastically, the mirth never leaving his face, before answering, "I can see from the concerned expression on your face that you wish for more information. Very well... let us begin! Since you are already familiar with the rules of our game I'll start with something simple - what are you doing in London, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

"I'm here to stop Ragyo Kiryuin. That's all you need to know."

Ichigo didn't know how Quilge found out he was in London but the former substitute shinigami wasn't about to let the matter drop. The two Quincy that returned alive from Honnouji Academy during the Great Culture and Sports Festival had left Karakura Town after only a day, which meant neither could have heard Olivier's orders. Narrowing his eyes slightly at the amused Sternritter Ichigo continued, "Now for my question - why are *you* here?"

"I see that you haven't forgotten your initial question but as the saying goes - silence is golden. That is something I am not at liberty to discuss," Quilge's smirk didn't falter even as Ichigo's eyes narrowed in suspicion. Absentmindedly adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves, his lips pursed in thought, the Sternritter added, "But that's not fair now, is it? This would not be a fair game if I could ignore any question I didn't feel like answering. Your trust in our organization would falter, which would only benefit Ragyo Kiryuin in the end. So please allow me to say the following - the Jahrtausendarmee will not stand against you."

"No, it isn't fair," Ichigo's smug answer caught Quilge off guard. Upon seeing the Sternritter's confused expression Ichigo continued, "You asked a question so there's my answer. What is the Jahrtausendarmee?"

"Oh?"

Quilge chuckled softly as he adjusted his glasses, the voice of His Majesty loud and clear in the hidden receiver in his ear. Ichigo Kurosaki's intelligence was just as high as the Daten suggested. Frowning slightly as he listened to His Majesty's words, the slight apprehension spreading across his face hidden by the storm raging around the city, Quilge smirked before responding, "It seems I forgot the rules of my own game for a moment. So! I shall be a man of my word. The Jahrtausendarmee is merely the name for a facet of our organization dedicated to defeating Ragyo Kiryuin at any cost. As for my question... would you believe me if I said the creature known as Alucard is a centuries old vampire?"

The silence on the rooftop was palpable as Ichigo stared incredulously at the Quincy. Resting Tournesol against his shoulder, Mugetsu's multicolored eyes narrowing at Quilge before turning up towards his face, Ichigo sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, "A vampire... that's just great. As if I didn't have enough to worry about without the freaking undead coming after -"

Ichigo was cut off when the sky erupted in shades of orange and red as a series of massive explosions detonated back at the hotel, the roof of the building igniting as dozens of military-grade Nudist Beach pincushion grenades went off simultaneously. Worried for Ryuko, the dark spiritual energy as strong as ever, Ichigo moved to shift Mugetsu into Gufū and go help when Quilge appeared directly in his path using Hirenkyaku.

"We are not quite done," Quilge's eyes were shadowed by darkness, his glasses gleaming malevolently, as he raised a gloved finger in front of his face, "Before you do anything hasty I should point out that you are powerful enough to defeat me. My Jail would certainly

be unable to contain a being of your power. Why, I might go as far as to say I wouldn't stand a chance against you. So why am I standing in your way, you ask?"

"That's something I would like to know..." Ichigo growled before reaching out and grabbing the front of Quilge's uniform, "But I'm also starting to get really curious about who the hell you are."

"Oh dear. It seems I forgot to tell you my name the last time we met. How very rude of me..." Quilge chuckled even as Ichigo tightened his grip on his uniform. Raising a hand to his glasses, the rain fogging up the lenses, the Sternritzer hummed for a moment before continuing, "Allow me to properly introduce myself, Ichigo Kurosaki! My name is Quilge Opie, former captain of the Jagdarmee and current captain of the Jahrtausendarmee."

A streak of ruby light, accompanied by Ryuko's shouting, stopped Ichigo before he could ask Quilge another question. Letting go of the Sternritzer, who took the opportunity to smooth out the creases on his uniform, Ichigo scowled when the shadows covering the roof sprang upwards and surrounded the Quincy. Staring at the man as he vanished into the darkness, the grin never leaving his face the entire time, Ichigo narrowed his eyes before turning around and blasting off into the sky towards Ryuko, Mugetsu wordlessly shifting into Gufū the moment his feet left the ground.

"A-Are they gone?"

Seras, who had witnessed the entire conversation from only a few meters away, cautiously peeked out from behind her cover once Ichigo and Quilge stopped talking. Glancing around the empty rooftop, the rain pelting against concrete and steel the only sounds she could hear, the fledgling vampire sighed loudly in relief before collapsing onto her back. As she stared up into the stormy skies, rain running down her face, Seras wondered what they were talking about. She was sure the one man, Quilge Opie, had interspaced German words into the conversation, but Seras had no idea what they meant.

"I wonder what Master is going to think of all this..."

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## **Kamui Tales #27 - Valentine's Day**

Nui loved Valentine's Day more than anything in the world... except maybe for Ichigo and Amu.

As she skipped cheerfully through the halls of Honnouji Academy, the normally packed and busy corridors strangely devoid of life, the Grand Couturier hummed happily as she clutched the gift currently pressed tightly against her chest. While Valentine's Day had always been the third best day of the entire year to Nui, only losing to Christmas and her birthday, this year promised to be extra special for one simple reason - Ichigo.

"I wonder if Ichigo's going to like my gift? I made it myself, after all..." Nui's sapphire eyes blinked owlishly as she thought over the question before giggling and sticking her tongue out, "Gosh, that was such a stupid thing for me to say. Of course he's going to like it! Homemade gifts are the perfect thing to give on Valentine's Day!"

Turning around the corner in the hallway, her pink boots skidding lightly on the polished floor, Nui smirked when she stepped on a pressure plate and activated one of Honnouji Academy's many defenses. Leaping straight into the air as several Anti-Life Fiber bullets tore through the air, her right arm swinging the purple Needle Blade through the air and destroying the rest, Nui smiled as she landed cutely on the ground. Taking a second to fix her pink Lolita dress Nui Harime continued walking forward as the trap exploded behind her.

"I know you're watching, Satsuki," Nui stared at one of the hidden cameras recording her every move and stuck her tongue out, "It's

really adorable how much effort you're putting into this. Too bad none of it's going to stop me from meeting Ichigo!"

Lips curling into a smile as she imagined the stern look Satsuki must have on her face by now, the steely gaze in her blue eyes to die for, Nui paused when she heard a faint beeping coming from her left. Kicking open the door to the classroom, the steel folding under her supernatural strength, Nui's blue eyes widened when she saw the explosives lining every inch of the room. Grumbling as the timer on the desk in front of her counted down to zero Nui puffed her cheeks out and huffed, "So it was a trap, huh?"

On the other side of Honnouji Academy, safely hidden behind layers of metal reinforced with Life Fibers, Satsuki Kiryuin watched as the monitors erupted in yellow and orange. Her hands instinctively moving to Bakuzan at her waist, the hardened Life Fiber weapon offering some modicum of protection against the eldritch abomination currently making its way towards them, Satsuki knew the traps wouldn't be enough, "Status, Inumuta?"

"The Grand Couturier is moving through Honnouji Academy faster than our predictions," Houka Inumuta answered, his fingers furiously typing in commands on the keyboard. Adjusting his glasses as he watched Nui Harime emerge from the smoke, the pink package still securely held against her chest, he turned to Satsuki and added, "Based on her current direction and velocity she should reach Ichigo Kurosaki in less than a minute."

"Than I suppose evacuating that wing of Honnouji Academy was the proper course of action," Ira Gamagori grumbled as he watched the Grand Couturier make a mockery of their defenses, "Shall I order the Disciplinary Committee to intercept her, Lady Satsuki?"

Satsuki narrowed her eyes as Nui Harime waved to another of Inumuta's hidden cameras, the image shifting to static as the Grand Couturier destroyed it. Valentine's Day was the worst day of the year solely for the fact that her mother's little helper took it upon herself to give everyone she knew *gifts* . Suppressing the shudder threatening

to well up as she remembered the present Nui Harime gave her last year, several of the bloody corpses too badly mangled to be recognized, Satsuki turned away from the monitors and closed her eyes, "That will not be necessary, Gamagori. The Grand Couturier's goal is to give her gift to Ichigo Kurosaki. Attempting to stand in her way will certainly lead to massive losses."

"Damn..." Sanageyama cursed and slammed a fist against the nearby wall, "We should be out there stopping her!"

"Nui Harime is not going to kill Ichigo Kurosaki," Satsuki replied calmly as she sat down and leaned her head back. Taking a sip of tea, the bitter liquid helping to calm her nerves, she continued, "Every Valentine's Day the Grand Couturier picks out one person and dedicates every fiber of her being into giving them a hand-crafted present or gift. Last year was my turn and this year it is Ichigo's."

Skipping to a halt outside a nondescript door, her smile widening as she felt Ichigo's Life Fibers through the metal, Nui raised her arm and politely knocked. Humming gently as she heard Ichigo coming to answer, her blue eyes sparking with glee, Nui thrust her arms forward when the door opened.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Ichigo!"

After taking a second to get over the shock that Nui Harime was not only in front of him, but was also *not* trying to tear his heart out, Ichigo looked at the gift in her hands and asked, "What is this?"

"It's Valentine's Day, Ichigo!" Nui replied bubbly as she stared into Ichigo's eyes, "It's the day of the year that I give a gift to the one person I love the most! This year it is your turn!"

Ichigo numbly took the gift from Nui Harime, his mind desperately trying to think of the ulterior motive for her actions. He knew she was insane but there had to be a real reason she would come all the way to Honnouji Academy besides giving him a stupid present. Unnerved

by the wide sapphire eyes staring into his soul, the Grand Couturiers hands clasped together under her chin, Ichigo decided to bite the bullet. Tearing the wrapping off the gift, fingers trembling as he wondered what she could have given him, Ichigo froze when he opened the package and saw what was inside.

"It's..."

Lying delicately inside the box, colored perfectly and at nearly an eighth scale, was a scale model of him wearing Mugetsu's activated configuration. Carefully removing the figure from the box, genuinely impressed by the detail Nui Harime put into it, Ichigo flipped it over in his hands and asked, "You made this yourself?"

"Yup!" Nui answered cheerfully before grabbing Ichigo's arm and dragging him out of the room, "Gosh, I knew you'd like it but I never thought you would love it! Let's go show Satsuki and all the other wet blankets hiding in their little room my wonderful gift!"



# The Magnificent Seven

*I present to you the latest chapter of **To My Death I Fight** and in just over a month from the last chapter (I do apologize for the long delays between chapters). In this chapter you'll see a lot of departures from canonical events even if they happen to proceed along the same general path. I won't spoil anything by explaining it to you. Read the chapter and review it once you're done.*

*There are a few special shout outs I'd like to give:*

*1) The first one goes to GasmaskAvenger and his Kill la Kill story - Maim de Maim. Check it out when you have a chance. It's a really good (one of the best) Kill la Kill AU stories on the site and is worth reading.*

*2) The second goes to **that-booky-chick15** on deviantart for his/her fantastic fan art of this story.*

*3) The last goes to everyone that contributed to my tvtropes page (just search To My Death I Fight tvtropes on google and you'll find it). Unfortunately I don't know everyone that contributed so I'll just list those that I do know (sorry the rest of you) - MechaManiac, Nitewind. If you contributed and want recognition please PM me and I'll add you fro the shout out in Chapter 44.*

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## Chapter 43 - The Magnificent Seven

"Mr. Bernadotte, what time is it?"

Pip Bernadotte, professional mercenary and current bodyguard for Sir Integra Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing, blinked as he tore his gaze away from the rather morbid painting plastered on the wall in front of

him. Rolling up the sleeve of his jacket he glanced at his watch before responding, "It's a few minutes past two thirty, Miss Hellsing."

Integra Hellsing's eyes narrowed in irritation as mild paranoia coursed through her veins, "They arranged this little rendezvous and still managed to be late. Do you think it's a trap?"

"We can only hope they're that stupid," Pip smirked as he reached into his suit and pulled out a carton of cigarettes, the words 'Lucky Strike' emblazoned on the side in bold red letters. Tapping the carton several times against the palm of his hand, fingers expertly extracting a single cigarette, Pip placed it between his lips before continuing, "I'm not a rank amateur out on his first mission. If the Vatican tries to pull anything funny my men will open fire before they even have a chance to blink."

"The Vatican interfering with our business is the last thing we need at the moment," Integra muttered as her thoughts drifted back to the events of the previous evening. The media was calling it a terrorist attack but the leader of the Hellsing Organization knew better. Alucard not only fought a creature of tremendous power, which was able to keep up with him in his released state, but also subsequently failed to obtain any useful information about who sent them. Knowing a creature existed that was immune to Alucard's normal method of information gathering, harming the vampire in the process, left a bad taste in Integra's mouth.

"So..." Pip grumbled under his breath as he lit the cigarette, "... any idea what sort of creature Alucard fought last night?"

With a flick of her wrist Integra reached out and snatched the cigarette from Pip's lips before crushing it in her fingers. Giving the mercenary a tense glare before pointing to the 'No Smoking' sign on the wall, eyes narrowed as she rubbed the ash off her gloved fingers, Integra sighed, "I don't know... but that woman not only possessed regeneration on par with Alucard's, which allowed her to heal from a point blank shot from the Jackal, but also wore a truly

scandalous outfit that transformed into more powerful forms with but a simple verbal command."

"Scandalous?" Pip had a mystified look on his face as he tried to visualize what Integra was talking about, "Wait a minute... you mean like one of those Japanese cartoon characters? You know, the cartoons with the magical girls that say a short phrase and their uniforms transform into -"

"Whatever the case may be..." Integra interjected before Pip could say another word, "... Alucard managed to overheard a single phrase - Life Fibers."

Pip's eye widened imperceptibly as he recalled the terrorist bombing of the Revocs Distribution Facility in Paris nearly a month ago, "Life Fibers? Aren't they some type of special fabric in Revocs clothing? Don't they, I don't know, keep the clothing clean and stuff?"

"That is the general consensus but privately Ragyo Kiryuin is notoriously tightlipped about the creation of Life Fibers," Integra responded, a hint of annoyance in her tone. After the embargo the Secret Intelligence Service, under the guidance of Sir Irons, attempted to locate the patent information pertaining to Life Fibers only to discover nothing of the sort existed. Even if Life Fibers were an industrial secret exclusive to Revocs, developed exclusively on site, some information should have been on record.

"Ah... Madame Kiryuin. Did you know she once offered us a job?"

The French mercenary did not miss the slight widening of Integra's eyes, cleverly hidden beneath the brim of her rather unique hat. Smirking at his current employer's shock Pip turned his attention back to the large painting on the wall and sighed while folding his hands inside his suit, "We were in Paris, relaxing after another finished job, when her little assistant came knocking at our door. Without so much as a hello Mademoiselle Hououmaru offered the Wild Geese nearly twenty million American dollars if we would take out a terrorist group attacking Revocs facilities in Japan."

Integra's face tightened slightly as she asked, "And why did you not take the job?"

"Because I have a knack for smelling bullshit," Pip ignored his employer's annoyance at the curse as he smirked but the smile never reached his eye, "Something about the job just didn't seem right. The CEO of the world's largest and most powerful clothing conglomerate offering mercenaries millions of dollars to take out some terrorists we never heard about? I would have to be an idiot to not smell a trap. I told Mademoiselle Hououmaru that we already had a job set up and to come back in a couple of months, which was unfortunate for her. That job ended up taking -"

"Oh... I think we're a bit late."

The Italian accented voice, echoing slightly in the spacious gallery, cut the mercenary off midsentence. Slowly walking towards them, a disarming smile plastered on his face, Enrico Maxwell laughed nervously as he pulled off his glasses, "The meeting was at two thirty, right?"

"Two fifteen," Integra replied curtly.

"Oh dear..." Maxwell chuckled in embarrassment and turned to Renaldo, "It seems I wrote down the wrong time. Please accept my apologies for keeping you waiting..."

"That is close enough!" Integra snapped, causing a barely flustered Maxwell to come to a halt several meters away, "What business does the Vatican have here? What possible reason could they have to send the Iscariot, the dirtiest of their dirty little secrets?"

"I know our reputation precedes us but there is no need for such rudeness," Maxwell chuckled, unperturbed by Integra's outburst, before noticing that the man standing just behind her was not Walter C. Dornez. Burying his suspicions about the Hellsing butler's absence, the smug expression on his face easily hiding his paranoia, Maxwell swung an arm across his chest and gave Integra a small

bow, "However... given the tragic loss of life last night I will allow that to slide. Now then, perhaps it is best I properly introduce myself. I am Enrico Maxwell, head of the Iscariot Organization and I must say, it is an honor to meet a woman of your stature."

"I don't care for either your name or pointless platitudes." An agitated growl escaped Integra's lips as she continued glaring at Maxwell, "Just tell me what you want."

"Come now. There's no need to be so harsh." The twitch plaguing Maxwell's left eye, which started the moment he stepped foot in England, became more noticeable while the smile on his face grew more forced. Clenching his left hand into a fist in order to keep his anger under control the leader of Iscariot decided to attempt diplomacy one final time, "We wouldn't come all the way here just to antagonize you Sir Integra..."

"I don't believe you!" Integra harshly cut off Maxwell as her patience for his prattling reached its limit, "Wolfe's actions in Badrick go against every one of our treaties! Northern Ireland is joint territory, which means we had full authority to deal with the problem yet Wolfe killed five of my best men without even a warning shot! And you have the audacity -"

"Shut up!"

Finally reaching his breaking point Maxwell stomped his right foot on the ground and angrily interrupted Integra before she could finish. Accidentally crushing his glasses in his hand, shards of glass quickly becoming embedded within his glove, Maxwell's left eye twitched as he leaned forward and sneered, "Did you honestly expect us to sit back and let you romp around as you please? Five men, you say... I wouldn't feel guilty if five million of your Protestant scum were slaughtered! As for these so-called violations... you know damn well you were supposed to inform the Vatican before even thinking of spreading your filth outside England, which is a fact you seem to have conveniently forgotten! So just shut up and pay attention! You miserable English sow!"

"A sow, you say?"

Alucard's echoing voice carried a hint of amusement as he phased through the wall behind Integra, the lights in the corridor dimming slightly in his presence. The corners of his mouth pulling upwards into a grin as he turned his full attention to the leader of Iscariot, his blood red eyes hidden behind orange sunglasses, Alucard chuckled as he slowly moved his hand towards his overcoat, "Leave it to Iscariot to inspire the fear of God into the masses... and with such fearsome insults as well. Honestly, more than two thousand years of your insane prattle and that's that best you could come up with? I'm insulted."

"Well, if it isn't the great vampire Alucard," Maxwell hid the twinge of nervousness visible in his eyes, a light sweat breaking out across his body as he felt the unholy power of the vampire, before taking a single step back and bowing his head, "I've heard all the stories about you but I never thought I would actually see you in person. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well... and now, I must bid you goodbye," Alucard chuckled as he slowly withdrew the Casull, his amusement increasing at Maxwell's unflinching demeanor. Dramatically propping the pistol on the crux of his left elbow, one red eye visible through his sunglasses, Alucard smirked as he aimed at Maxwell's forehead, "Do you expect me to allow you to live after calling my master a sow? Honestly, it's dealing with idiots like you that make this world interesting. So now I'm going to put a bullet through your head, you foolish little man."

"Oh, how absolutely terrifying..."

Maxwell flexed his fingers at Alucard's threat as the nearly invisible receiver in his ear flared into life. His left eye continuing to twitch as he stepped forward, anger replaced by veiled amusement, Maxwell smirked and snapped his fingers, "What am I ever to do now that your little pet has put a gun to my face and threatened to kill me?"

Well... I believe turnabout is fair play. So why don't we even the odds a bit? Wolfe!"

Integra's eyes widened as she caught the faintest of movements in the skylights lining the ceiling of the corridor. Craning her neck upwards as a figure crashed through the roof, the light fluttering of clothing barely audible to her ears, she mentally cursed when Heinkel Wolfe landed several meters behind Maxwell. Exhaling loudly as she crouched on the ground, the faint crackle of broken glass echoing through the mostly empty halls, Heinkel's mouth twisted into an annoyed sneer as she stood up and locked eyes with Alucard.

"We meet again, vampire," Heinkel spat vehemently as she reached into her cassock and withdrew a single pistol engraved with the words 'Jesus Christ is in Heaven' along the barrel. A small huff leaving her lips as she snapped her arm up and aimed directly between Alucard's eyes, the Macedonian silver rounds blessed directly by the Pope powerful enough to put even him down, Heinkel's straw-colored hair shifted in an unfelt breeze as she growled in a thick German accent, "Don't think you'll survive a second time."

"Is that so?"

A series of amused chuckles reverberated throughout the corridor as Alucard stepped forward, his path taking him between Integra and Pip, and slowly removed his orange sunglasses. As blood red eyes pierced through the area, his fedora blowing off as the lights surrounded him dimmed ever so slightly, Alucard pulled the Jackal from within his overcoat and pointed it directly at Heinkel's forehead, "I'm not one to back down from an enemy, especially one as interesting as you. So come then, Judas Priest! Let's see which one of us is left standing in the end!"

"Keep laughing, vampire," Heinkel's muscles tensed as she began approaching Alucard, her enhanced senses picking up on each of the vampire's subtle twitches and movements, "This fight will be

finished with but a single bullet to your blackened heart. Iscariot does not back down when the enemy presents itself!"

"Calm down, Heinkel!" Maxwell felt a twitch of fear and nervousness course through his body as Heinkel ignored his orders while continuing to walk towards Alucard. The fallout from Heinkel engaging Alucard in England, on an ordered peaceful meeting, would undoubtedly lead to severe consequences for Iscariot. Extending an arm outwards, his fingers grasping at Heinkel's cassock, the leader of Iscariot raised his voice and shouted, "Stop! I'm ordering you to stand down!"

"Hi!"

Before the situation could escalate any further Seras Victoria, clad in the guise of a tour guide, came waltzing through the corridor accompanied by a large group of elderly Japanese tourists taking pictures of everything they saw. Blowing on the whistle in her hand, blue eyes carefully looked back and forth between Heinkel and her master, Seras waved to the tourists and muttered, "Everyone with the Japanese tour this way please! Right this way please! We're walking this way... we're walking. Kochi desu yo,"

"Damn it..." A string of German curses escaped Heinkel's lips as she stared at the group of tourists blocking her path. While she was confident enough in her own skills to safely aim through the throng of elderly tourists Heinkel didn't put it past Alucard to kill them just to reach her, "This isn't the proper place for a fight. There are too many innocent people here."

"Agreed... now if you'll excuse me, I'm going back to sleep. Getting up in the middle of the day is truly exhausting..."

The excited grin on Alucard's face slowly fell away as the ancient vampire realized he would not have the opportunity to fight Heinkel. As he holstered the Jackal inside his overcoat, the black metallic pistol vanishing into the shadows composing his body, Alucard paused midstride when his thoughts drifted back to his battle the



night prior against the creature known as Ryuko, "... but before I leave I met the most interesting man last night."

As Seras chuckled nervously, the fledgling vampire doing her best to keep violence from breaking out, Alucard's lips quirked upwards into a smug grin as he focused his attention on Maxwell and Heinkel, "The creature from last night, I believe Ryuko was her name, had quite the intriguing accomplice. Perhaps you know of him? He certainly seemed to be quite familiar with you people. Does the name... Alexander Anderson ring any bells?"

"What!?"

Maxwell took an involuntary step forward, his violet eyes widening in shock upon hearing Alucard utter the most hated name in Iscariot, and seethed, "How do you know that name? Tell me!"

"So Iscariot has a traitor?" Alucard's laughter rang throughout the corridor as he drank in the anger and stunned surprise etched onto Iscariot's faces. Pivoting around, his heavy footsteps echoing hollowly upon the marble tiles, the vampire gave one final chuckle, "It is truly amusing to see the infallible image of your organization shattered. Why, it almost makes you lot look... human."

Heinkel's eyes were hidden behind her glasses, the lenses shining brightly from the ambient lighting, as she pulled free of Maxwell's loosened grip and sulked away. Shoulders hunched forward slightly as she holstered her pistol, her stride barely breaking in the process, the paladin waited a few seconds before scoffing, "If you'll excuse me, sir, I think I'll head back to Rome."

In a rare show of seriousness, characterized by the tightening of his eyes, Maxwell grimaced and whispered under his breath, "You caught that name, didn't you? You think it's..."

"It's not a very common name," Heinkel replied briskly, her answer cutting Maxwell off before he could finish. Giving Renaldo a brief but courteous nod, the older man visibly relieved the meeting hadn't

resorted to violence, Heinkel did not appreciate what Alucard was insinuating. Hands clenching into fists, her gloves crackling under the strain, she spat vehemently before continuing, "But I'm going to return to the orphanage and dig through the records. After more than thirteen years only to hear that name again..."

"Inform me the moment you discover anything," Maxwell grunted, his thoughts shifting to his miserable childhood at Anderson's orphanage before the murderer had fled into the wilderness. Turning his attention to Integra, an insufferable smug look adorning her face, Maxwell's lips pursed in disgust as he added, "It might be wise to leave Yumiko out of the loop... at least until we're certain about what's really going on."

"Well now, it appears we both have to contend with rather difficult subordinates," Integra scoffed, a mixture of irritation and amusement in her tone, as she watched Heinkel leave through the opposite end of the corridor, "But if you're done posturing I think it's time we moved onto business. What say you, Pig?"

Maxwell chuckled nervously as he raised his right arm, "Of course! Now that all that pointless violence has been worked out of our systems perhaps you wish to join me in the café garden?"

"Humph," Integra smirked victoriously as she walked past Maxwell, "After you..."

As the two leaders left to converse elsewhere, the atmosphere still charged from their mutual hatred of each other, Pip let out a sigh of relief. Subconsciously reaching for the packet of Lucky Strike in his breast pocket, the comforting smell of nicotine already easing his mind, he could not help but ponder what sort of crimes Alexander Anderson had done against Iscariot. Shaking his head upon realizing such questions were far about his pay Pip turned to Seras, who was lightly chuckling while waving nervously at him, and gave her a thumbs up, "That was very good, Miss Seras."

Her mood quickly shifting upon the positive encouragement Seras returned the gesture and replied, "Thank you!"

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During the Valentine Brother's assault on the Hellsing Manor the ground floor study had been one of the few rooms to remain completely intact. Full of nothing but books pertaining to the histories of various European countries, a thin layer of dust always coating the walls despite Walter's best efforts, it contained little incentive for either of the brothers to investigate during their brief rampage. This made it the perfect temporary stay for any guests arriving at the manor while any remaining blood and visceral was removed and cleaned.

A yawn escaped Ryuko Matoi's mouth as she leaned her head back against the aged leather couch, tired blue eyes briefly focusing on the singular bang of red hair hovering over her face. Blinking tiredly while suppressing a second yawn she glanced at the century-old grandfather clocked in the far corner of the room, the pendulum within the clear body endlessly swinging back and forth, before groaning out of sheer boredom, "Why the hell did you drag us along if we can't even come to your stupid meeting? I didn't get any sleep last night because of that vampire bastard!"

"Ye can get some rest later," Alexander Anderson ignored Ryuko's impatient behavior as he leaned against the wall next to the doors of the study. As his fingers flexed instinctively, the tailor bayonets sealed within his gloves able to be summoned at a moment's notice, the former priest's glasses reflected the afternoon sunlight filtering through the sole window of the room before continuing, "But ye should consider yerself lucky. If it weren't for the Life Fibers woven in yer body ye would have suffered a fate worse than death."

Ryuko's eyes narrowed slightly as she recalled what little information she knew about vampires, "Are you saying I would have been turned

into a vampire?"

"Only if ye were a virgin," Anderson replied curtly, his head turning imperceptibly towards the orange haired teenager standing next to the window. The former priest locked gazes with Ichigo for nearly ten seconds, the scowl on the teenager's face deepening in response, before he scoffed and shook his head, "If ye weren't... ye would have become what's known as a ghoul. An undead corpse while yer soul suffers eternal torment at the hands of the vampire that bit ye. That's not a fate would wish on anyone... even ye two."

There was a palpable silence after Anderson finished his explanation, the endless ticking of the grandfather clock the only sounds permeating the study for nearly a minute. Eyes staring at the floor while he contemplated what the former priest was implying, the very notion of someone having their soul endlessly tormented sickening him, Ichigo's face twisted into a disgusted scowl as he pushed off the wall and turned towards Anderson, "This doesn't make any sense. If Alucard is this dangerous then why the hell hasn't the Soul Society killed him?"

"That's a very good question."

Anderson's green eyes narrowed in suspicion as his lips pulled into a small sneer, "That unholy monster hiding in the guise of a woman seeks to bring about the apocalypse, her every action anathema to humanity, yet we haven't seen hide or hair of the shinigami. Are these supernatural beings truly as benevolent as ye claim?"

"The shinigami can go to hell for all I care," Ryuko growled as she crossed her legs upon the table in front of the couch, white sneakers contrasting heavily with the recently created addition to Senketsu.

She had heard all about the Soul Society and shinigami thanks to Ichigo and Kisuke, the latter all too willing to describe fanciful stories of his time as captain of the Twelfth Division, and Ryuko could safely say with absolute certainty that they were a bunch of stuck up pricks still living hundreds of years in the past. Glowering angrily as she

folded her arms across Senketsu and glanced at the grandfather clock, the small hand shifted barely past the large two, Ryuko closed her eyes and snorted, "They didn't help us out at the festival so why the hell should we care about them? All I want to do right now is hunt down that undead bastard and kick his pale ass."

" ***That's not a very smart idea, Ryuko,***" Senketsu's multicolored eye blinked once before shifting upwards towards Ryuko, ***"Alucard was much stronger than you. If you attempt to fight him again there's a good chance you could die."***

"Gee, thanks for the pep talk," Ryuko responded sarcastically. Pulling at her Kamui's lapels when she saw him roll his eye, a soft telepathic growl reaching her ears as a result, Ryuko asked, "Whose side are you on anyway? Besides, I know all about vampires thanks to those crappy books Mako borrowed from Honnouji Academy's library. All I gotta do is stake the bastard's heart and he's dead, right?"

Senketsu paused for a few seconds, his single eye narrowed in contemplation, before replying, ***"His regeneration was on par with your own. Driving a stake through his heart might not be enough to stop him."***

"That's just perfect..."

Ryuko grimaced, an annoyed scowl set on her face, as she vividly recalled Alucard regenerating from his seemingly fatal wounds with that obnoxious smirk plastered on his face. She didn't know what it would take to finally kill the undead bastard but Ryuko was more than willing to keep on trying. Yawning as she leaned her head back against the couch, blue eyes focused on the ceiling while she imagined wiping the smug grin off Alucard's face, Ryuko stiffened and asked, "Wait... does this mean werewolves are also real?"

Anderson, who had been intently following Ryuko's side of her conversation with Senketsu, uncrossed his arms and pushed off the wall before answering, "Did ye think shinigami and yer so-called

hollows are the only supernatural creatures inhabiting this world? Don't be daft. This world is full of inhuman creatures, vampires and werewolves included, but ye Life Fiber Hybrids are at the top of the food chain."

As the grandfather clock continued ticking in the background, the afternoon sunlight filtering through the window illuminating the dust in the air, Ryuko subconsciously rubbed the flawless skin on her neck. It worried her to know that Senketsu's full power, which was enough to scare a psychopathic monster like Nui Harime, couldn't even leave a scratch on Alucard. Exhaling loudly, her breath causing the red bang in her hair to sway in the sudden breeze, Ryuko grumbled, "Vampires, huh? I wonder how many other myths are real."

"Oh, goddamn it..."

Ichigo's eyes snapped open as he finally connected together what was plaguing him for the past few days. Groaning from a mixture of annoyance and self-loathing as he collapsed on the couch next to Ryuko, one hand rubbing the bridge of his nose to stave off the oncoming headache, Ichigo couldn't believe he was such an idiot. He should have seen something like this coming from a mile away yet he walked headfirst into it without even a second thought. Aware that his outburst had caught both Anderson and Ryuko's attention he sighed before explaining, "Before we left Kisuke told me all myths are based on reality. That bastard knew about Alucard the entire time."

"Why the hell didn't he give us a damn warning?" Ryuko growled, her hand already reaching for the Scissor Blade in the pouch on her waist, "Screw him! When we get back to Karakura Town I'm going to kick his ass!"

"Calm yerself," Anderson frowned as he lightly strummed his fingers against the sleeves of his cassock. Lips pulled into a tight grimace the former priest turned towards the window as his accent thickened, "Kisuke Urahara shall pay for his deception. Ye can be sure of that."

Upon our return to Karakura Town I vow to drive my bayonets into his body, shinigami or not, until he learns a valuable lesson about honesty. Now quiet down. We have company."

"Company?" Ryuko leaned forward on the couch, one eyebrow quirked in confusion, and looked around, "I don't see -"

A series of knocks against the thick oak doors of the study, coming every three seconds, interrupted Ryuko before she could finish asking her question. Blue eyes firmly focused on the doors as they opened, the exhaustion plaguing her body quickly vanishing, Ryuko found herself disappointed when a thin man clad in the formal attire of a butler slowly walked into the room. Hands clasped firmly against the small of his back, white dress shirt and purple vest freshly dried and pressed, Walter C. Dornez took a second to adjust his tie as he observed the two teenagers accompanying the Nudist Beach liaison.

Upon first glance that didn't seem like much, their eyes betraying the familiar hint of cockiness and arrogance so prevalent in modern youth, but Walter found his attention focusing on the rather unique school uniforms they wore. There was something slightly perturbing about the eyes stitched into their lapels but the aged butler decided that was a matter for another time. Straightening his back, the monocle over his left eye reflecting the afternoon sun, Walter turned to Anderson and gave a small bow, "I do apologize for the fifteen minute delay of our meeting. Sir Integra recently suffered a slight change in her schedule, which unfortunately required my unique services. I thank you for your patience but I must insist on seeing your credentials."

"But of course," Anderson stepped forward, his hand reflexively picking up the silver briefcase from the table, and continued, "Olivier mentioned a phrase, some sort of password to verify my identity. I believe it was... Briggs."

"Very good. Everything seems to be in order."

Walter's shoes squeaked against the varnished floor as he turned towards Anderson and extended a hand, his lips curling into a pleased smile upon hearing the correct password. Waiting until the former priest shook his hand, Anderson's grip strength actually managing to surprise the former vampire hunter, Walter continued, "Your superior was quite insistent I prepare everything before your arrival. All the documents and papers you requested are located in the conference room just across the manor. I even took the liberty of transferring them to a flash drive for convenience."

Anderson paused as something stung the edges of his senses, a familiar feeling permeating his mind and causing him to briefly look towards the exit of the study. When the sensation passed just as quickly as it arrived, replaced by the calmness of the afternoon, an imperceptible grimace spread across his face, "It seems ye have yer house in order. My men would appreciate having this information as soon as possible."

The smile on Walter's face faded slightly as he turned his attention away from Anderson towards the two teenagers in the room. Although morally against conscripting children for battle the aged butler decided to keep his opinions to himself and motioned for Anderson to follow him, "This won't take more than ten minutes but I must insist your companions remain in the study until we return. The manor is still on high alert after last week's attack. Some of the new guards might accidentally mistake them for intruders."

"That's not a problem," Anderson's growl cut Ryuko off just as she opened her mouth to retort, the subtle glare in his green eyes stopping her from saying anything. Pausing as he reached the doors of the study, his free hand pressed against the oak frame, the former priest looked over his shoulder at Ichigo, "Perhaps ye should give yer father a call."

A grim expression settled on Ichigo's face as Anderson continued out of the room, Walter quietly closing the doors behind them with a soft click. Leaning his head back against the couch as the two men's footsteps faded away, the monotonous ticking from the grandfather



clock the only sound piercing the silence, Ichigo sighed and ran a hand through his orange hair. With everything that had happened last night, including getting shot out of a building by a vampire, he completely forgot to call his dad.

Swallowing his annoyance as he reached into his pocket Ichigo groaned upon noticing he had nearly twenty unanswered calls. Staring at the blinking number in the corner of the screen for nearly a minute, Ryuko leaning over his shoulder in curiosity, he shrugged before snapping the phone closed, "Damn, I forgot to call my old man last night and knowing him, he probably fell asleep next to the phone. But he's probably asleep by now..."

"Then I suppose you don't care if I borrow your phone?"

Before Ichigo realized what was happening Ryuko reached over, snatched the phone out of his hand and jumped off the couch. Tiredly stretching her back as she stood up and looked around the study, a strange familiar feeling scratching the edges of her mind, Ryuko absentmindedly walked away from Ichigo as she searched through his list of contacts, "I wanted to call Satsuki last night but that undead bastard destroyed my phone. If I don't talk to her soon Gamagori is going to seriously piss me off with one of his stupid speeches about tardiness and proper discipline."

**" You do realize it's because she's worried about you, Ryuko."**

"Don't remind me," Ryuko growled at her Kamui, one foot stomping temperamentally against the ground, as memories of Satsuki's apology several days after the festival coursed through her mind, "I don't care if she is my sister, I'm still a little pissed at all the crap she put us through!"

**" You're being stubborn,"** Senketsu sighed as he felt Ryuko's blood pressure rising, the motion causing his uniform to flutter lightly against her body. Mentally frowning when the taste of her blood changed, undoubtedly due to her shifting mood, Senketsu stared up

at Ryuko and sarcastically asked, **"Would you feel better if Satsuki allowed you to hit her?"**

"I already tried doing that," Ryuko muttered impetuously as she folded her arms across Senketsu, "It didn't work."

After Satsuki recovered from her coma, mostly due to Orihime's miraculous healing, Ryuko had rushed to the hospital and confronted her sister about everything she did at Honnouji Academy. Ten minutes of shouting later, mostly on Ryuko's end, Satsuki had stoically spread her arms and told her sister that she could strike her down if it helped make her feel better. How, Satsuki told her, could she hope to defeat Ragyo Kiryuin if she couldn't withstand a punch from her own sister? Both angry and annoyed at Satsuki she had decided to take her sister up on her offer... only for Gamagori and Sanageyama to repeatedly get in her way. After more than half a dozen failed attempts to punch Satsuki, which in the end accomplished nothing more than leaving the two members of the Elite Four unconscious in a smoking pile on the ground, Ryuko had thrown her hands into the air and gave up in frustration.

**" I could sense she was being truthful, Ryuko."** When Ryuko frowned in retaliation, her blue eyes glued onto the phone, he added, **"Because she is your sister Satsuki possesses similar blood to you. Therefore I -"**

Cursing when she accidentally typed in the wrong number, her fingers furiously deleting several numbers, Ryuko quirked an eyebrow and scoffed, "Are you suggesting you want to be worn by Satsuki?"

**" What? No!"** There was no mistaking the sense of betrayal in the Kamui's voice at even the notion of being worn by anyone besides Ryuko, **"You are the only one that I will ever allow to wear me!"**

Propping his head against the arm of the couch as he listened to Senketsu apologize to Ryuko, the Kamui's sputtering causing Mugetsu to laugh, Ichigo couldn't help but feel there was something

about Alucard he was missing. Pursing his lips as an idea came to mind he stood up and walked over to the table on the other side of the study, scraps of paper and a single pen scattered haphazardly across its surface. Briefly mulling over what he knew about vampires, which wasn't much to begin with, Ichigo shook his head before writing down Alucard's name and stepping away from the table.

" ***Alucard...***" Mugetsu stared at the strange name for several seconds before asking Ichigo, ***"It's a rather weird name. I don't think anyone at Honnouji Academy had a name this weird. It almost seems made up."***

"Made up you say..." Ichigo muttered as he stared at the seven letters scribbled on the scrap of paper for nearly a minute before giving up. Sighing as he tossed the piece of paper away to start over fresh, several ideas coming to mind, Ichigo's eyes momentarily glanced across the table and froze at what he saw.

"Oh... damn it..."

Nervous fingers reaching for the scrap of paper, which had flipped over when he threw it away, Ichigo's mind ground to a halt when he transposed the letters in Alucard's name and realized who Ryuko fought last night.

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"We are aware you're looking at a particular word in connection with your recent troubles," Maxwell pushed the plate of food aside, his hunger forgotten for the moment, and motioned at Integra with his hand, "It is also known to us that you've had some... difficulty uncovering anything of worth."

A stiff autumn wind blew through the café garden as Integra leaned back in the chair, "Yes, that's more or less true."

"Millennium..." Maxwell's lips twisted into a conniving smirk, his left eye narrowing slightly, as he watched Integra's breath hitch in her

throat, mild surprise evident on her face. Strumming his fingers against the black briefcase lying on the table in front of him, his head propped against a fist, the leader of Iscariot chuckled in amusement and asked, "Is that not correct?"

Integra's face pulled into a nearly imperceptible grimace, her appetite all but gone, before she gently placed the cup of tea in her hand back on the table. Given the Vatican's massive budget and nearly limitless resources it should have been obvious Iscariot would have information on the true perpetrators behind the Valentine Brother's assault. Staring across the table at Maxwell, the smug look adorning his face irritating her far more than it should, Integra tilted her head slightly to the right and scoffed, "I believe you're referring to the Jahrtausendarmee, if I'm not mistaken."

"Oh?"

Maxwell was honestly surprised by Integra's response to what had been a rhetorical question. The sneer on his face disappearing as he straightened his back, fingers tapping lightly against the surface of the briefcase one final time, Maxwell closed his eyes and laughed, "You already know of them? And here I was under the assumption you were completely clueless about the group that killed your men."

"One of the creatures involved in last night's incident conversed with a man proclaiming himself a member of the Jahrtausendarmee... German for Millennium Army. We also managed to acquire this man's name - Quilge Opie," Integra paused when she noticed Maxwell's eyes briefly widen, a hint of nervousness in his expression. Leaning forward onto the table, her hands clasped together underneath her chin, Integra's tone hardened, "You're familiar with this man. Who is he?"

"Come now, Sir Integra. Do you truly believe our organization is omniscient? The name certainly sounds familiar but then again, such a unique name is not so easily forgotten," Maxwell replied with a mocking chuckle, causing Integra to narrow her eyes in suspicion. Ignoring his counterpart's gaze as he pulled the briefcase closer, one

finger resting upon the combination lock near the handles, Maxwell shrugged his shoulders and closed his eyes, "We are both busy people so I think it is time I place my cards on the table. Do you wish for our files on Millennium? Do you want to know everything we know? Yes... or no?"

A faint sigh escaped Integra's lips at Maxwell's audacity. In any other instance she would have stood up and walked away from Iscariot but Integra knew she didn't have the comfort of time on her side. Folding her hands in her lap once more, fingers clenched tightly at what she was about to say, Integra silently took a deep breath and muttered, "Yes... please..."

Maxwell softly giggled as his fingers began working on briefcase's combination lock, the four dials slowly clicking into place one at a time. Hearing the supplication and humility in the Protestant's voice was music to his ears but he knew better than to press his luck with Integra, especially given the fact her pet vampire was still lurking about in the shadows. Grin widening as he heard the last lock click into place, the two handles of the briefcase opening simultaneously, Maxwell pulled out a thick black book and placed it in the middle of the table, "Very well then... allow me to present to you... Millennium!"

"Sixty years ago, during the final days of the Second World War, Nazi party loyalists attempted to flee Germany but they couldn't do it alone. An extraction operation was required but with allied forces closing in they didn't have the benefit of patience," Maxwell explained to a stoic Integra, one finger pointing directly at her face. As the wind coursing through the café garden momentarily intensified, the chill causing him to shiver slightly, the leader of Iscariot sipped his tea before continuing, "However... despite all of their preparations most of the loyalists were killed before they could leave Berlin by the Russians when a stray bomb destroyed their underground passageway. Others were captured and killed when the Americans accidentally stumbled across one of their convoys. The

few thousand that survived fled to South American where they found refuge with local Nazi sympathizers."

"And these survivors belonged to Millennium... or rather the Jahrtausendarmee?" Integra pondered, one eyebrow rising above her glasses, "You never answered my question. Who is Quilge Opie?"

"Quilge Opie..." The smile on Maxwell's face vanished as his tone became uncharacteristically somber, a stark contrast to his normal confidence, "... to be perfectly honest we are as puzzled about this man as you Protestant pigs. The communications and missives we recovered from surviving Nazi officers before the Nuremberg Trials mentioned that name yet we couldn't find a single trace of that man. No photographs, records or even family. It was assumed he was nothing more than a fantasma, a figure used by the Nazis to cover their tracks, yet you claim your pet overheard one of these... creatures... speaking with this man?"

"Seras..." Integra growled, emphasizing her name for Maxwell, "... is quite certain what she heard is accurate."

"How disconcerting," Maxwell coughed into his hand and cleared his throat. Knowing that Quilge Opie not only existed but was also currently present in London worried the leader of Iscariot. Sighing deeply in order to clear his mind, mentally noting to look into Quilge's background once he returned to the Vatican, Maxwell gently placed his hand on the book and smirked, "While I would love to allow you access to the information contained within these pages I must ask of you a favor. A gift, if you would be so quaint."

Integra's posture stiffened as her eyes shifted between the book and Maxwell, "A gift?"

Maxwell's left eye sporadically twitched as he slammed his hand on the table, the silverware clattering violently, and sneered with his teeth bared, "Allow us to enter your godless country and hunt down the traitor Alexander Anderson!"

An awkward silence followed Maxwell's outburst, his breathing coarse and ragged, before Integra folded her arms across her chest and asked, "Before I even dare to consider your request I wish to know one thing. What did Alexander Anderson do to Iscariot to warrant such a reaction?"

"Twenty three years ago Anderson was one of Iscariot's most promising paladins. His skill and strength unparalleled," Maxwell looked away from Integra as shame passed across his face. Hands folded together on the table, knuckles bleeding white beneath his gloves, Maxwell paused momentarily before grimacing and turning back to Integra, "But he grew weary and retired to work at an orphanage in Kobe, Japan. When he returned to Rome thirteen years ago... something changed. Without provocation he murdered more than a dozen members of the Holy Conclave but before we could arrest him he vanished back into the wind. Apparently his mind snapped and he believed the chief supplier of Vatican clothing, the illustrious Ragyo Kiryuin, was some unholy creature from the pits of hell."

Integra was barely able to contain her surprise beneath a mask of indifference at Maxwell's mention of the Revocs CEO. Leaning back and crossing her legs, any remaining appetite long since gone as she came to several disturbing revelations, she pursed her lips and asked, "What makes you think our people know where Anderson is? You said he's delusional about Ragyo Kiryuin. He could simply be in the country due to the upcoming embargo vote on Revocs merchandise. Alucard's actions last night should prove beyond a reasonable doubt that we are in no way colluding with Anderson."

"That is what we figured," Maxwell's left eye twitched as he ran a hand through his silver hair, "Anderson is a man of focus and determination, traits that Wolfe shares in abundance. Hunting him down will not be easy, especially given the animosity between our organizations. Therefore I wish to parley one final piece of information... to gain your cooperation, of course."

When Integra deigned to simply stare at him, her eyes narrowed slightly, Maxwell smirked and asked, "Aren't you the least bit curious how the Vatican knows so much about Millennium?"

An involuntary gasp escaped Integra's lips, "You..."

"Oh! I see you figured it out. Yes! We were the ones that helped the Nazis!" Maxwell's demented laughter ground against Integra's ears and it took all her self-control for her to not tell him to shut up. Fingers tapping against the black book before he slid it across the table towards Integra, the leader of Hellsing reluctant to touch him, Maxwell leaned forward as his left eye twitched, "Now ask yourself a simple question - why would I ever tell a pig like you this information? The answer is simple. We already know where Millennium is hiding! When we helped them escape Europe we gave them access to a select group of bank accounts, each of which has been carefully monitored. The last withdrawal took place five days ago in Rio de Janeiro. Now, is that sufficient enough to warrant your cooperation?"

Integra sneered as she flipped through the book, her eyes focusing on the handwriting detailing past accounts and dealings between the Jahrtausendarmee and the greater Nazi party. Tearing her attention away from the book after nearly a minute Integra sighed and looked at Maxwell, "You've made your point. For your... cooperation... we shall forward any information on Alexander Anderson. If we find him you'll be the first to know. Now then, about your information..."

"I think they are starting to put everything together."

Staring through the window at Integra and Maxwell, a smirk appearing on his face upon watching the two adversaries arguing over trivial things, a man wearing a blood-stained lab coat ignored his food and turned his attention back to his companion. Folding his hands politely on the table, multi-lensed glasses shining malevolently, the Doktor shook his head and said, "It appears they already know about the Jahrtausendarmee."



"Putting it together, you say?" The Major wiped sauce off his cheeks as he placed the fork down on the table, the piece of steak stabbed on the end momentarily forgotten. Staring at the Doktor from over the rims of his glasses, yellow eyes gleaming knowingly, he chuckled and added, "Don't be ridiculous, Herr Doktor. They don't know anything about anything. All they can do is dance to His Majesty's tune like marionettes until we cut the strings."

Despite his compatriot's confidence the bemused grin fell off the Doktor's face as he remembered the sole variables in His Majesty's plans. Subconsciously biting the tip of his thumb hard enough to draw blood, the latex glove stained a deep crimson, the blond haired man's face pulled into a reluctant grimace as he motioned to the Major with his hand, "... and the recent complications to the Schatten Ausrufung?"

The Major's grin didn't falter as he sipped his wine, "Are you referring to our allies, Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi?"

"His Majesty did not foresee their arrival," the Doktor muttered as he tapped his fingers against the table, "All of our plans will be ruined if they were to act against us."

"Ah, but they won't, Herr Doktor."

There was no mistaking the amused tone in the Major's voice as he sat back in the chair and folded his hands underneath his chin, "For what possible reason would those children betray us? Have we not fought alongside them at Honnouji Academy, sacrificing life and limb to stop Ragyo Kiryuin's grand plans? On the contrary, it is they who will play the biggest role of all in His Majesty's plans and we have no one to thank but our old friend Alucard. And Quilge, who played his part magnificently in delivering the message. All we need to do now, Herr Doktor, is sit back and allow the pieces to move into place."

The Doktor's grin returned briefly as he asked, "It is my imagination or are you enjoying this?"

"Enjoying is hardly the proper word for this feeling." The corners of the Major's lips twisted into a perverse grin as he stared at his fellow Quincy, "I'm ecstatic! Positively giddy with anticipation at what's to come! Just think of the struggle that surely awaits us as the curtain falls upon the illustrious Ragyo Kiryuin. The Schatten Ausrufung shall be His Majesty's greatest accomplishment and we, Herr Doktor, shall have front row seats."

Silence permeated the café for almost a minute after the Major's speech, the worry etched onto the Doktor's face balanced by his compatriots confidence, before the doors to the kitchen swung open and a young man in his late teens hurried out. Quickly making his way towards their table, several plates precariously balanced on his hands, the young man gave a brief apology as he placed the meals in front of the two Quincy, "I apologize for the delay in your order, gentlemen. Our normal chef called in sick with the flu and it took a little while to call in a replacement. My manager asks that you look at the menu and enjoy a complimentary dessert to make up for the troubles."

"Ah, very good." The Major gave the waiter a curt wave of his hand as he opened the menu, "The service and food here has been most excellent. You can look forward to a most generous tip."

The young waiter gave one last thanks to the Major before turning back towards the kitchen, his ears perking when the two men switched from English to German. Pushing the door to the kitchen open with his back, the empty plates balanced carefully on his hands, the waiter made sure to carefully step over the bound and gagged chef as he placed the dishes in the sink. Crouching down next to the chef, who was still unconscious thanks to a healthy dose of chloroform, the waiter chuckled as he ran a hand through his black hair, "Lady Ragyo will be very interested in hearing about the Jahrtausendarmee and 'His Majesty.'"

Tearing off the uniform he borrowed from the usual waiter, whose car just so happened to be stuck in the middle of Liverpool without gasoline, the man chuckled as he put on an olive-green jacket before

calmly strolling towards the rear exit of the café. He could never have guessed spying on the meeting between Iscariot and the Hellsing Organization would lead to such a bountiful wealth of information. Ragyo Kiryuin was going to find the presence of Quincy in London interesting to say the very least.

His shoes echoing lightly on the marble tiles as he stepped back into the museum, fingers deftly closing the emergency exit with nary a sound, the man subtly looked back and forth before reaching into his jacket and pulling out a small receiver. Smirking when he heard the two men from the café speaking German loud and clear, thanks in no small part to the transmitter placed on the Major's coat, the man chuckled as he walked away, "Vielen dank und auf wiedersehen..."

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Kinue Kinagase's face was illuminated as she stared at her phone, the brief message from Aikuro visible in the midnight darkness, before snapping it shut and standing up. Blue heels clicking softly against the roof, Danketsu's purple lines glowing softly, Kinue watched with mild interest as a single helicopter tore across the skies overhead. Staring passively at the aircraft as it flew towards Guanabara Bay in the distance, the bright from the resort distract a stark contrast to the rest of Rio de Janeiro, she shook her head before sliding her cell phone into the small pouch wrapped around her left leg. Reaching around to the small of her back, fingers deftly unlatching the pair of binoculars clasped against her waist, Kinue walked over to the edge of the rooftop and knelt down as she spied on the Rio de Janeiro Distribution Facility nearly half a kilometer away.

"Several guards at the entrance... each wielding high-powered Anti-Life Fiber weapons..." Kinue muttered as she clicked a button on the side of the binoculars and zoomed in on one of the guard's uniforms, "... ballistic armor is composed of at least ten percent Life Fibers... hmm? What's this?"

Lowering the binoculars when a single truck arrived at the facility, its bright headlights causing the front of the building to light up in shades of sickly yellow and white, Kinue watched with muted suspicion as it was let through without any of the guards bothering to check the driver. Following the vehicle as it entered the compound, guards flanking it on either side while it slowly drove towards its destination, Kinue perked up when she felt something tingle on the edges of her senses. As she glanced towards the resort district, the sensation remaining just out of reach, Kinue was brought back to reality when her Kamui gave a very feminine snort.

***" What the hell are you doing? Are you going to stare into space or are we going to destroy some fucking Life Fibers?"***

"Our mission it to simply scout the facility," Kinue responded off-handedly with a shake of her head, the strange feeling ignored for the time being. Turning her attention back to the task at hand, completely unfazed by Danketsu's enraged curses at being ignored, Kinue's mood soured dramatically when she caught of glimpse of blue hair. Clicking the button on the binoculars a second time, the resolution taking a few seconds to catch up, Kinue sighed upon noticing a very familiar woman, "... Esdeath Partas. Her presence is going to complicate things."

***" Like there's anything mere raiment can do against a Kamui!"***  
Danketsu growled angrily, the enraged look in her multihued eyes worsening as Kinue's own annoyance at the situation merged with her anger. Sensing her wearer's pulse quickening slightly, Kinue's thoughts already revolving around how best to avoid confrontation, Danketsu tightened herself before adding, ***"You already killed two of these pathetic humans. One more shouldn't be an issue."***

"What about Seattle?"

Kinue knew her point had come across loud and clear when she heard Danketsu mentally sputtering, the Kamui suffering a mixture of anger and embarrassment upon remembering the pain she experienced at the hands of that coward. Closing her eyes as she

took a moment to rein in her emotions, Danketsu's anger permeating across their connection diminishing slightly as a result, Kinue stared into her Kamui's eyes as she stood up, "You've heard the reports from Honnouji Academy. Esdeath's raiment is extremely dangerous."

**" So what if she can create fucking ice out of nothing! Just don't get hit and you'll be fine,"** Danketsu's embarrassment was largely forgotten as she glared up at her wearer, **"I'm going to make you suffer if you get my Life Fibers wet."**

"A fight against Esdeath is the last thing on my mind," Kinue crouched on the roof, elbows propped against her knees as she brought the binoculars back up to her eyes. Scanning the crowd of Revocs personnel in the distance, her eyes searching for Esdeath's current location, Kinue frowned upon feeling Danketsu tighten around her body in displeasure.

**" Don't tell me you're scared!"** A derisive scoff echoed in Kinue's mind as her Kamui blinked and looked away, **"I'm the strongest Kamui in existence. Even Mugetsu's power pales in comparison to what we can do!"**

"And what about Ragyo Kiryuin?" Kinue asked as she watched several guards carry an airtight steel case into the facility, "She already knows of your existence. What do you think will happen if she manages to capture you?"

Danketsu's pupils quivered at the mention of the Kiryuin matriarch but the Kinagase sibling found her attention captured by something far more important. Zooming in as much as possible when the doors to the facility slowly opened, the binoculars' digital display constantly readjusting and focusing due to static interference, Kinue bit her lip when she noticed several COVERS floating out to meet the guards. Mentally noting both the size and shape of the COVERS, which were easily larger than the ones at Honnouji Academy, Kinue scowled as she pulled out her phone.

Inputting a number with her thumb while never taking her eyes off the COVERS, Danketsu's irritated voice demanding she cut down the Life Fiber beings, Kinue waited until the phone stopped ringing before speaking, "... it's Kinue. I've confirmed the presence of COVERS in Rio de Janeiro."

*" So the General was correct, " Tsumugu's gruff voice cut out for a moment, a blast of interference causing Kinue to wince slightly, before coming back loud and clear, "... means we'll need to retreat and formulate a plan to take out the facility without risking the local population."*

"There's something else you should know," Kinue pressed the phone against her ear as she stood up, her black and red hair waving in the wind, "I managed to catch a glimpse of Esdeath Partas."

*" Esdeath? Even a monster like Ragyo Kiryuin would never send a psychopath like her to Brazil without a damn good reason. I don't like this Kinue, you should..."*

Tsumugu's voice was lost in the background as Kinue sensed a large concentration of Life Fibers rapidly approaching her position. Feeling Danketsu already beginning to convulse around her body, the Kamui's bloodlust unmistakable to the woman, Kinue brought the phone back up to her ear and interrupted her brother, "... I'm going to have to call you back, Tsumugu. Something rather important just came up."

Snapping the phone shut before Tsumugu could respond, her brother's voice cut off midsentence, Kinue let out a faint sigh as she suppressed Danketsu's instinctive hatred for other Life Fibers. Eyes half-lidded as she turned around, her hand slowly pulling the Genji Blade free from its sheath, Kinue stared at Esdeath as the blue haired woman emerged from the shadows before asking, "How long have you known I was here?"

"Does it really matter?"

Esdeath grinned as she absentmindedly adjusted her officer's cap, tight white bandages wrapped around her left arm visible under her sleeve. Stomping to a halt on the opposite of the roof from Kinue, her arms folded underneath her ample chest, the blue haired member of Xcution's eyes were hidden in shadow as she spoke, "I'm going to enjoy seeing how much pain you can take before I tear off your Kamui and bring it to Lady Ragyo."

As Danketsu tightened around her body in response to Esdeath's threat Kinue frowned as she assessed the situation. A long and protracted battle against someone like Esdeath Partas was not something she could afford to do. The Xcution member already admitted knowing about her presence, which meant it was only a matter of time before Ragyo Kiryuin decided to send reinforcements. Exhaling slowly as she calmed herself down, her partially exposed chest rising and falling, Kinue briefly noticed her breath lingering in the air before replying, "Let me tell you one useful piece of information. Defeating me will not be as easy as you think."

"Don't worry, I'm counting on that," Esdeath's already sadistic grin widened as she took a single step forward, the roof beneath her heels instantly covered in a layer of blue ice. As a rainbow aura enveloped her body, an invisible wind causing her raiment to ripple, Esdeath locked her blue eyes with Kinue's before swinging her arm outwards, "Xcution Uniform: Cocytus Raiment."

Kinue narrowed her eyes as she felt Danketsu shivering around her body in anticipation, the Kamui's eagerness to fight Esdeath bleeding across their connection. Taking a single step backwards when the rainbow light surrounding her opponent began to dim Kinue scoffed lightly as she expertly sheathed the Genji Blade before pulling out her two Carnifexes. Snapping the six needle clips into place just as the light illuminating the rooftop vanished Kinue arched an eyebrow as she aimed her weapons at Esdeath, "Interesting... I thought Ragyo Kiryuin kept a French scheme for naming her raiment."

A light sheen of frost spread across the rooftop as Esdeath stepped forth, the pale blue metallic armor covering her body and accenting her figure clinking slightly. Armored feet leaving trails of thick ice in her wake, the pleated skirt shifting slowly in the breeze, the blue haired Xcution member smirked as she adjusted the visor covering her face. Staring at Kinue with icy blue eyes Esdeath's smirk twisted into a psychotic smile, "You should feel honored, naked pig. Only Lady Ragyo and the Grand Couturier have seen my raiment's activated form."

"I'm flattered," Kinue replied sarcastically, barely noticing the subzero temperature enveloping the rooftop, before snapping her arm upwards and firing the Carnifex's full clip directly at her opponent's face.

Even as a thick wall of ice shimmered into existence in front of Esdeath, the six needles penetrating nearly three inches before spinning to a halt, Kinue was already on the move. Immediately strafing to the side as a thick pillar of ice burst out of the roof from underneath her feet Kinue didn't have a moment to rest as she watched Esdeath flex her wrist. Cursing faintly when she was forced to continue dancing through her opponent's attacks, Danketsu's heels creating small craters on the rooftop, the elder Kinagase sibling's mood soured as she felt her Kamui's frustration at Esdeath's abilities.

Jumping to the side when several spikes exploded out of the roof directly in her path, the blue ice shimmering dangerously in the dark night, Kinue decided she couldn't afford to stay on the defensive any longer. She could already make out the wailing of klaxons from the distribution facility, which mean it was only a matter of minutes before she was swarmed by every conceivable type of Revocs security. Diving backwards while tucking her knees against her stomach Kinue swung her left arm towards Esdeath before firing all six needles in rapid succession at her right eye.

Her arm remaining perfectly still despite the Carnifex's massive recoil, Danketsu's strength easily absorbing the force from the



weapon, Kinue managed to fire each needle at the exact same spot on Esdeath's barrier. Blue eyes widening in surprise as she watched large cracks rapidly spreading across her shield, the ice splintering under the powerful assault, Esdeath instinctively leapt away just as the ice violently shattered, a small grunt of pain escaping her lips when the sixth and final needled lodged itself several inches in her right shoulder.

"You're quite strong for a nudist..."

Esdeath's eyes shone with a psychotic glint as she landed on the roof, a small trail of blood leaking from the corner of her mouth. Claspings her fingers around the needle lodged in her shoulder before wrenching it free, a small spray of blood arcing through the air as feeling returned to her arm, Esdeath licked away the blood in her mouth as her body shivered in excitement for the first time in several years. Torturing captured nudists had grown boring after only a few months, the weak and pathetic humans unable to last more than a few minutes before passing out from blood loss or dying. The prospect of pushing her Cocytus Raiment against Kinue, or rather Danketsu, caused her pulse to quicken in anticipation.

"In this world the strong prosper while the weak wither and die... the same is true for Life Fibers," Esdeath chuckled coldly, Kinue's eyes narrowing as she raised her left arm into the air. As several dozen jagged spears materialized above her head, an icy mist slowly wafting into the night sky, she grinned and continued, "Danketsu may be stronger than my raiment but in the hands of an unworthy human like you it is nothing but scraps of clothing. Let's see how you handle someone who has surrendered themselves to the glory of Life Fibers. Grêle tempête!"

"Oh great..."

Kinue holstered her Carnifexes and blurred into motion the moment Esdeath announced her attack, allowing her enough time to avoid the initial barrage. Her body appearing to fade in and out of existence as she deftly avoided Esdeath's fairly straightforward

attack, the salvo of deadly projectiles moving painfully slow to the elder Kinagase sibling, Kinue's eyes widened in surprise when she felt a large explosion erupt from the street below. Chancing a glance backwards while twisting her body to the side Kinue gasped when she saw Esdeath's attacks destroying the surrounding neighborhood without care. As bursts of steam shot out of Danketsu's vents, her anger at the Xcution member causing the Kamui's emotions to bleed through the connection, Kinue wrapped her fingers around the Genji Blade before tearing it out of its sheath in one smooth motion, shattering the spears with ease.

"I've had enough of this..."

Flipping backwards before blasting forward towards Esdeath with enough force to shatter the roof beneath her feet Kinue's eyes hardened when she saw her opponent summon a blue-tinted ice barrier, a slightly worried expression visible on the blue haired woman's face. As the Genji Blade began shining with a deep purple aura, wisps of energy rising into the air as Danketsu's emotions began mixing with her own, Kinue stomped to a halt and pulled her lips into a grimace. Steeling her emotions as she pushed more power into the Genji Blade, the anger spreading through her mind abating, Kinue tightened her grip on the crimson blade before shouting, "Seni-Soshitsu!"

The barrier protecting Esdeath crumpled almost instantaneously under Kinue's attack, the blue haired woman's face frozen in an expression of terror as a crescent of purple energy left the Genji Blade and slammed into her body. Thrown backwards as the attack finally ended, a large gash running diagonally from shoulder to waist, Esdeath bouncing limply several times against the roof before Kinue rushed forward with her arm cocked back. Smashing her fist directly into the Xcution member's solar plexus, the Cocytus Raiment cracking under the force, the elder Kinagase's eyes narrowed dangerously as she wrapped her fingers around Esdeath's throat and slammed her headfirst into the roof.

Her breath coming out in short pants, the slight exhaustion plaguing her body quickly vanishing, Kinue released her supposedly deceased opponent and took a step back. Staring down at Esdeath's corpse, the woman's eyes locked open, Kinue scowled upon realizing she couldn't sense any Life Fibers from the body. Watching as the color drained from Esdeath's body before it shattered, one arm instinctively covering her eyes from the shards of ice, Kinue gasped in surprise, "An ice clone? But when did she -"

"Gee... that sure is an interesting sight. I wonder where she went?"

Kinue's breath hitched in her throat at the excessively saccharine and familiar voice. Gritting her teeth as she twisted her body around, Danketsu's energy causing the Genji Blade to glow a bright purple, Kinue barely managed to glimpse Nui Harime's saccharine smile before a petite fist slammed into her face. As blood and spittle flew out of her mouth, both Danketsu and her eyes widening in stunned surprise, the elder Kinagase heard a resounding boom before she was violently thrown backwards across Rio de Janeiro.

"Gosh, that seems like it really hurt!" Nui giggled as she watched Kinue crash into a building some distance away, a large cloud of smoke and dust rising upwards into the darkened sky. Pirouetting around when a visibly wounded but otherwise fine Esdeath reappeared on the roof, her interest in Kinue increasing upon noticing the Xcution member's injuries, Nui stick her tongue out and exclaimed, "Lady Ragyo's plan to lure out that faker worked perfectly! It's such a shame that you weren't able to hurt her, you know. Although... hmm..."

An inquisitive expression spread across Nui's face as she tilted her head to the left, her blonde pigtails bouncing slightly from the motion, "Danketsu seemed to really hate that human. I wonder why she just didn't eat her? That's all you humans are good for, you know. It's almost like... oh! I know why!"

"Please allow me to pursue her, Grand Couturier," Esdeath's tone was respectful as she wiped away the trail of blood leaking from her

lips.

"Nope!" Nui announced as she clapped her hands together, sapphire eyes lightning up as everything about Danketsu's relationship with Kinue began making perfect sense. Walking away from a mildly confused Esdeath while reaching into her dress, the purple Needle Blade gripped in her manicured fingers, Nui smirked mischievously as her opinion on Kinue changed completely. When Lady Ragyo ordered her to capture the woman forcing herself into a Kamui, which wouldn't have been a problem if that coward hadn't failed in Seattle, Nui thought it would be really boring since the only people that could use a Kamui's full power were hybrids like Ichigo and Ryuko.

Nui couldn't be happier to be completely wrong.

"A worthless human like you couldn't do anything but die," Nui continued, turning around and looking over her shoulder at Esdeath, "I could feel it instantly, you know. That woman and I have so much in common..."

It took Esdeath only a few seconds to realize what the Grand Couturier was trying to imply. Deactivating her Cocytus Raiment with barely a thought, the raiment's armor vanishing in a burst of rainbow stars, the blue haired woman fixed her dirtied uniform before asking, "Shall I inform Lady Ragyo?"

"You can do whatever you want but I'm going to go have some fun!" Nui replied curtly, her saccharine tone fading for a second, before leaping away and vanishing into the night.

As she raced across the rooftops of Rio de Janeiro, her pink boots barely touching the ground, the Grand Couturier couldn't but wonder how someone like Kinue Kinagase managed to evade Lady Ragyo's notice for such a long time. Lips curling into a cute smile as she approached Kinue, the woman's Life Fibers a veritable beacon in the darkness for the Grand Couturier, Nui decided the best course of action would be to simply ask. While she thoroughly enjoyed

torturing humans for information, weaving Marionette Threads into their empty heads to help speed along the process, Nui would never use such barbaric techniques on someone like Kinue.

Humming happily upon finally reaching her destination, a cute grunt leaving her lips as she stepped off the roof and landed on the streets, Nui didn't spare the corpses lining the street any attention as she coked her head to the side. Sapphire eyes staring widely into the rubble of the building, one hand pressed firmly against her forehead, Nui leaned forward and announced, "You can come out now, you know. A love tap like that surely didn't hurt someone like you!"

"Danketsu Genkei!"

Nui didn't even bother flinching when a maelstrom of purple energy exploded out of the building, her blonde pigtails chaotically whipping through the air. Tucking her arms against the small of her back, the purple Needle Blade held gingerly in her fingers, Nui closed her eyes and smiled as she savored Danketsu's new configuration. As the Grand Couturier of Revocs it was her solemn duty to create new and exciting uniforms for the naked apes, which was why she could instantly tell Danketsu was a Kamui of the highest quality. Opening her eyes once the cacophony of light and energy died down Nui tilted her head sideways and said, "Genkei? How cliché! Couldn't you have come up with something a bit more original?"

"Forgive me if I don't meet your expectations," Kinue sarcastically answered as she slowly walked out of the building, the soft clicking of her heels echoing throughout the silent street.

As Kinue stepped into view one of the first things Nui noticed, which brought a small and nearly imperceptible frown to her face, was the uncanny similarity in appearance between Danketsu Genkei and Junketsu Zenkan. While Danketsu's configuration possessed the same type of pleated hakama as Junketsu, colored dark blue instead of white, the Kamui's armor differed slightly with several vertical slits exposing the thigh-high heels underneath. As her trained eyes examined Danketsu's many banshi, the weave pattern so intimately

similar to Senketsu's, Nui came to the conclusion that whoever created the wonderful Kamui had plagiarized Lady Ragyo's superior work.

"Gosh, you don't have to worry about that," Nui exclaimed, Danketsu's atrocious name forgotten upon noticing the final change in Kinue's appearance. Her smiling widening as she stared at the older woman's hair, the ugly red dye replaced with a much more beautiful purple undertone, Nui straightened her back and giggled, "Seeing your Kamui's configuration more than makes up for the bad name!"

A tense silence permeated the area as Kinue glared at Nui through narrowed eyes, the Grand Couturier's smile never faltering in the slightest. Sliding her right foot back as Danketsu's irritated voice echoed deeply in her mind, a burst of steam shooting out of the vents on her back, Kinue knew she couldn't remain in Genkei for more than fifteen or twenty minutes without losing control. Although Danketsu's advanced configuration increased her power, which should be enough to theoretically take down Nui Harime, it had the unfortunate side effect of lowering her mental barriers and allowing the Kamui's more volatile emotions to bleed across the connection between their minds.

Taking a deep breath Kinue refocused her attention on the smiling Grand Couturier, "Let me give you a single piece of useful information. The tactics you usually use in battle... will not work on me..."

"Tactics, huh? I don't know anything about that but your voice sounds awfully familiar. It's almost like we've met before..."

The Grand Couturier childishly puffed her cheeks in disappointment when she didn't get so much as a rise from the woman, which came across as rather odd considering what happened in Rome sixteen months. She had been in the city on official business for Lady Ragyo, taking out one of her last major competitors and securing Revocs a monopoly in Europe, when she sensed something

intimately familiar in the distance. When she finally managed to track down the source Nui had been mildly surprised to see it was just another one of the naked apes.

"You know, at the time I thought you were just another stupid naked ape trying to stop Lady Ragyo's plans," Nui giggled childishly before she vanished in a burst of speed. Reappearing above Kinue, the older woman's eyes momentarily widening in surprise, the Grand Couturier smiled as swung the purple Needle Blade downwards, "If I knew you were wearing a Kamui I wouldn't have let you go so easily!"

The crackle of a sonic boom reverberated throughout Rio de Janeiro as the Needle Blade connected with Kinue's forearm. Beads of sweat dripping down her face as she fought for dominance against the Grand Couturier, the asphalt beneath her heels crumpling and cracking under the pressure, Kinue felt her muscles screaming in protest as more of her Kamui's power coursed through her body. Her mind strangely lucid despite Danketsu's emotions intermingling with her own, a slight shiver rushing up her spine as the Kamui tightened around her body, Kinue's lips curled into a facsimile of a smirk as she locked eyes with a visibly flustered Grand Couturier, "What's the matter? You seem surprised the Needle Blade couldn't cut through Danketsu."

"I-Impossible!"

Even as her fingers clenched around the Needle Blade, her arms quivering as she desperately tried to overpower Kinue, Nui's mind was preoccupied with the sheer impossibility of the situation. As the Grand Couturier of Revocs she knew more about Life Fibers than perhaps anyone other than Lady Ragyo and Isshin Kurosaki. Even Ryuko's idiotic traitor of a father, who should have suffered more for temporarily destroying her left eye, didn't know half the things she did but despite all that Nui couldn't understand why the Needle Blade wasn't cutting through Danketsu's armor. This was impossible! No matter how strong a Kamui's armor there was no way it could withstand a blow from a hardened Life Fiber weapon.

"This is impossible!" Nui repeated out of shock, her sapphire eyes widening when Danketsu's armor continued to withstand her attack without so much as a scratch, "Your Kamui shouldn't be able to stop me!"

"Impossible? As the Grand Couturier I thought you would already know..." Kinue trailed off in a quiet tone as she cocked her free arm backwards and curled her hand into a fist. As steam blasted forth from Danketsu's grills, the purple lines covering the Kamui shining brightly, the elder Kinagase narrowed her eyes and uncharacteristically shouted, "... Danketsu is the toughest Kamui in the world!"

Stomping one heel into the road before smashing her fist into the Grand Couturier's solar plexus, a deep echo reverberating through the night as the percussive blast cratered the building behind Nui Harime, Kinue's mild elation vanished when a pink boot violently connected with the underside of her chin. Gasping as she stumbled backwards, her mind noting the strange absence of pain, Kinue instinctively leaned to the side as the Needle Blade stabbed through the air, the purple weapon barely missing skewering her throat. Pulse quickening as she crossed her arms over her chest, the Needle Blade shaking while stuck between the crux of her forearms, Kinue grunted before pirouetting and slamming her heel into Nui's face with enough force that an audible crack was heard.

"Danketsu is the toughest, huh?"

Nui's tone carried a hint of uncharacteristic seriousness as she flipped away from the older woman and stabbed the Needle Blade into the road, the hardened Life Fiber weapon easily leaving a large trench in the asphalt. Tilting her head to the side and grinning as the blood coating her mouth and chin vanished, her regeneration quickly healing her wounds, the Grand Couturier ignored her opponent's scowl and scoffed childishly, "Gosh, what an arrogant assumption to make! It's really annoying to listen to humans say how they are going to win because they need to win or something stupid like that!"



Hmm... but I suppose I should be careful since that doesn't apply to someone like you..."

Kinue kept her eyes firmly locked on the Grand Couturier while slowly reaching for the Genji Blade, "What are you talking about?"

"I'm just really curious how a Life Fiber Hybrid like you managed to hide for so long from Lady Ragyo," Nui replied without care, a pleased look in her eyes as she watched her opponent freeze in shock. Laughing happily as she leaned onto the Needle Blade, her right leg curled up against her dress, the Grand Couturier waited several seconds for the true meaning of her words to sink into Kinue's mind before continuing, "While that's rather bothersome I'm really confused why you would betray your own kind for these pathetic naked apes. Humans only exist as food for Life Fibers, which makes fighting you all the more depressing."

Kinue subconsciously rubbed her fingers against the black tattoo between her breasts, a reminder of her past idealism, before gripping the Genji Blade. As she drew it from its sheath, a purple aura surrounding the crimson blade as Danketsu's power immediately began flowing through it, Kinue narrowed her eyes and scoffed, "You're insane. I find it hard to believe I have anything in common with a psychotic monster like you."

"How rude!"

Nui huffed as she pulled the Needle Blade out of the ground. Twirling the purple blade around her wrist, lips curling back into a saccharine smile, the Grand Couturier stuck her tongue out and continued, "While you were fighting Lady Ragyo's cute little lackey I spent some time listening to Danketsu. She really hates you, you know that right? If you were a pathetic human like you keep claiming Danketsu who have long since eaten you! La vie est drôle! The only reason you're still alive is because it's super impossible for a Kamui to devour hybrids like us!"

***" I suppose that explains why I could never fucking kill you."***

Danketsu's multicolored eyes narrowed into pinpricks, a blast of steam shooting out of her grills, when she realized the Grand Couturier had a point. She had tried to devour her wearer multiple times over the last decade in retaliation for refusing to acknowledge her existence. For the first few months she had desperately tried talking to her wearer, the only person in Nudist Beach who could hear her voice, only to feel betrayed when the woman stupidly believed she was going insane. After she finally grew sick and tired of Kinue's shitty treatment, which only grew worse after she lost control and went berserk, Danketsu had tried to devour her only to be stunned when she found herself unable to do it despite her best efforts.

Shuddering in disgust as she repressed the annoying memories, a ripple coursing through her uniform, Danketsu turned her eyes upwards to Kinue and growled, ***"Don't think this changes anything between us. Even if you are a Life Fiber Hybrid my opinion of you hasn't changed at all. I still fucking hate you."***

"Wow! Danketsu really hates you. I can't even imagine why you would mistreat such a beautiful Kamui," Nui giggled childishly, her smile widening at the confused expression in Danketsu's eyes, before leaning forward and clapping her hands together, "Anyway, I wonder how your nudist friends will react once they find out you're just like me? I bet Mr. Anderson will be really angry! Do you think he'll try to kill you?"

Narrowing her eyes as she slowly circled around Nui Harime, wisps of purple energy wafting off the Genji Blade, Kinue grimaced upon realizing it was only a matter of time before Esdeath Partas decided to assist the Grand Couturier. Subtly shifting her gaze down towards Danketsu, the Kamui's attention firmly locked on the blonde haired teenager, Kinue pursed her lips and whispered, "Danketsu, I need you to lend me your full power."

" ***Humph,***" Danketsu scoffed at her wearer, ***"Why the hell should I do that?"***

"It is my fault we don't have the best relationship," Kinue softly admitted before pausing to look at the Grand Couturier. When she noticed Nui Harime simply staring at her, one hand propped against her cheek while a smile was plastered on her face, the older woman frowned before continuing, "But I know how much you hate the Grand Couturier. If you lend me your full power just long enough to defeat her I promise to never wear anything over you again."

The slight widening of Danketsu's multicolored eyes in genuine surprise didn't go unnoticed by her wearer. Mentally scoffing as she looked off to the side, a faint growl echoing through Kinue's mind, Danketsu waited several seconds before responding, ***"For the moment my hatred for Nui Harime far outweighs how much I despise you. Fine! Use my full power and tear that abomination apart one Life Fiber at a time! Just make sure to keep your end of the bargain."***

"You're going to help her now? Wow, that's so adorable," Nui giggled and leapt backwards when Danketsu pulsed with power, her blonde pigtails blowing chaotically around as a sudden gust of wind rushed down the street. Tapping her foot against the ground as she raised the purple Needle Blade, her saccharine smile developing a malevolent edge, Nui cocked her head to the side before sighing dramatically, "So you want to fight, huh?"

"Do you know Danketsu's special technique?"

Purple heels clicking softly as she walked towards Nui Harime, the energy enveloping the Genji Blade illuminating the street in shades of crimson and purple, Kinue closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Curling both hands around the Genji Blade's hilt, a burst of phantom wind racing outwards, the purple undertone in Kinue's hair brightened as she continued, "I thought as the Grand Couturier you would know something so apparent. Every Kamui possesses a specific and unique ability only accessible in their battle configuration - Mugetsu has Getsuga Tenshou, Senketsu has the Genkai series and Junketsu possesses Tenrai Kagai."

Twisting her arms around until the Genji Blade was held parallel to the ground, the energy coursing through it shifting until it turned a complete crimson, Kinue smirked when she saw a hint of fear appear in Nui's sapphire eyes. Grunting as she stomped her right leg into the ground, her purple heel easily piercing the asphalt, Kinue locked eyes with her opponent before shouting, "Youkou Genshou!"

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"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's quite rude to play with your food?"

The shadows seemed to twist and contort as a well-dressed man slowly walked through the crowd encircling the hotel. Hands folded within the pockets of his brown suit, a soft chuckle emanating from his throat as he stepped around the blood pooled on the ground, the man flicked a finger against the brim of his fedora as he stare at the waiting Alucard, "You certainly do seem to live up to your reputation, Mister Alucard. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Tubalcain Alhambra but my colleagues call me The Deathdealing."

Alucard's lips curled upwards into a mockery of a grin as he looked away from the man standing before him and surveyed the gathered crowd but his interest wasn't focused on the multitudes of ignorant humans. In the distance he could feel two creatures nearly identical to Ryuko Matoi, their powers shining like beacons in the dark. Chuckling in amusement at the prospect of fighting such unique opponents, his blood red eyes gleaming in the night, Alucard turned back to Alhambra and asked, "The Deathdealing? Such a pretentious title. I take it these poor souls belong to you?"

"Ah... I assume you're referring to those unfortunate men," Alhambra quipped while nodding his head towards the six members of the BOPE impaled on the flagpoles behind him, streams of crimson blood dripping from their corpses onto the ground, "You can thank their foolish superiors. All it took was one small lie about immortality and they immediately sent their men off to die."

"Taking advantage of human idiocy..." Alucard scoffed in mild annoyance as he stared at Alhambra, "There is no such thing as immortality, which brings up an interesting question. What exactly are you supposed to be? You're neither a vampire nor the same type of creature as Ryuko Matoi."

"Do you expect me to simply tell you all of my secrets, Mister Alucard?"

A bead of sweat dripped down Alhambra's cheek as he sensed the nightmarish spiritual energy dwelling deep within Alucard's soul, the power an abyss of death and eternity that threatened to devour everything within reach. Alhambra knew it would be suicidal to allow Alucard the opportunity to release his full strength, which left him with only one course of action. Sweeping his arm across his body before snapping his fingers, blue spiritual energy appeared as a deck of cards emblazoned with the Quincy Zeichen materialized in his hand, Alhambra chuckled smugly, "I think, however, that there are more pressing matters to be concerned about. As you pointed out I'm not a vampire, which stands to suggest your holy bullets won't work on me."

"Your incessant prattle is starting to bore me," Alucard's smile faded upon sensing the energy flowing through Alhambra's cards, "So let's cut to the chase. Why are you here?"

"Do you really need to ask? I'm here to -"

Alhambra was cut off when a massive pulse of spiritual energy rippled across Rio de Janeiro, the power causing the few humans in the crowd capable of detecting supernatural energies to collapse under the mental strain. Grimacing as he twisted around, a deep crimson light temporarily illuminating the entire city, Alhambra grunted in disgust as the stench of Life Fibers assaulted his spiritual senses. He was already aware of the Revocs facility on the other side of the city, the Life Fibers within the complex mildly nauseating him, but the spiritual energy he just felt could have only come from a

handful of creatures, none of which he was inclined to face at the moment.

Lurching forward and nearly losing his balance when something crashed into the upper levels of the hotel, the accompanying supersonic percussive blast shattering nearly every window in the building, Alhambra leapt to safety moments before jagged pieces of sharpened glass rained down on the ground. Green eyes narrowing suspiciously as he stared upwards, a vague outline barely visible though the columns of billowing smoke, Alhambra ignored the twinge of concern eating at the edges of his mind and muttered, "What the hell..."

"Gosh, how rude!"

A small frown of annoyance graced Nui Harime's face as she landed on the ground, her pink boots tapping gently against the carpeted steps. Sparing an unconcerned glance at the stump of her left arm, an excessive amount of blood spurting forth from the wound, Nui mentally berated herself for completely forgetting about Danketsu's special technique. If she hadn't dodged to the side at the last second her body could have been completely destroyed, which would have been bad, but Nui wasn't too worried about such trivial matters now that she learned so much about Danketsu.

Humming as she reached the bottom of the steps, her sapphire eyes slowly scanning the crowd of humans, Nui's lips curled upwards into a mischievous smile at Lady Ragyo's brilliance. Thanks to the trace amount of Life Fibers in every single Revocs product none of the humans could see her, their memories devoured by the very clothing they wore. Resting her elbow on the purple Needle Blade while her left arm regenerated, flawless flesh rapidly knitting itself back together, the Grand Couturier stared at the six corpses impaled on the flagpoles surrounding her and scoffed, "Hmm... impalement is so last year! Although I should give points for originality! That reminds me..."

Her left leg curling as she reached into her dress, perfectly manicured fingers pulling out her cell phone, the Grand Couturier blinked in confusion when a playing card wreathed in blue energy sliced through the air, shattering the device in her hand. Turning around while dropping the now useless phone, her right hand absentmindedly pulling the Needle Blade out of the ground, Nui stared at Alhambra and cocked her head to the side, "That was a brand new phone, you know."

"Forgive me for my... exuberance," Alhambra mockingly apologized as he extended his hand, several new cards appearing between his fingers, "But I'm afraid I cannot allow you to call your illustrious master just yet."

"Oh? It's downright adorable you believe that," Nui's smile developed a sadistic edge as she began walking towards Alhambra, the Needle Blade held firmly in front of her body, "I go wherever I want to go, and no one can stop me. Not even someone like you, Mister Quincy."

"I have no idea what you're talking about..." Alhambra shrugged his shoulders, one hand adjusting his fedora as he circled around the Grand Couturier. Briefly turning his attention towards Alucard, green eyes narrowing in suspicion at seeing the vampire silently watching, the Quincy flicked his wrists before vanishing in a burst of Hirenkyaku. Reappearing on the other side of the Grand Couturier, his shoes skidding to a halt, Alhambra smirked as blue spiritual energy coated his hands, "... but allow me to make the first draw!"

Alhambra leapt into the air as he swung his arms forward, a veritable maelstrom of phantasmal playing cards shooting out of his hands. Beads of sweat trickling down his face while a harsh wind tore through the courtyard, his mouth twisting into a snarl upon seeing the playful look on the Grand Couturier's face, the Quincy scoffed in frustration before raising his arm until it was at eye level and snapped his fingers. Almost immediately the thousands of cards surrounding Nui Harime began glowing with a harsh blue light before simultaneously detonating in a cacophony of light and sound.

Hunched shoulders rising and falling in time with his breathing, a single card held tightly between his fingers, Alhambra's green eyes remained focused and attentive as he cautiously looked around the courtyard, "Now where is that little diablo?"

"Gosh, that isn't a very nice thing to say..."

A mischievous smile was plastered on Nui's face as she emerged from the cloud of smoke, her appearance completely flawless apart from several small tears in her pink dress. Taking a moment to examine her clothing, a satisfied giggle leaving her lips when the cuts in her dress repaired themselves, Nui's pink boot tapped lightly against the ground in annoyance when she saw Alhambra telekinetically launch dozens of cards at her. Sighing as her right arm blurred into motion, the purple Needle Blade easily shredding every single card before they could reach her, the Grand Couturier's grin widened upon seeing the shocked expression on the Quincy's face.

"Is it my turn yet?"

Vanishing from sight before shimmering back into reality with the Needle Blade slicing deeply into Alhambra's left arm, all the muscles and tendons severed in a single blow, Nui smirked in satisfaction at the Quincy's involuntary scream of pain. Carefully stepping around the puddles of blood pooling on the ground, one hand reaching up to fix a strand of unruly blonde hair, Nui mocking gasped as she addressed the injured man, "Wow, that sure looks like it really hurts! You should probably go see a doctor!"

"Y-You little..."

Alhambra's fingers subtly twitched as strings of invisible spiritual energy wove throughout his injured arm and reconnected the severed muscles. Allowing his arm to continue hanging limply for the moment, rivers of blood staining his fingers, Alhambra could feel his chances of surviving the night falling by the second. The Grand Couturier's strength was far beyond what she demonstrated at Honnouji Academy. As he desperately searched for a solution, his



eyes glancing towards the black Sanrei Glove hidden on his right hand, Alhambra was caught completely by surprise when Nui Harime twirled around and walked away without attacking.

"Sorry but you're boring me," Nui quipped playfully, a tired yawn threatening to tear its way out of her throat, while pressing the Needle Blade against the small of her back and walked away from the Quincy. Her sapphire eyes widening in curiosity as she approached Alucard, the strange energy radiating off the vampire causing her Life Fibers to quiver in an oddly familiar way, the Grand Couturier smiled and tilted her head to the side, "And who exactly are you supposed to be? You sure don't feel like a stupid human or Quincy."

"Your power fascinates me, girl."

Alucard's amused chuckles echoed throughout the courtyard, the shadows writhing and controlling around his body, as he descended the steps towards the Grand Couturier. Reaching into his overcoat and pulling out the Jackal, the black pistol shining brightly in the darkness, the vampire found his interest in the blonde haired monster rising with each passing second, "It reminds me of that other creature. Tell me, do your clothes speak as well?"

Nui's expression immediately perked at the vampire's oddly specific comment, "That doesn't sound right. It's super impossible for someone like you to hear a Kamui, you know!"

"So it's called a Kamui..." Alucard's blood red eyes shone psychotically as he reached the bottom of the steps. Towering more than two feet over the Grand Couturier, his lips pulled into a maniac grin at the complete absence of fear in her eyes, the vampire slowly pointed the Jackal at Nui's forehead before continuing, "... unfortunately I'm beginning to find your voice highly irritating, monster -"

A blast of pressure exploded across the courtyard as the Needle Blade cleaved through Alucard's body, blood and visceral spraying

through the air as the vampire was bisected nearly vertically. Blood red eyes widening in shock as the two halves of his body fell apart, a sickening squelch causing more than a few members of the crowd to throw up, Alucard allowed Nui Harime a second to celebrate before snapping his arm up and squeezing the Jackal's trigger. The Grand Couturier, expecting the vampire to use a normal weapon, was thrown backwards as the mercury-tipped round tore through her head and blew it clean off her shoulders.

As streams of blood oozed back into his body, the shadows composing his form rapidly regenerating the damage, a repetitive echo snapped through the air as the vampire king began to mockingly clap his hands together. His mouth pulled upwards into a vicious smile as he watched Nui Harime's head finish regenerating, bright purple light shining from within her body as the last of her pigtails reappeared, Alucard chuckled and added, "Your regeneration is superior to even the most powerful of vampires. Tell me something, monster girl, are you by chance related to Ryuko Matoi?"

"Hmm... how are you still alive?"

Humming in confusion as she pondered how Alucard survived getting cut in half, her sapphire eyes blinking owlshly, Nui's head tilted to the side as several ideas came to mind. Her first thought was that he was a Life Fiber Hybrid, as impossible as that was, but she immediately discarded that idea upon failing to sense any Life Fibers in his body. Lips quirking in barely concealed amusement when something flicked against the corner of her mind, the vampire king's mentioning of Ryuko filed away for later use, the Grand Couturier leaned her chin on the Needle Blade and exclaimed cheerfully, "While I would love to simply cut you open and find out what makes you tick I'm actually expecting company. She should be here in three... two... one..."

Slowly pulling the Needle Blade out of the ground as she finished counting down, her lips quirking into an amused smile, Nui let out a playful huff before immediately pirouetting around and blocking Kinue Kinagase's attack. Her smile briefly faltering when the older

woman's strength proved more than she anticipated, a bead of nervous sweat dripping down her face as her pink boots slid backwards along the ground, the Grand Couturier quickly clasped her other hand around the Needle Blade's handle to arrest her momentum. Pouting childishly as sparks arced out from between their blades, her face lit up in shades of purple, Nui leaned forward and smirked, "It's only a matter of time, you know. No matter how much you try to act like a human they'll never accept you."

"And I suppose you're speaking from experience?" Kinue responded sarcastically, her fingers instinctively tightening around the Genji Blade as she pushed more of Danketsu's power through the specialized weapon.

"Of course not!"

Her laughter echoing as she vanished in a burst of speed, the Genji Blade slamming into the ground from the abrupt lack of resistance, Nui clapped her hands as she landed safe and sound in front of the hotel. Sapphire eyes absentmindedly noting the bloody corpses spread throughout the lobby, their faces locked in expressions of eternal torment, the Grand Couturier stuck her tongue out as she tucked the Needle Blade behind her back, "Golly, why would you ask a question when you already know the answer?"

Instead of responding to Nui's obvious taunts, which caused the blonde haired teenager to pout childishly, Kinue found her attention focused completely on the smiling man wearing severely outdated Victorian attire. Cold blue eyes narrowing when she felt Danketsu shivering around her body, the Kamui unable to explain just what it was about the man that bothered her so much, Kinue stared at the six impaled corpses before turning back to the Grand Couturier and asking, "What are you planning?"

"Do I look like someone with a plan?"

Nui huffed childishly, one foot tapping against the ground, before looking at the bleeding corpses and gasping in realization. Sticking

her tongue out while raising a hand to her cheek, the skin appearing to fade to a pale white, the Grand Couturier giggled in embarrassment, "Oh... you're talking about those sorry humans. Sorry, but I didn't kill any of them. Not from a lack of trying, mind you. They were like that when I got here."

"The little diablo is correct."

Kinue looked away from the Grand Couturier as Alhambra walked across the courtyard towards her, his right hand adjusting the brim of his fedora. Shadowed green eyes staring at Nui Harime as several spotlights from the crowd shone on his back, illuminating his body in a bright yellow light, the Quincy gave the nudist a respectful bow and continued, "Tubalcain Alhambra, at your service. I hate to be the bearer of unfortunate news but the Grand Couturier was not the one to kill those poor men."

"I realized that the moment she denied doing so," Kinue replied, mildly distracted as her attention briefly focused on the gathered crowd of civilians and law enforcement surrounding the hotel. Blue eyes narrowing imperceptibly when she noticed nobody was looking at her, the Revocs logo stitched on every visible piece of clothing all she needed to see, Kinue expertly sheathed the Genji Blade against the small of her back and scoffed, "The Grand Couturier does not lie, after all."

Her hand tightening into a fist as the full weight of her existence finally settled in her mind, a small sigh escaping her lips as she wondered what she would tell Tsumugu, Kinue shook her head as she pushed such thoughts out of her mind. She could always figure out how to break the news to her brother later on but now wasn't the time to worry about such things. Hooking a finger through the Carnifex holstered on her right leg as she slowly walked towards Alucard, Danketsu growling under the ancient vampire's gaze, Kinue slid in a full clip of needles before commenting, "You must be Alucard."

The ancient vampire's face was wreathed in shadows before his lips pulled into an amused grin. Reaching into his overcoat as he sauntered towards the nudist, his black leather riding boots echoing softly against the ground, Alucard withdrew the Casull from the shadows composing his body while whistling appreciatively at Danketsu's power, "Another one of you creatures... and with a Kamui, no less. These last few days have been truly exciting."

"Anderson's report was quite thorough about your capabilities... and your identity," Kinue explained stoically as Danketsu telepathically shifted back into Genkei, the change in configurations accompanied by a flash of purple stars and light. Snapping her arm upwards and pointing the Carnifex directly at the ancient vampire's heart, her index finger tightening around the trigger, Kinue's blue eyes narrowed as her heels clicked loudly against the ground, "But it seems Bram Stoker didn't get everything right."

"You're referring to *that* man," Alucard's voice contained a twinge of amusement as he stepped to a halt several meters from the nudist, "He was such an interesting human but I found his ending quite disappointing..."

Allowing his voice to trail off as he aimed the Casull at Kinue's throat, a sharp wind quickly kicking up and causing his red overcoat to billow outwards, Alucard's grin widened until his fangs became visible as a manic light shone in his blood red eyes. It had been years since someone managed to figure out his true identity yet the woman standing before him somehow did so in less than a day. His black hair writhing like shadows as he stared into Danketsu's multicolored eyes, both the Kamui and her wearer's hair glowing with a dark purple color, the ancient vampire smirked before snapping his right arm behind his body and firing the Jackal at Nui Harime.

"Like I'll fall for the same thing twice!"

Mockingly smiling as she swung the purple Needle Blade into the oncoming bullet, her sapphire eyes glistening with confidence, Nui was shocked when the mercury-tipped round smashed through the

hardened Life Fiber blade without losing momentum. Time appearing to slow down for just an instant as the ambient light reflected off the broken pieces of the Needle Blade the Grand Couturier gasped when the holly bullet easily tore through her elbow, the force behind the specialized round disintegrating her entire arm, before exploding in the lobby behind her.

Sapphire eyes narrowing psychotically as she glared at Alucard, her teeth visibly sharpening into daggers, Nui Harime's body shook before she took a deep breath and announced saccharinely, "Just kidding!"

Kinue couldn't help but stare in disbelief as the color faded from the Grand Couturier's body, leaving the one blonde haired teenager as little more than a white and grey caricature of a human being. As a blast of steam shot out of Danketsu's grills, the Kamui undoubtedly enraged by Nui Harime's ploy, the elder Kinagase scornfully muttered, "I was fighting a Mon-Mignon Prêt-à-Porter clone the entire time?"

"Sorry but that's just not true!" Nui replied joyfully, her voice warbling slightly, as her body began fraying apart at the seams. Sticking her tongue out as her remaining hand dissolving into purple Life Fibers, the alien fibers vanishing into the night, the Grand Couturier giggled before continuing, "You were fighting a super durable, patent pending and overall cute COVERS clone! It was specifically designed so I could have fun without having to leave Honnouji Academy! I may not be as strong or fast but I think it gets the job done -"

The Grand Couturier's body lurched backwards as Kinue shifted her aim and fired the Carnifex directly into her stomach. Keeping her finger pressed against the trigger as she fired a second time, the Anti-Life Fiber needle piercing through Nui's left shoulder, Kinue mentally berated herself for failing to realize something was wrong from the moment Nui Harime punched her across the city. Depressing the trigger when Nui continued smiling despite her body

dissolving away Kinue scoffed and demanded, "Why were you here?"

"To see you, silly!"

Laughing even as her entire lower body vanished into nothingness, strands of purple Life Fibers briefly floating in the air, Nui looked at Alucard and Alhambra before continuing, "Did you honestly think we didn't notice what you humans were doing? You nudists are so predictable it's downright adorable! It's common fact that only a Kamui can defeat raiment so Lady Ragyo figured they would send you to check things out. While it was really fun seeing all of Danketsu's techniques I didn't expect to fight an actual vampire. This has been quite the eventful night... au revoir!"

A tense silence permeated the courtyard as the last traces of the COVERS disintegrated, the Grand Couturier's melodious laughter fading away into the cooling night. Pursing her lips as a harsh wind blew away any remaining Life Fibers, a small burst of steam shooting out from Danketsu, Kinue perked up when she heard the subtle click of a gun against the back of her head. Quickly vanishing in a burst of speed as Alucard fired the Jackal, the thirteen-millimeter bullet passing through her afterimage, the elder Kinagase sibling's black and purple hair whipped chaotically as she reappeared behind the vampire and fired the Carnifex's four remaining needles deep into his heart.

"You expect to kill me with needles?" Alucard scoffed derisively as he twisted around, streams of crimson liquid leaking out of his chest, and fired the Jackal twice more at his opponent only for both holy bullets to miss when Kinue's body faded away one more. Eyes narrowing as he followed Kinue across the courtyard, his enhanced senses easily tracking the woman's movements, Alucard paused and looked down when he felt something roll against his foot before nearly a dozen spool grenades exploded into a multicolored inferno.

Heels skidding along the ground as she leapt away just seconds before the remainder of her spools grenades detonated Kinue

breathed deeply as mild exhaustion began to set in. Her chest rising and falling as the Life Fibers in her body rapidly restored her stamina, Danketsu's form glowing with a bright purple light, she was forced to quickly lean backwards when she heard the familiar sound of the Jackal firing. Gritting her teeth as the bullet passed only a few inches above her body Kinue's eyes widened when she spotted Seras Victoria on the edge of the hotel's roof before the fledgling vampire fired a single 30-mm depleted uranium shell from the Harkonnen.

"I don't think so!"

Appearing in front of Kinue using Hirenkyaku, streams of blue spiritual energy clinging to his shoes, Alhambra grimaced as he swung his arm and threw a single card at the incoming projectile. Fingers tightly gripping the brim of his fedora as the specialized heilig pfeil severed the shell lengthwise, the two halves exploding against the courtyard on either side of him, Alhambra didn't take his eyes off Alucard's last known position as he spoke, "I think now would be a good time for you to leave, Miss Kinagase."

Kinue allowed Danketsu to shift back to her normal configuration, the Kamui giving a haughty huff, before holstering the Carnifex and asking, "Do you intend to fight Alucard?"

"My superiors have tasked me with taking Alucard down," Alhambra smirked as he flicked his wrists, several new cards instantly appearing between his fingers, "But unlike the Grand Couturier my powers will have full effect on the vampire. You, on the other hand, are one of the few people able to fight Ragyo Kiryuin."

"Very well," Kinue sighed as she turned away from the Quincy, Danketsu tightening around her body due to Alucard's presence. Casting one last glance towards where the ancient vampire was undoubtedly waiting, her face twisting into a faint scowl, she crouched down and added, "Let me give you one important piece of advice before I leave - there is a member of Xcution nearby so don't let your guard down. Danketsu Funsha!"



Holding tightly onto his fedora as Kinue escaped into the night, her powerful launch managing to dispel the smoke concealing him, Alhambra chuckled softly as his lips curled into a pleased smirk. His shoes echoing faintly against the ground as he approached the patiently waiting Alucard, the shadows surrounding him stretching further with every step, the Quincy pulled a new deck of cards out of thin air before speaking, "I sincerely apologize for that unnecessary delay, Mister Alucard, but what can one do when the Grand Couturier makes up her mind? Now then, I believe it is time I brought you in..."

"This night has been full of such interesting revelations," Alucard's tone contained a hint of amusement as he watched Kinue vanish into the distance, her form a purple pinprick against inky blackness, before shifting his attention to the nearby Quincy. Pointing the Jackal at Alhambra's neck, the massive weapon already reloaded, Alucard's lips twisted into a manic grin as he asked, "Do you intend to actually fight me? You claim you're going to bring me in yet you could hardly stand against that little girl. You're either incredibly stupid or arrogant."

"I am neither of those things..."

Raising his left arm above his head, droplets of blood from his injuries splattering against the ground, Alhambra smirked at Alucard's mildly curious expression before snapping his fingers. As hundreds of cards flew through the air before stopping several feet from the crowd, a shimmering blue barrier instantly flaring into existence, Alhambra's body was enveloped by blue spiritual energy as he carefully removed his right glove, "Oh? Are you curious about what I just did?"

"Hardly," Alucard scoffed before snapping his arm upwards and firing the Casull at the barrier. Slightly intrigued when the barrier stopped the bullet, the explosive silver round disintegrating in a burst of blue flames, the vampire stared directly into Alhambra's eyes and lightly chuckled, "A barrier designed to keep anyone from interfering. You're not the first one to try something like this."

"Bem dito," Alhambra complimented as he raised his right hand, showing the vampire the previously hidden black Sanrei Glove. Fingers clasped around the glove, blue spiritual energy wafting off his body, the Sternritter cocked his head and chuckled, "I feel the need to thank you. Your presence has allowed me the opportunity to release my full power without consequences. Watch carefully, Mister Alucard, because this is the last thing you'll see. Vollständig: Setzeniel."

His blood red eyes widening in surprise when a column of spiritual energy erupted from Alhambra, the intensity more than enough to disintegrate the courtyard surrounding the Sternritter, Alucard leapt away moments before his body was completely engulfed. Landing on the hotel's roof before immediately collapsing to one knee, a large quantity of blood spurting from where his arm and lower torso should have been, the ancient vampire growled in annoyance as his body began regenerating. Standing back onto his feet as his internal organs reconstituted themselves from the shadows, streams of blood oozing back into his body, Alucard frowned at the darkness tinting Alhambra's spiritual energy before silently releasing his restriction seals.

"Police Girl!" Alucard's echoing voice easily crossed the rooftop all the way to Seras Victoria, "If you truly covet your unlife continue cowering in the shadows. This man is far from the average opponent..."

Lips twisting upwards as the rooftop was cast in shades of blue and white, the shadows composing his body retreating for just an instant, Alucard deliberately turned around slowly and whistled mockingly at Alhambra's new form. Chuckling coldly as he stared at the Quincy's new form, angelic winds made of spiritual playing cards stretching from his shoulders and a five-pointed star hovering over his head, Alucard's hands clapped loudly as he spoke, "Setzeniel... Gamble of God... do you fancy yourself a divine being, Quincy? I don't know whether to be amused or insulted."

"You must be going soft in the head, Mister Alucard," Alhambra's voice echoed with a slight ring as he snapped his fingers, hundreds of glowing playing cards instantly appearing in the air surrounding the vampire. Extending his fingers, wisps of spiritual energy wafting off the digits, the Quincy smirked as a faint wind kicked up, "Do you think I'm going to give you the necessary time to release your restriction seals? I think not!"

"This world would be truly boring without people like you to amuse me."

Alucard's chuckles turned into outright laughter as the hundreds of cards tore through his body, blood and visceral splattering against the roof, before his eyes widened and he took a single step forward. Holding his arms out as dozens of red eyes appeared on his body, the shadows covering the rooftop shifting and bubbling, the ancient vampire's gait didn't falter as the rest of Alhambra's cards were destroyed by the darkness emanating from his body. As eldritch beasts and abominations emerged from his body, the sound of thousands of screaming souls mixing together into an unholy chorus, Alucard stared into the deeply unsettled Quincy's eyes and shouted, "What are you waiting for Quincy? Didn't you say you were going to bring me in? Well then... hit me with your best shot!"

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"... the number of casualties continue to rise from the terror attack in..."

Propping his feet on the desk as he muted the television, the auburn haired woman's voice instantly shutting off, a young man with short black haired leaned backwards in his chair and smirked at the events unfolded in Rio de Janeiro. One finger rapidly tapping against his knee as he weighed his options, the creature calling itself Alucard putting quite a wrench into his carefully calculated plans, the young man hummed thoughtfully before reaching into the breast pocket of

his olive colored jacket and pulling out a burner phone. Slowly inputting a phone number, his eyes fixated on Alhambra as the Quincy released a large amount of energy, he waited several seconds before speaking, "Are you watching the news, Lady Ragyo?"

"Yes, it appears my dearest Nui played her part perfectly. Thanks to the Life Fibers in Revocs clothing none of the pigs in human clothing noticed her presence."

Ragyo Kiryuin's lips curled into a pleased smirk as she stared at the data the Grand Couturier had managed to collect on Danketsu. As her maroon eyes memorized every stitch and weave in the holographic images displayed, the blue and purple Kamui's Life Fiber's naked and bare for all to see, the Kiryuin matriarch's disposition quickly changed as she came to the same conclusion as her precious Nui about Danketsu's origin. Only her fool of a former husband would have the audacity to plagiarize the hard work she and Isshin put into weaving Junketsu. The fact Danketsu's advanced configurations were nearly identical was only more proof that Souichiro, despite possessing a modicum of talent, had no true artistic skills.

Clenching her free hand into a fist, perfectly manicured nails failing to break her flawless skin, Ragyo turned away from the images and narrowed her maroon eyes as she remembered a more persistent problem, "These Quincy are started to become something of an issue. Their powers might not be effective against Life Fibers but I'm not about to take any chances. Deal with them however you see fit but be sure to let me know once you've located their headquarters."

A light chuckle echoed throughout the cramped room as the man grabbed a thick notebook off the desk. Absentmindedly flipping through the pages, each covered in lines of German translated into both English and Japanese, he couldn't help but wonder about the true identity of this 'His Majesty' the Quincy held in such high regards. Rubbing the bottom of his chin as his lips pursed into a grimace, several unlikely answers passing through his mind, the man

leaned his head back and asked, "What about Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi?"

"I'm mildly surprised Isshin would allow them to leave Karakura Town."

Her pure white heels clicking against metal as she strutted between rows of mentally refitted humans, the Marionette Threads visible around their brains, Ragyo pondered the reasons Isshin would let Ryuko and Ichigo leave the relative safety of Karakura Town. While London, and by extrapolation England, was nearly free of Life Fibers thanks to that ridiculous embargo that did not mean she couldn't enter the country. Unflinching when a spurt of blood shot through the air, courtesy of Amu stabbing a human who made an atrocious tear in Shinra Koketsu, the Kiryuin matriarch huffed haughtily, "But it's of no consequence. While their presence in London does pose a minor annoyance it shouldn't matter in the grand scheme of things. Still... I am rather curious about how Ryuko and Ichigo are doing. Please be a dear and check on them for me."

The man's smirk widened as he placed a green cap on his head and stood up, "Do you wish for me to spy on them, Lady Ragyo?"

"Swaying those idiotic men in Parliament takes priority for the moment, which should be an easy task even for a coward the likes of you," Ragyo answered, her expression stoic as she watched a COVERS deal with the latest corpse. Folding her arms under her bosom, the rainbow light from her silver hair intensifying, she tilted her head and smirked as an idea came to mind, "The Hellsing Organization, however, will prove to be a much more formidable challenge. This creature... Alucard... is not something I anticipated. I assume this won't be a problem even if you *are* a coward, Mr. Akiyama?"

Yuu Akiyama chuckled lightly as he pulled a high-resolution picture of Ryuko Matoi off the wall. Staring for several seconds at the image of Ryuko, taken when she arrived at London Heathrow Airport, he turned to leave his cramped room but not before grabbing the copy

of Dracula from his desk, "Thank you for the highest of praises, Lady Ragyo, but you don't need to worry about anything. Now if you'll excuse me there's a few politicians I need to meet..."

# Train in Vain

*So here is Chapter 44... a bit later than I hoped. Sorry about that but I don't have much to say. The arc is finally getting into the good stuff (i.e. Hellsing OVA IV-X level of good) and that means more fight scenes and character development. Writing out deep and emotional scenes (like in this chapter) tends to take a lot more time because I NEED everything to be perfect. If even one thing about the scene is wrong or out of context then everything will fall apart. I couldn't have that so I spent a lot of time making sure every single line of dialogue was up to standards (and beyond it.)*

*I hope you enjoy the chapter and please be sure to leave a review once you're finished. As always I'll end with the message about visiting my tvtropes page and the like. Enjoy the chapter!*

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## Chapter 44 - Train in Vain

Adjusting her cassock's collar as a stiff breeze whipped through the area, her straw blonde hair ruffling in the darkness, Heinkel Wolfe's boots crunched softly against the gravel as she approached a large two story building. Glancing at the moon rising over the horizon, the pale white light reflecting off her glasses, she took one last drag from her cigarette before crushing it. The moisture from her breath condensing in the cool autumn night, her breath coming out as a faint mist, Heinkel braced herself as she stopped in front of the building and gripped her fingers around the door and twisted. Stepping inside the building, old wooden boards creaking loudly beneath her boots, the woman feared throughout the world as the Judas Priest smiled brightly when nearly a dozen orphans ran out of the adjoining rooms and began pestering her with questions.

"Don't worry, I won't leave out any details about my latest exciting trip," Heinkel lightheartedly promised as she ruffled a young orphan's hair before stiffening when she noticed the elderly matron standing nearby with a stern expression on her face, "But that will have to wait until tomorrow. You all best go back to bed before the matron gets angry."

As a collective groan echoed throughout Harobaro House the children pouting as they reluctantly marched back to their respective rooms, Heinkel felt a cold chill race down her spine when the matron sternly asked, "Did you have to visit so late in the evening, Ms. Wolfe? It's going to take me at least an hour to get all the children back to bed."

"I'm sorry, matron," Heinkel apologized sheepishly while nervously rubbing the back of her neck, "If it's too much trouble I can come back tomorrow and -"

"Oh, you don't need to apologize."

The matron's tone softened as she wrapped Heinkel in a hug, the elderly woman's arms barely reaching the paladin's chest, "The children love it when you and Yumiko visit but I wish she wouldn't always show off that sword around the children. I don't want them getting the wrong ideas."

Heinkel chuckled nervously at the matron's specific choice of wording. It was common knowledge within Iscariot that even the most innocent of insults about Yumiko's choice of weaponry would be met with quick and lethal force. The last person to make such a fatal mistake, a new recruit who commented to Yumiko that blessed bullets were better for dealing with the supernatural than her katana, had barely escaped with his life. It had taken the combined effort of six paladins, Heinkel included, to hold back Yumiko and stop her from painfully killing the naïve young man.

"I'll be sure to pass on the message," Heinkel's lips pursed into a grimace under the matron's withering gaze before she let out a sigh



and followed the elderly woman deeper into the orphanage. After several tense seconds passed, the silence permeating the hallway nearly deafening, the paladin stared at the wall and added, "I'm sorry for not visiting last month. There was a rather nasty piece of business in Moscow that Maxwell wanted me to investigate."

The matron couldn't help but shake her head at the mention of Iscariot's leader, "Enrico was always such a serious young man. I hope he's not overworking you."

"You don't need to worry about me," Heinkel answered for what felt like the hundredth time in her life, "I'm not a little girl anymore. I can take care of myself."

"As you keep reminding me," the matron replied with a knowing smirk before stopping in front of her office.

Turning the handle of the door, the rusty hinges creaking softly from age, the elderly woman reached for the light switch before walking inside. Ignorant of the musty smell of books as the room was quickly illuminated in shades of orange and yellow, the incandescent lamps perched on the walls casting sinister shadows, the matron couched harshly as she sat down behind her desk. Wrinkled cheeks curling into a smile as she watched Heinkel standing in the doorway, the paladin too polite to enter the office without an invitation, she gestured with her hand before continuing, "You were always such a scrawny teenager but look at you now. Twenty-eight years old and not only taller than most men but more developed than any woman I've ever seen."

Scratching the back of her neck in embarrassment as she stepped inside the office, the faint lighting reflecting off her glasses, Heinkel looked out the window before speaking, "The truth is I'm actually here on business. I need to look at the old records."

A curious expression passed across the matron's face at Heinkel's rather odd request. Aged hands clasped together on the desk as the soft chiming of the clock down the hallway rung loudly through the

quiet orphanage, the ten chimes signaling how late it truly was, the elderly woman's eyes narrowed in thought as she asked, "Why do you need to see the old records? Everything's digital nowadays. The only reason you would need to go there is..."

"Anderson was spotted in London by the Hellsing Organization's pet monster," Heinkel interrupted as she slammed a fist against the wall, anger tainting her voice, before sighing loudly and turning around, "Iscariot's investing most of its resources into finally bringing him to justice but I thought it would be best to start at the beginning. The old records contain files from the Kobe orphanage. There might be something in them that can help us track him down."

"I see..."

There was a hint of sadness in the matron's voice at the mention of Alexander Anderson. She would never understand how a gentle man like Anderson, who would gladly sacrifice his life to save the children he cared so much about, could snap and commit such a violent deed. Opening the top drawer of her desk and pulling out a key, a light sheen of dust coating the bronze surface, the elderly woman handed it to Heinkel and said, "Please remember to lock the door once you're finished. I don't want any of the more inquisitive children getting hurt."

Tightly clasping the key between her fingers as she turned around and left the matron's office, the elderly woman wishing her luck in her search, Heinkel couldn't help but feel that she was searching for a needle in a haystack. Even though the old records contained files on every orphan fostered by Anderson and his predecessors at the Kobe orphanage, which were immediately transferred to Harobaro House after the former paladin lost his mind, Heinkel knew the likelihood of finding any useful information within the archives was slim at best. The bare wooden boards creaking beneath her boots as she finally reached her destination, the door leading down to the basement managing to appear sinister in the dim moonlight, she scoffed lightly before swinging it open and descending into the darkness.

Flicking a finger against the switch on the wall, her face twisting into an annoyed scowl when there was a burst of sparks before the basement was cast back into darkness, Heinkel cursed as she reached into her cassock and pulled out a flashlight, "Verdammt! One would think with all the money this place gets the matron would have fixed the wiring ages ago."

As she stopped at the bottom of the stairs, her boots echoing lightly against the bare stone floor, Heinkel swept the flashlight across the spacious basement and sighed dejectedly at her cursed luck. Even though she had known about the old records since transferring to Harobaro House thirteen years ago, a shudder racing down her spine at the memory of the matron punishing her for trying to break inside, she had never actually been in them but now she could see why the Vatican was so hesitant on copying the files.

"This... might take a while," Heinkel muttered as the pale yellow light from her flashlight illuminated the stacks of boxes, her eyes counting nearly one hundred before the shadows permeating the basement made that impossible. Letting loose a series of grumbling curses as her shoulders slumped forward, the flashlight held limply in her hand, the paladin took a deep breath before moving towards the nearest box, "Well, I should get started..."

It took Heinkel more than twenty minutes of searching, her eyes watering from the large amount of dust hanging in the air, before her attention was drawn to a particular box. Tucking the flashlight under her arm as she crouched down and rubbed her gloved hand against the plastic surface, the faded black letters stenciled on the box barely visible after more than a decade, the paladin grinned victoriously and muttered, "Here it is... A. Anderson - January to June (1985)."

Her fingers gripping the corners of the box as she carefully removed it, a relieved sigh escaping her lips when the rest of the stack didn't come crashing down around her head, Heinkel let out a small grunt before standing up and walking towards the desk at the far end of the basement. As she dropped the box onto the desk with a

resounding thud, the resulting cloud of dust causing her to momentarily cough, Heinkel sat down before gingerly removing the lid. Propping the flashlight onto the desk, the beam angled just high enough to see inside the box, she began leafing through the folders before stiffening when she spotted a familiar name.

**" MATOI, RYUKO"**

Heinkel momentarily paused, the folder still held firmly in her hands, as she read that particular name for the first time in more than a decade. It felt blasphemous that she was even considering equating the Ryuko she knew growing up to the same monster Alucard claimed to have fought in England. Nothing made any sense yet Heinkel couldn't ignore the feeling in the pit of her stomach that Alexander Anderson's surprising reappearance in London after so many years was more than just simple coincidence.

Snorting in barely veiled annoyance as she flipped open the portfolio and began riffling through the contents, aged yellowed forms and documents falling at the wayside, the paladin froze when an old photograph slid out of the folder and across the desk. As her gloved fingers gingerly held the image up to the light, the exposure chemicals already distorting the once vibrant colors into shades of yellow and grey, Heinkel's grey-green eyes narrowed upon recognizing the two people in the photograph. Crouched in front of the old Kobe orphanage with a large smile plastered on his face, one hand placed squared on top of a visibly embarrassed Ryuko Matoi's head, was a much younger Alexander Anderson.

"Damn it, Anderson..."

As half-remembered memories swam to the surface of her mind, thoughts and recollections from more than thirteen years ago playing out before her eyes, Heinkel slammed a fist against the desk and shook her head. Turning her attention back to the contents of the folder, the picture tucked safely inside her cassock, the paladin's eyes thoroughly scanned over the documents for anything that could be useful.

"No known allergies... mild case of trypanophobia..." Heinkel listed off as she read through the sparse medical records, her tone growing tenser with every passing second, before scoffing and tossing them into a pile to her left. There was absolutely nothing in Ryuko's medical history that could be useful in determining the validity of Alucard's statement. The only thing that stood out was Ryuko's mild case of trypanophobia and even that was common enough to be ignored.

A yawn escaping her mouth as she rubbed the bridge of her nose, nearly twenty hours of consciousness starting to take its toll, Heinkel was just about to skip over Ryuko's initial adoption papers when something caught her eye. Quickly standing up as she flipped through the many forms and contracts with renewed vigor, her gaze focused on the signature written at the bottom of each page, the paladin leaned forward and muttered out loud, "Why did Masaki Kurosaki fill out all of Ryuko's paperwork?"

The faint light from the flashlight shifted chaotically as Heinkel sat back down. Masaki Kurosaki was a name familiar to anyone who grew up in the Kobe orphanage. Her charitable donation to the orphanage, which had been in danger of closing due to the actions of the previous director, had been enough to keep the doors open for decades. In the weeks after Anderson lost his mind and vanished into the ends of the earth, the former priest's insanity carving a bloody trail out of Rome, the Vatican shut down the Kobe orphanage and transferred all the children to Hanobaro House.

As she rapidly leafed through the stapled documents, her attention continuously drawn to the dates stamped on the top of each page, Heinkel cursed lightly in German upon noticing an odd coincidence. According to Ryuko's file Masaki Kurosaki gave her to the Kobe orphanage on April 7th, 1985, which was the same day as the latter's donation. Scratching at her cheek while leaning back in the chair, her glasses falling down the bridge of her nose, Heinkel shook her head and muttered to herself, "What was so special about Ryuko that she would donate millions of dollars?"

Minutes stretched into hours as Heinkel read through Ryuko's file, the faint sound of water dripping in the far corners of the basement interrupting the nearly palpable monotonous silence. Most of the documentation was completely cut and dry, consisting of nothing but the standard legal framework needed for adoption, but it was the name of the man who adopted Ryuko that struck the paladin as completely out of place - Isshin Matoi. While this could be nothing more than contrived happenstance the paladin knew that wasn't the case. There were far too many coincidences surrounding Ryuko's four years at the Kobe orphanage.

Heinkel sighed tiredly as she ran a hand through her straw blonde hair before perking up when she felt something in her pocket vibrating. Reaching into her cassock and pulling out her cell phone, her grey-green eyes widening slightly as she recognized the number, the paladin shook her head and held the phone next to her ear, "Wolfe speaking."

A few seconds passed in complete silence before a partially nasally voice spoke, *"This is John Arnold of Section IX. I apologize for the lateness of my call, Paladin Wolfe, but I was told by Enrico Maxwell to call you as soon as possible in regards to the Anderson investigation."*

Whatever remained of Heinkel's mental exhaustion quickly dissipated as she stood up and pressed the phone closer to her ear. Vatican Section IX was the cyber division of the Catholic Church, tasked not only with collecting information but also suppressing anything related to the supernatural and undead. Closing the folder while turning around, one hand rubbing her sore neck, she pursed her lips before asking, "Have you found something?"

*" We traced Alexander Anderson's arrival in London to a privately owned jet owned by Ishida Pharmaceuticals,"* Arnold paused briefly, his fingers rapidly typing in the background, before coughing and continuing, *"We've managed to log into the surveillance system at London Heathrow Airport. Anderson didn't arrive. Two other people,*

*most likely in their late teens, were accompanying him. I'm sending several pictures to your phone now..."*

Lowering her arm as the connection was severed, her grey-green eyes narrowing in contemplation, the paladin didn't need to wait even a minute before her phone indicated she had mail. One arm folded under her bosom as she opened the attachments, her thumb flicking through the images of Anderson meeting with two heavily armored men, Heinkel felt her breath hitch in her throat as she beheld the perfectly recognizable visage of Ryuko Matoi. Zooming in on the image, Ryuko's unique gear-shaped pupils as well as the bang of red hair hovering over her face clearly visible, she took a moment to gather her thoughts before slamming her fist against the desk hard enough to crack the metal surface.

"Fuck!"

One hand rubbing the bridge of her nose as she digested the information, an angry growl escaping her lips, Heinkel waited several minutes before dialing a number. Leaning over the desk as she removed her glasses, tired grey-green eyes looking at the photograph of Ryuko and Anderson, she sighed when a familiar voice answered. Sitting comfortably in a Vatican jet as he flew over France, one hand waving away Father Renaldo, Enrico Maxwell's voice was tense as he spoke, *"Wolfe... I didn't expect to hear from you so quickly. I take it you managed to find something of value at Hanobaro House?"*

"There were several glaring inconsistencies in Ryuko's files that warrant further investigation," Heinkel replied, a grimace on her face as she closed the portfolio.

*"I see..."* Maxwell rubbed his chin as he pondered Heinkel's findings, *"And have you discovered anything pertaining to the current situation?"*

Heinkel scoffed dejectedly, her shoulders hunched forward, before speaking, "Anderson arrived in London on a private jet owned by

Ishida Pharmaceuticals. Also... I've all but confirmed Ryuko was with him."

*"How unfortunate but we shall cross that bridge when the time comes. Right now there are far more pressing matters,"* Maxwell's tone developed a serious edge as he stared out the window, *"Anderson alleged association with Ishida Pharmaceuticals might be enough to force that Protestant bitch to allow Iscariot back into England. The Ishida Conglomerate has a daughter company in London. We can use Anderson's arrival as a pretext to launch an investigation without having to worry about the Hellsing Organization's little pet."*

Grabbing Ryuko's file off the desk, her fingers clasping the folder tightly, Heinkel's lips pulled into the barest of smiles as she asked, "Who shall be leading the investigation?"

There was a slight pause before Maxwell answered, *"It is quite unfortunate that your righteous actions in Badrick were so ill-received. Even if Iscariot receives approval to launch an official investigation on English soil it's more than likely your presence will cause the Hellsing Organization to be on guard. We'll speak more about the specifics once I reach the Vatican. In the meantime continue your search for anything useful."*

Holding the phone against her ear as Maxwell hung up, the dial tone beeping every few seconds, Heinkel frowned before tossing the folder back onto the desk. It seemed she had a lot more work to do before calling it a night.

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"Life Fiber Override - Kamui Junketsu!"

The peace and tranquility of Tsubakidai Park was abruptly shattered as Satsuki Kiryuin's fingers depressed the blue metal bands



wrapped around her left arm. Her expression remaining completely stoic as Junketsu shifted and contorted around her body, the newly rewoven Kamui bristling with energy and power, the former Kiryuin heiress let out a relaxed sigh as she felt the subtle presence of her Kamui hovering at the corners of her mind. Glancing into Junketsu's multicolored eyes once the mental connection was firmly established, recently regained trust easily noticeable, Satsuki's lips twisted into the faintest of smirks before turning towards the man standing not forty feet away.

Her heels clicking softly against the ground as she walked forward, small bursts of steam shooting forth from Junketsu's pauldrons, Satsuki frowned as she curled her fingers around the Scissor Blade and pulled it free from the dirt. As she held the crimson blade in front of her face, the polished surface shining brightly in the afternoon sunlight, Satsuki couldn't help but feel it lacked the elegance and beauty of Bakuzan. While the Scissor Blade possessed the capability to end her mother's tyranny and genocidal plans for humanity there was something about the hardened Life Fiber weapon that continued to puzzle her even after nearly a full week of training.

Sighing softly as she slid her right foot backwards, Junketsu's form glowing with a faint blue light, Satsuki gripped the Scissor Blade tightly before turning her attention fully on the man standing before her. Her eyes narrowed dangerously, every muscle in her body prepared for the battle about to begin, the youngest Kiryuin clasped both hands around the crimson blade and scowled, "I'm ready."

Loud and boisterous laughter filled the area as Isshin Kurosaki rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, the red fabric completely devoid of Life Fibers. While his silver hair rustled in the bitter autumn wind, the rainbow undertone increasing alongside his mood, Isshin crossed his arms as a smug grin spread across his face, "Well, don't let this old man slow you down. You can come at me whenever you're ready. I promise I won't move from this spot."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed at her opponent's confident declaration before she abruptly vanished in a blur of motion, her heels kicking up small divots of grass and dirt as she sprinted towards the older man. Flicking her wrists while shifting the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip before reappearing several feet in front of Isshin, her upper body already twisting around as Junketsu radiated with a blue light, Satsuki planted a heel firmly into ground as she rushed forward. Shouting passionately while swinging her left arm outwards, the red blade held firmly in her grip leaving a crescent of sapphire light in its way, she was caught by surprise when a tachi materialized in Isshin's right hand and easily blocked her attack.

A loud rumble echoed throughout the area before the ground beneath Satsuki began to splinter and crack, the pulse of power causing the nearby trees to sway dangerously. Her arm shaking as she tried to overcome Isshin's monstrous natural strength, the rainbow blade held in his hand unmoving, Satsuki grimaced before vaulting away. She had known Isshin Kurosaki was equal to her mother but without the specter of death looming over her shoulders Satsuki could take the time to analyze and counter his movements. Panting lightly as she landed on one knee, beads of sweat tricking down her face, the younger Kiryuin clenched her fingers tightly around the Scissor Blade before rushing back towards her opponent.

"It's a foolish mistake to underestimate me!"

The sound of metal hitting metal reverberated through the park as Satsuki pushed Junketsu's speed to its absolute limits, the Kamui's multicolored eyes narrowing along with her own, and attacked Isshin with a series of nearly invisible slashes. It bothered the former Kiryuin heiress that her full power, outside of shifting into Zenkan, wasn't enough to force Ichigo's father to use more than the barest portion of his power. Her lips twisting into a sneer as phantom pains radiated from her stomach, the memories of her mother's actions at Honnouji Academy still fresh in her mind, Satsuki was so focused on tracking Isshin's tachi that she failed to notice his left hand until he tapped two fingers against her stomach.

A small burst of rainbow colored energy exploded out of Isshin's fingers the moment he made contact. Violently bouncing backwards along the ground, pained grunts escaping her lips as her head slammed into the dirt, Satsuki grimaced as she managed to regain her balance. Planting the Scissor Blade into the ground and skidding to a stop, her chest rising and falling with every exhausted breath, she stared at Ichigo's father and asked, "What was that technique?"

"That wasn't bad at all, Satsuki!"

Ignoring her question completely as he propped the tachi on his shoulder, his mouth pulled into a goofy smile, Isshin scratched at his chin before continuing, "It may not seem obvious but your power has increased since leaving Honnouji Academy. You could probably give my delinquent son a run for his money!"

"It's not enough," Satsuki admitted as she sighed deeply and stared off into the distance.

After the Great Culture and Sports Festival it had become abundantly clear that apart from the mysteriously absent shinigami, whose lack of assistance continued to grow more suspicious with each passing day, only Ichigo's father possessed the capabilities of defeating Ragyo Kiryuin in direct combat. While the probability existed shinigami like Kisuke Urahara, Yoruichi Shihoin and Tessai Tsukabishi could accomplish such a miraculous feat, if given enough time, it was likely her mother already had contingencies in place for such an event. One did not become the CEO of an international conglomeration, the second largest in the world, without having the intelligence to match. There was not a doubt in Sastuki's mind that after Kisuke Urahara, a man she presumed the Grand Couturier murdered, broke into the Kiryuin Manor and nearly sealed away the Original Life Fiber her mother would go out of her way to prevent it from happening a second time.

Tightening her grip upon the Scissor Blade as she staggered to her feet, small bursts of steam jettisoning from Junketsu's pauldrons,

Satsuki frowned before asking, "Tell me... how much of your power are you currently using?"

Isshin adopted a thoughtful expression as he rubbed his chin, "Hmm... that's a tough one but I'd say a little under ten percent."

A nearly imperceptible grimace appeared on Satsuki's face upon hearing Isshin Kurosaki's admission before she quickly suppressed it. It was foolish to believe that she forced Ichigo's father, the same man her mother feared, to use nearly a tenth of his full power when he did nothing more than parry her attacks. Firmly locking her eyes on the older man as she subconsciously tucked a strand of hair behind Junketsu's horns Satsuki gave him an affirmative nod before replying, "I thank you for your honesty, Isshin Kurosaki. Knowing my mother's full strength will make it easier for me to kill her."

"Well, you certainly seem to have your priorities in order."

Isshin grumbled melancholically before stabbing his tachi into the ground next to his feet. He was painfully aware, perhaps more than anyone on the planet, of the atrocities Ragyo committed over the last twenty years but hearing Satsuki talking so bluntly about killing her mother left a bad taste in the former shinigami's mouth, "But killing Ragyo... that's quite the goal, Satsuki. It's not like she's immortal but, don't take this the wrong way, Junketsu just isn't strong enough to do the trick."

"I am well aware of the chasm separating our powers."

Satsuki's voice contained a hint of anger as she slammed the Scissor Blade against the ground, her eyes narrowing dangerously while a familiar backdrop of blue light shone brightly from behind her head. Acutely aware of Junketsu's presence in her mind, the Kamui's eyes blinking as they looked upwards at her wearer, she took a deep breath before staring into Isshin's maroon eyes, "It is of no consequence if I never possess the necessary power to defeat my mother because I am no longer fighting alone! With the combined might of Nudist Beach, Ichigo and Ryuko at my side I shall carve a

path to Honnouji Academy's gates and strike down Ragyo Kiryuin before her plans can come to fruition. It is only by working together that we shall free humanity from the shackles of Life Fibers once and for all!"

"You don't say..."

The rainbow undertone in Isshin's hair brightened subtly as he reached out and gripped his tachi before pulling it out of the ground. Rubbing at a kink in his neck, a thoughtful expression adorning his face, the former shinigami couldn't help but compare Satsuki to the young woman he encountered during Parent Student Day. His lips curling into a grin as he realized the full extent of his son's influence on Ragyo's eldest daughter Isshin waited a moment before laughing and giving Satsuki a thumbs-up, "Congratulations, Satsuki! You've managed to pass the Isshin Kurosaki secret test of character! Therefore I grant you permission to go out with Ichigo!"

Satsuki blinked in confusion, her stance faltering momentarily, at Isshin's abrupt comment, "What are you talking about?"

"There's no need to be shy. I know all about your feelings for my idiot of a son," Isshin grinned smugly as he trailed off. Turning partially to the side while blatantly ignoring the annoyed glare Satsuki was sending his way, his well-trained eyes easily spotting the minute blushing of her cheeks, Isshin crossed his arms and frowned before continuing, "It fills my heart with shame to hear how dense Ichigo can be sometimes. Stuck in a luxury suite for four days with a beautiful woman literally throwing herself at him and all he did was brood in his room? It looks like I need to show him my self-help video again."

"You are misinformed about my feelings for Ichigo," Satsuki stoically corrected.

Twisting her hands around the Scissor Blade's handle while holding it aloft near her shoulders, sunlight glimmering off the crimson surface, Satsuki narrowed her eyes as she explained, "I required a

confidential location to tell him about my mother's true nature but all of my previous attempts had been less than successful. By successfully moving Ichigo into the Student Council quarters immediately prior to the Naturals Election, where he would be forced to remain due to the High Velocity Life Fiber Jammer, I made certain he could not leave until he fully understood what my mother was planning for humanity."

A tense silence covered the park as Satsuki finished speaking, the afternoon dimming as a cloud floated in front of the sun, before Isshin sighed in relief, "Boy, is that a heavy load off my shoulders! I was certain we would end up having one of those manga scenes where the oblivious teenager is forced to decide between two equally attractive and talented women. Now that I know you don't have any feelings for Ichigo I can make sure things work out between him and Ryuko! She did confess her feelings to Mako, after all! I hope that -"

"I did come here to listen to your incessant nonsense!"

The Scissor Blade shimmered dangerously as Satsuki harshly cut off Isshin's external monologue, her blue eyes glowering at the man standing just a few meters away, "The only thing that matters is stopping my mother from completing the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet! Romantic attachments and everything else is second to preventing the extinction of humanity at the hands of the Life Fibers!"

A smirk appeared on Isshin's face as he turned towards Ragyo's eldest daughter. If there was one thing he learned from nearly eighteen years of relentless parenting it was that teenagers, no matter how mature or intelligent they acted, all basically responded the same way when asked about love. Either they grew increasingly embarrassed at the conversation and desperately tried to change the subject or they lash out angrily and deny ever feeling that way. Rolling his eyes to the left while tapping the tachi against his shoulder, the sharpened edge of the blade failing to even cut his clothing, Isshin hummed as he scratched his cheek, "You're absolutely right. I'm sure you don't want to hear about your inability

to express your feelings. So why don't you try shifting Junketsu into Zenkan?"

The faint blush adorning Satsuki's cheeks faded as she exhaled softly, wisps of blue energy wafting off Junketsu's form. Scowling at the older man as her body was enveloped in a blue aura, courtesy of Junketsu's power, the younger Kiryuin took a deep breath before passionately declaring, "Before this battle is concluded I shall force you to use twenty percent of your power, Isshin Kurosaki! Junketsu Zenkan!"

Sitting on a bench a safe distance away from the fight, her chin propped lazily on the palm of her hand, Nonon Jakuzure watched as Satsuki shifted into Zenkan before vanishing in a burst of incredible speed. Irritably scowling when Isshin managed to parry the Scissor Blade, one hand quickly reaching up and holding onto her majorette hat moments before a harsh wind blew through Tsubakidai Park, the former Non-Athletic Committee Chair mumbled in mildly suppressed awe, "You know, Strawberry's dad is strong for a complete idiot. I suppose being both stupid and strong runs in their family."

"It is not a matter of physical strength, Jakuzure."

Ira Gamagori's brow creased into a frown as he observed the clash between Satsuki and Isshin Kurosaki. The raw power displayed by Ichigo's father, the same man that drove fear into Ragyo Kiryuin's heart, was astronomical in nature to the teenager. As his grey eyes tracked Satsuki's supersonic movements, the swings of the Scissor Blade barely visible to his highly trained senses, he clasps his arms behind his back and continued, "Even though Lady Satsuki is truly wearing Junketsu her opponent is anything but human. Isshin Kurosaki's exposure to the Original Life Fiber means he is a similar being to Ragyo Kiryuin. Trying to measure his strength is as fruitless as describing color to the blind. We should consider ourselves fortunate that he wishes to assist humanity instead of destroying it."

"Don't start getting all philosophical on me," Nonon spat in retaliation, the skull perched on her hat moving in time with her every word.

Huffing indignantly as she turned away from Gamagori, her eyes narrowing dangerously, the pink haired girl smirked mischievously before adding, "By the way, I'm surprised the underachiever didn't tag along. What, you get tired of flirting with her all the time?"

"I do not flirt with Mankanshoku!" Gamagori's left eye twitched at the obnoxious grin on Nonon's face. Grumbling as he folded his arms across his massive chest, the spikes of his Shackle Regalia gleaming in the bright afternoon sun, he coughed awkwardly and turned away, "If you must know Mankanshoku is currently at the movies with her family. It would be rude to accompany her on such a personal outing."

As another gust of wind tore through the park, courtesy of Satsuki using Tenrai Kagai against Isshin, Nonon waved her baton at Gamagori, "That's quite the denial. Didn't your dear old dad give his approval?"

The casual mentioning of his estranged father's bombastic and embarrassing personality caused every muscle in Gamagori's body to stiffen. Tapping a finger angrily against his inner arm, the memory of his father enveloping him in a 'manly' hug refusing to leave his mind, the former Disciplinary Committee Chair's tone darkened as he glanced at Nonon's Goku Uniform, "What goes on between my father and I is none of your concern, Jakuzure, but I find myself curious. Care to explain the sorry state of your Symphony Regalia?"

Eyeing the small cuts and abrasions covering her Symphony Regalia, the blue stitching beginning to fray and unweave, Nonon scoffed dismissively before sarcastically responding, "I don't see how it's any of your problem. I'm going to be staying with Lady Satsuki for the next few days. I'll get my Goku Uniform fixed before leaving."

"That is completely unacceptable!"

Gamagori's eyes shone with a malevolent yellow light as he towered over Nonon, "While I may no longer be the Disciplinary Committee Chair of Honnouji Academy that does not mean I will stand aside



and let you destroy your Goku Uniform out of sheer laziness! You will head to Kisuke Urahara's shop before sundown or I will be forced to report your insubordination to Lady Satsuki."

"Don't call me lazy," Nonon growled in return, her Goku Uniform shifting in the wind as she glared daggers at Gamagori, before folding her arms and spitting on the ground, "I tried going yesterday but that creepy shinigami was busy and Iori was out testing his new invention. The only one around was Strawberry's ditzy friend and I'm sure as hell not letting her anywhere near my Symphony Regalia!"

"Are you referring to Orihime Inoue?" Gamagori's expression changed as he calmed down and pondered Nonon's unreasonable excuse, "I will admit the versatility of her abilities does come across as rather unbelievable. Being able to revive the dead is not something to be expected from a seventeen-year-old girl. But do not allow your petty annoyances to stand in the way of Lady Satsuki's ambitions and dreams. Orihime Inoue's abilities not only allow her to heal the wounded but to also quickly repair Goku Uniforms. It would be idiotic to not take advantage of such a power, especially when she is so willing to help."

"Whatever you say..."

Nonon shivered in the autumn cold, her Goku Uniform affording little protection against the encroaching elements, before turning away from the mildly annoyed Gamagori and back towards Lady Satsuki's fight. Leaning her cheek against a fist, a small yawn threatening to escape her lips, the former Non-Athletic Committee Chair was caught completely off guard when Yoruichi Shihoin appeared just a few feet away in a burst of speed. Cursing as she fell off the bench, her majorette hat tipping forward awkwardly, Nonon clenched her teeth and glared at the former captain, "Damn it! Why the hell do you always do that?"

"Hello to you too," Yoruichi chuckling as she allowed the large cylindrical device in her arm to crash heavily to the ground, a large cloud of debris kicked up in its wake. Tapping her hand against the

polished surface of the Emergency Rescue Suction Device, a name she knew even Kisuke would find tacky, Yoruichi turned to Gamagori and said, "Your inventive friend told me to stop by once I finished field testing this thing."

Gamagori rubbed his chin as he examined the Sewing Club President's latest creation in Anti-Life Fiber technology, "I see... were there any problems?"

The former captain gave the teenager a playful grin as she leaned against the device, "It's a little flashy and loud but it certainly works like a charm. I managed to rescue over fifty people this morning from COVERS."

"Your service has been most helpful. The Emergency Rescue Suction Device will be the catalyst in wresting Shizuoka Prefecture from the COVERS," Gamagori nodded at Yoruichi in appreciation.

Although his Shackle Regalia was more than capable of destroying COVERS there wasn't a guarantee the victim inside would survive. Gamagori didn't know whether it was some instinctual reaction or an order given by Ragyo Kiryuin but most of the Life Fiber beings he fought exploded upon defeat, not only killing the human trapped within but also anyone unfortunate to be within a certain range. That was where Iori's newest invention came into the picture. By using the Emergency Rescue Suction Device to forcibly extract the victim, simultaneously cutting the COVERS off from its internal power source, they could decimate Ragyo's forces while bolstering their own at the same time.

As he lifted the extraction device off the ground, his enormous strength enabling him to hold it in one hand, Gamagori quirked an eyebrow when he failed to get a response from the dark skinned captain, "Is something the matter, Miss Yoruichi?"

Yoruichi's purple hair shifted gently in the artificial wind as she observed Isshin's movements, her amber eyes focused on the ease in which the man parried Satsuki's accurate and precise attacks.

Frowning slightly as she crossed her arms, the posture temporarily emphasizing her bosom, she shook her head before turning away, "I'm just thinking about a few things."

After the monumental disaster that was the Great Culture and Sports Festival, and the subsequent COVERS invasion, the dark skinned shinigami had attempted to understand the Soul Society's lack of a response. Even if there was something physically or spiritually blocking her Priority X call from reaching the Captain-Commander it was next to impossible for the elderly shinigami to not notice the tens of thousands of Life Fiber beings devouring every human in Japan. Such an atrocity should have resulted in Genryusai Yamamoto personally dealing with Ragyo Kiryuin yet the CEO of Revocs was still alive and well.

*" Perhaps Ragyo Kiryuin's control over Life Fibers severed the connection between the Seireitei and the World of the Living. It would help explain why I haven't seen Zennosuke Kurumadani in several months."*

Yoruichi didn't flinch as a burst of powerful energy exploded outwards, courtesy of Satsuki slamming another Tenrai Kagai against Isshin's tachi. Putting aside the scandalous appearance of Junketsu's released configuration, which she personally had no issue with, the former captain couldn't help but ponder the power dwelling within the Kamui's Life Fibers. It might have looked like Isshin was toying with Satsuki, allowing all of her attacks to connect before deflecting them, but Yoruichi was not fooled. The strength behind each of Satsuki's blows, the speed she used to attack and the way her muscles twitched were all signs of someone on the level of a captain.

*" And that's not to mention the entire concept of a Kamui,"* Yoruichi mused as she attempted to get a better sense of Junketsu's spiritual energy. Even though Life Fibers were alien to the planet, in every definition of the word, she could get a faint grasp of their spiritual energy if she focused her senses. Ignoring the rampant feeling of nostalgia as she concentrated on Junketsu, the sensation fading as

quickly as it arrived, the dark skinned woman narrowed her eyes and frowned, *"Even after all this time I can't fully wrap my head around it. Fully sentient uniforms woven from pure Life Fibers that are able to converse with what Kisuke calls Life Fiber Hybrids... it's almost -"*

The sharp ringing of a cell phone, the stanza from an 18th century symphony barely audible from inside her pocket, harshly cut off Yoruichi's train of thought. Amber eyes widening in veiled amusement as she recognized the number, the corners of her lips curling into a mischievous grin, the former captain turned away from the two members of the Elite Four as she pressed the phone against her ear, "This is a surprise. I thought you weren't going to call me after last time?"

*" What is Alucard?"*

Hearing Olivier Mira Armstrong mention that name caused all of the shinigami's mirth to instantly vanish. Tensing as she pressed the phone closer against her ear, both Nonon and Gamagori intrigued by her sudden change in behavior, Yoruichi narrowed her amber eyes as she asked, "Where did you hear that name?"

*" Anderson screwed up,"* Olivier's voice contained a large amount of annoyance as she continued, *"He's not in London two hours before somehow drawing the attention of a creature similar in nature to Ragyo Kiryuin - regeneration, enhanced speed and strength and an apparent disregard for human lives. Over forty people, including two of my men, were killed before this monster decided to leave. Even Ryuko Matoi's Kamui proved unable to harm the bastard. According to Anderson she shifted into Senkou and was promptly beaten into the ground."*

A grimace spread across Yoruichi's face as she answered, "This isn't good. Well, if you want the long story Alucard's -"

*" I'm not done, Yoruichi Shihoin."* Olivier's authoritative tone cut the former captain off, *"Barely a day later he shows up in Rio de Janeiro and not only fights against Kinue Kinagase but one of these Quincy*

*and the damned Grand Couturier herself. All without sustaining a single injury. I understand you shinigami have your share of military secrets but this Alucard has already proven himself to be a thorn in Nudist Beach's side. I need to know what the hell I'm dealing with and how to put him down."*

"Alucard is not something I expected to encounter in my lifetime," Yoruichi rubbed her cheek and sighed loudly. Although she didn't care that Gamagori and Jakuzure were leaning forward, their curiosity at her reaction overwhelming them, it was the subtle shifting of Isshin's gaze that drew her attention. Scratching at the back of her neck as she walked away from the Elite Four, her blue jacket fluttering in the wind, Yoruichi paused a moment to collect her thoughts before continuing, "The Onmitsukido, or Stealth Force, possesses a list of the most dangerous supernatural creatures known to the Soul Society ranked by power and ability to disrupt the flow of souls. Alucard has remained at the top of that list for the last four hundred years."

There was the sound of papers rustling on the other end of the line before Olivier responded, *"I do not care about his personal history. I need to know the specifics of his abilities - power, strength and any weaknesses we can exploit. I will not let this war against Ragyo Kiryuin devolve into two fronts!"*

"When Alucard first appeared on the Soul Society's radar he massacred three captains before vanishing," Yoruichi's voice contained not a hint of emotion as she recounted one of the darkest moments in the Soul Society's history. What began as the standard response to a possible Vasto Lorde incursion in the living world ended up compromising the strength of the Gotei 13 for almost twenty years. Staring up into the sky, a faint melancholic look in her eyes, Yoruichi's expression hardened as she continued explaining, "I'm going to skip ahead and get to the point. Alucard possesses the ability to drink the blood of his victims, absorbing their soul and spiritual energy in the process."

*" So I'm dealing with a vampire?" Olivier's voice faded away but Yoruichi could hear the short-tempered woman yelling at someone in the background. After nearly a minute went by, her ears barely picking up the unmistakable tone of Alex Armstrong, the former captain was surprised by the calmness in the general's voice, "But it seems Alucard has a weakness. Anderson said Alucard was injured when he tried to drink Ryuko Matoi's blood, which suggests Life Fibers and vampires don't get along. It seems I'm going to need to have a lengthy chat with Integra Hellsing about why she failed to mention something like this sitting right under her nose."*

Yoruichi flinched as the call was violently disconnected but that was the least of her concerns. Tapping a finger against the plastic surface of the phone, her lips pursed deep in thought, the former captain looked over her shoulder at the two teenagers and said, "I'm assuming you both heard all that so there's no need for me to explain. Go to Kisuke's shop, break the door down if you have to, and tell him about Alucard. He'll understand."

"I understand," Gamagori nodded before turning to leave, a grumbling Nonon standing at his side, "And what are you going to do, Miss Yoruichi?"

The former captain gave the two teenagers a cursory glance as she pocketed her phone and began walking towards Isshin and Satsuki, "I'm going to tell an overprotective parent that his son is being hunted by one of the most dangerous creatures in existence. Wish me luck..."

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As the sun slowly set on the city of London, bathing the city in autumnal shades of orange and red and causing a frosty chill to permeate the air, Ichigo shivered as he leaned against the handrails of the London Eye. Staring across the River Thames towards the city stretching into the distance, hundreds of lights already visible in the

twilight sky, Ichigo's face pulled into a scowl as he thought about something that had been bothering him for some time.

At first it didn't seem all that important in the grand scheme of things, considering what happened within hours of arriving, but he hadn't seen a single shinigami or hollow since leaving Karakura Town. Even if his old man was telling the truth about hollow attacks being exceeding rare outside of Karakura Town that didn't explain why there weren't any shinigami. Ichigo didn't pretend to know everything about the Seireitei but a city the size of London, with a population over three million, should have at least a few shinigami. If there weren't any shinigami patrolling the city, helping the souls of the recently deceased pass onto the afterlife, what was preventing hollows from devouring everyone in sight?

*"I wonder how the Seireitei watches over one billion people?"* Ichigo frowned as he scratched the back of his neck, *"There are dozens of languages and cultures out there. A spirit wearing a shihakusho and carrying a sword is going to stick out like a sore thumb outside of Japan. I also don't think most of the world is just going to change customs after they die. It doesn't make any sense that -"*

"Give it a rest, Senketsu! I already took five pictures of the stupid thing!"

Ichigo was torn from his thoughts when Ryuko shouted at her Kamui for the third time in the last ten minutes. Sighing in annoyance as he tapped a finger against the handrail, Mugetsu emitting an angry growl in concert with his emotions, Ichigo couldn't help but rub the side of his face as Senketsu gave the same exact argument as before, **"Yes, but that was down at the ground. I want to take a picture of Big Ben from the very top where the view is much better."**

"What's the big deal, anyway?" Ryuko's voice contained a mixture of annoyance and exasperation as she tightly gripped her Kamui's lapels with one hand and pulled hard. Stomping away from the window towards the circular bench in the middle of the capsule, a

camera held in her left hand, Ryuko scoffed irritably as she sat down and stared angrily into Senketsu's multicolored eye, "Learn some patience. We're already going on that stupid tour tomorrow. Why can't you just relax and wait until then?"

***" The answer to that question is simple - because the view is much better up here,"*** Senketsu responded calmly as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, ***"It's common sense that you can't see the outside when you're inside, after all. Now take the picture, Ryuko."***

Ryuko grumbled softly at her Kamui's persistence before sighing in defeat and raising the camera to her eye. As she depressed the button on the camera, Senketsu's form tightening around her body in anticipation of the picture, Ryuko waited until the flash vanished before scowling, "That was the last one, got it? There are other things to worry about besides taking pictures of stupid landmarks... like wherever the hell that blood-sucking bastard is hiding."

Merely thinking about that smug vampire bastard, his red overcoat billowing while he shot off her leg, caused Ryuko to grit her teeth in frustration. She knew Alucard had been strong from the very start but being so thoroughly outclassed left a sore taste in her mouth that refused to go away. Even Nui Harime's supernatural strength paled in comparison to what she felt when Alucard released his full power. Folding her arms across her chest, fingers gripping Senketsu's body as she remembered the Jackal's bullets tearing through her chest, Ryuko bit her lip before turning to Ichigo and asking, "Hey Ichigo, you think that undead asshole's going to come after us again?"

"I don't know," Ichigo admitted as he sat down next to Ryuko. Curling a hand in front of his mouth as his eyes narrowed, a perplexed expression adorning his face, he was silent for several seconds before continuing, "Alucard was strong enough to beat you without any trouble. The fact he hasn't shown up in the last three days is strange."



Mugetsu's multicolored eyes blinked in confusion, ***"What about that Quincy, Ichigo?"***

Ichigo stiffened at his Kamui's innocent mention of the increasingly annoying Quilge Opie. It didn't take a genius to realize the Quincy was hiding something important behind all his cryptic questions and comments. That was why after they left the Hellsing Manor, a rather worried Walter shaking Anderson's hand, he took his phone away from Ryuko and called Uryu. If there was anyone that liked to rub in his knowledge of Quincy heritage it was Uryu and hearing his friend's confusion about Quilge was cause for concern. Leaning backwards and folding his arms Ichigo frowned and said, "He might have been telling the truth but I don't trust him. Even though the Quincy helped at Honnouji Academy it's a little strange they were already in London before we arrived."

"You said this Quilge guy's boss is working against Ragyo, right?" Ryuko asked out loud, her blue eyes narrowing as she stared out of the capsule. As her face was covered in a multitude of colors, the lights built into the London Eye bathing the area in the colors of the rainbow, she scoffed and added, "Then why the hell is he *here* ? Kisuke and that Armstrong Lady said Revocs is banned from England. That means Ragyo can't even come into the country. Why isn't he in Japan helping to fight against the COVERS?"

"I have no idea," Ichigo frowned, multiple thoughts running through his mind, as silence enveloped the mostly empty capsule. As the last vestiges of daylight vanished over the horizon, the stars twinkling in the skies drowned out by the city lights, Ichigo ran a hand through his orange hair and grimaced, "You were right."

Ryuko, who had spent the last few minutes silently staring at the hundreds of people milling about in the streets, turned towards Ichigo, "Right about what?"

"About Alucard..." Ichigo trailed off as he watched the ground slowly grow closer, "He killed dozens of people the other night. If he tries again... well, I don't think he'll let either of us escape a second time."

The constantly shifting lights from the traffic below illuminated Ryuko's face in streaks of white and yellow as she turned away from Ichigo. Gnashing her teeth as a shudder coursed up her spine, one hand subconsciously rubbing the side of her neck, Ryuko tightly clenched her other hand into a fist and spat dejectedly, "You don't need to remind me. I can't believe that fucking vampire was trying to eat my soul. If it weren't for my Life Fibers that Ragyo... damn it! Now I just want to kick the bastard's ass even more!"

**" Ryuko... you should consider yourself fortunate to not be completely human. The Life Fibers woven in your body saved you from a terrible fate. Not to mention that vampire's blood,"** Senketsu paused as a violent shudder rippled across his uniform, **"It was the most disgusting and foul thing I've ever had the misfortune to taste. I'd rather get washed in a spin dryer than taste Alucard's blood again!"**

**" I was wondering why you were so annoying that night,"** Mugetsu sarcastically quipped as she remembered how much her fellow Kamui begged Ryuko to thoroughly wash him after escaping from the vampire. Ignoring the harsh glare from Senketsu, her multicolored eyes rolling in response, Mugetsu pondered for a moment before looking up at Ryuko, **"Ryuko, didn't you say Alucard didn't react well to your Life Fibers?"**

"Yeah..." Ryuko grimaced before shaking her head and huffing, "One second the bastard was trying to drink my blood and the next he was bleeding on the roof. What? You come with a way to beat the bastard, Mugetsu?"

Mugetsu closed her eyes and gave the Kamui equivalent of a shrug before responding, **"I don't know. There's just something about Alucard that ruffles my threads. Now that he knows what Senketsu can do he's sure to be more cautious in the future, Ryuko. Not to mention his weapons somehow have enough firepower to tear through our armor."**

As the dull murmur in the background grew louder, the voices from the crowd gathered at the base of the London Eye increasing in volume, a confident grin stretched across Ryuko's face, "What are you worried about, Mugetsu? That bastard might know some of Senketsu's techniques but I've seen most of his tricks. The next time we fight I'll be more than ready for all of his weird crap."

Ichigo shook his head as the capsule slowly reached the ground, "You're seriously going to fight him again?"

"It's not like I'm going to hunt the bastard down or anything," Ryuko growled in response, jabbing her elbow deep into Ichigo's ribs before standing up. Huffing as she ignored his grunt of pain, her blue eyes narrowing in annoyance, Ryuko folded her arms across Senketsu while biting her lip, "I'm not stupid, Ichigo. That undead asshole was a lot stronger than Nui Harime. If he tries anything I'll at least know what to expect."

The sound of the capsule door opening, pressurized hydraulics hissing briefly as the plastic and glass panel slid to the side, prevented Ichigo from replying. Folding his hands into Mugetsu's pockets while stepping onto the metal ramp at the base of the London Eye, the line of impatient tourists waiting to ride the attraction numbering in the hundreds, Ichigo frowned as he walked past the beleaguered attendants. Eyes glued on Ryuko as she shoved her way through the crowd of rude tourists, Senketsu's telepathic attempt at calming her down failing miserably, Ichigo sighed in mild annoyance before turning around and descending the spiral steps towards the ground.

As he halfheartedly listened to Ryuko angrily complain about the rudeness of foreign tourists, the irony of which was not lost on him, Ichigo attempted to roll his eyes only to be punched in the arm. Grumbling as he rubbed his arm, the slight pain already faded, Ichigo's scowl vanished as he craned his neck upwards and stared at the star-filled skies, "So what did Satsuki say when you told her about Alucard?"

Momentarily stiffening at the mention of Satsuki, her blood pressure briefly rising, Ryuko quickly recovered before scoffing irritably. Claspng her hands against the nape of her neck, blue eyes narrowed in annoyance as she stared across the River Thames, a light growl left her throat as she answered, "Are you kidding? Satsuki already *knew* about it! I didn't even get to say one word before she promised to come help us 'take down a supernatural threat.'"

The mocking tone in Ryuko's voice as she imitated her sister caused a smirk to briefly flicker across Ichigo's face, "She's just worried about you."

"I already know that," Ryuko grumbled dejectedly as she walked alongside Ichigo, the multicolored lights illuminating the shops and stores lining either side of the street failing to catch her attention. Her black hair bouncing as she took a deep breath, the red bang hovering over her eye appearing to dim, Ryuko grimaced as she absentmindedly fixed Senketsu's lapels, "It's just... seeing Satsuki being nice is really strange, Ichigo. I know she's my sister but I'm so used to her behaving like a condescending bitch that watching her act all nice and friendly is really creepy."

" ***Hmm...***" Senketsu closed his eye as he thought deeply about his next words, "***Satsuki might be your sister but it would be really strange to start calling you Ryuko Kiryuin.***"

"Don't even kid about something like that, Senketsu!" The embarrassed blush spreading across Ryuko's face was luckily hidden as she growled and pulled on her Kamui's multicolored eye. Letting go of Senketsu's eye when her actions started drawing unwanted attention, her hand protectively smoothing out her Kamui's wrinkles, Ryuko folded her arms and stomped a foot against the sidewalk as they stopped at an intersection, "I know you mean well but it's just that... last week whenever I talked to Satsuki she always asked about my childhood. Whenever I tried asking about what it was like growing up under Ragyo Kiryuin she just glared at me and said it was inconsequential."

Ichigo grimaced as he stared at the London skyline stretching into the distance, the early evening traffic sporadically illuminating his body in various shades of yellow and white. As the vivid memories of the Karakura Town Raid Trip played through his mind, his eyes softening briefly, he let out an exaggerated sigh and rubbed the back of his neck nervously, "After Satsuki made me her Vice President she explained a bunch of stuff - including how she thought you were dead. I bet she's simply trying to make up for the last seventeen years or something."

The inadvertent reminder of her mother caused Ryuko to angrily clench her hand into a fist, the Seki Tekko crinkling under the force. Biting her lip as the traffic stopped, her eyes staring crestfallenly at the road, she gritted her teeth as she walked alongside Ichigo, "First my dad is killed and then I find out that not only do I have a sister but my mom is an evil bitch trying to kill everyone. Damn it, my family is really -"

"Hey, give it a rest already."

Staring into the display window of a high-end store as he cut Ryuko off midsentence, Mugetsu growling enviously at the expensive outfits on display, Ichigo scratched his cheek before running a hand through his orange hair. Lips pulled tightly together as he turned towards Ryuko, his hand rubbing the back of his neck, Ichigo looked around before asking, "I know Satsuki's your sister but what about Mako? Her family might be weird but they did take you in and treat you like their daughter. They didn't have to do that and... uh... damn it. What would Mako say if she were here?"

The tension slowly dissipated from Ryuko's face as she imagined everything her best friend would do to cheer her up. Her lips curling into a soft smile as she stared into the clear skies, images of Mako making various poses while spouting seemingly nonsensical phrases passing through her mind, Ryuko chuckled and playfully punched Ichigo lightly in the shoulder, "Thanks for that, Ichigo. Hey, do you think we can get Alucard to kill Ragyo for us? That would really solve all our problems..."

"Why, isn't this a most pleasant night? I hope ye two are enjoying yerselves..."

Both Ichigo and Ryuko leapt away in surprise when Alexander Anderson, clad in his usual attire, appeared without a sound directly behind them. Her heart beating a mile a minute as she gasped for breath, her head subconsciously reaching for the shrunken Scissor Blade in her pocket, an irritated growl escaped Ryuko's mouth as she jabbed her finger against the former priest's chest and asked, "Damn it, what the hell's your problem? Are you trying to give me a heart attack or something?"

"I don't think a creature like yerself could succumb to such a malady," Anderson's green eyes, hidden behind opaque glasses, betrayed no emotions as he answered Ryuko.

Ignoring the angry scoff the teenager gave in reply as he looked down the crowded street, lips pulling away from white teeth upon sensing something on the periphery of his senses, the former priest was silent as he walked between the two teenagers. Raising one hand as he motioned for them to follow, the darkness enveloping the city thickening as they left the commercial district, the echoes of their footsteps resounded through the area before Anderson's gravelly voice broke the silence, "I just received word from headquarters. Twenty-four hours after yer fight against the vampire he was spotted in Rio de Janeiro."

"That doesn't make any sense," Ryuko scoffed, one eyebrow arching as she tried to remember everything she read over the last few days, "I thought vampires can't cross running water."

"Several hours after arriving the vampire eviscerated dozens of members of the local police," Anderson's short blonde hair rustled slightly in the autumn breeze, the chill permeating the night causing his breath to come out in misty wisps, as he blatantly ignored Ryuko's comment. His shoulders stiffening as he clenched a single hand, the glove crackling under the pressure, the former priest scoffed as his boots echoed heavily against the sidewalk, "One of

yer Quincy allies tried to confront the undead abomination but would have met a similar fate if not for the timely arrival of the Grand Couturier."

Ichigo's eyes widened at the news, "How could she get to Brazil without anyone knowing about it? My old man said he would be able to sense if Nui or Ragyo left Honnouji Academy."

Anderson cocked his head upwards as he looked over his shoulder, thin glasses shining malevolently in the ambient light, and sneered, "It was a COVERS clone, Life Fibers warped and twisted into a mockery of that murderous abomination. The Grand Couturier's traitorous master sent her to South America to deal with Kinue but apparently the clones aren't as powerful as the real thing. Yer Kamui should be more than adequate in dealing with the Grand Couturier if she dares take a single step on Protestant soil."

"Kinue managed to kick Nui's ass, huh?" A smug smirk spread across Ryuko's face as she folded her arms across Senketsu's form. After several uneventful seconds passed in silence, the faint whistling the only sound in the nearly deserted streets, Ryuko blinked owlishly before blurting out, "Hang on a second... how does this have anything to do with that undead bastard?"

"Despite her best attempts at sending the Grand Couturier's blackened soul to the deepest pits of hell, where that abomination would rot for all eternity, the colonel found herself brought into direct conflict with the vampire," Anderson's tone was brusque as he felt his pocket vibrating. Pulling out his phone and flipping it open, green eyes narrowing at the displayed message, the former priest paused before adding, "Yer Quincy friend managed to buy her enough time to escape before he was tortured and murdered."

As a single car drove through the nearly empty streets, the sound of its engine cutting through the subsequent silence, Ryuko bit her lower lip and spat on the ground, "We already know Alucard is a bastard so unless you found a way to actually kill him what's the point of telling us this crap?"

Twisting around until he was directly facing the enraged teenager, upper lip pulled back exposing his teeth, Anderson stared directly into Ryuko's eyes and growled, "Because the vampire is nothing more than a dog of the Protestants."

Ichigo and Ryuko's twin looks of abject shock caused Anderson to pause, a stiff and harsh wind blowing through the street as the former priest allowed the teenagers a long moment to digest the information. Frustration and annoyance washing off his face as he turned to the left, his eyes staring absentmindedly across the street at a closed store, the nudist was taken aback when Ryuko stalked forward and tightly gripped the front of his cassock. Her blue eyes narrowed dangerously as she gnashed her teeth together, supernatural strength pulling the larger man forward and down to eye level, Ryuko stared at the former priest and shouted, "What the hell did you say? Are you suggesting that undead bastard is on our side?"

**" Perhaps you should calm down and let him explain, Ryuko,"** Senketsu said as his multicolored eye narrowed at the former priest. Waiting a moment for Ryuko's boiling blood to settle back down the Kamui tightened around her body before adding, **"From the look on his face Anderson doesn't seem too thrilled about the news either."**

Ryuko held onto Anderson's cassock for several more seconds before letting go and walking back towards Ichigo, her Kamui's comforting words helping to calm her down. Eyes narrowing as she remembered what happened to last time she lost control of her anger, teeth gnashing at the memory of Mako's body, Ryuko spun around and scowled at the former priest, "Alright, start talking."

"The General was quite displeased with England's hospitality upon our arrival," Anderson's accent thickened with each passing word as he approached Ryuko and Ichigo. As one hand reached into his cassock before pulling out a folded letter, an ornate wax seal emblazoned with a coat-of-arm keeping it sealed, the nudist continued, "So upon complaining to the young Integra Hellsing she



learned a wee bit of interesting news. The vampire ye nearly died fighting is nothing more than a pet of the Hellsing Organization, only let off its leash to deal with supernatural threats."

"Oh great, just because I have Life Fibers in my body this bastard is going to keep coming after me!"

Groaning loudly as she assessed the situation, one hand rubbing the bridge of her nose, Ryuko grunted before spinning around and punching a nearby wall. Her face twisting into a scowl as she pulled her hand back, bits of concrete and stone clinging to unbroken flesh, several tense seconds passed in silence before Ryuko turned to Anderson with a large grin on her face, "Well, I'm not going to sit back and let that asshole ambush us again. He's a vampire, right? That means we know all his weaknesses!"

Anderson ignored the minor property damage as he turned his full attention to Ichigo. Offering the sealed letter in his hand to the orange haired teenager, who took it after a moment of deliberation, the former priest stared at the small hole in the wall and scoffed, "The General's managed to smooth things over with the Protestants. We managed to convince them their pet vampire was tracking the Life Fibers in yer Kamui. As long as ye don't do anything stupid there's no need for them to know anything else."

Grimacing as he held the letter in his hand, Ryuko staring curiously over his shoulder at the strange coat-of-arms on the wax seal, Ichigo frowned as something came to mind, "If you're right about Alucard... then why was he in Brazil?"

"Just *how* much do ye know about yer Quincy allies?"

The scathing tone permeating Anderson's voice momentarily took Ichigo off guard but before the former substitute shinigami could response the nudist had already turned around. As his boots echoed gently against the sidewalk, his hands folded inside the pockets of his cassock, Anderson added, "There is a meeting coming up with the Hellsing Organization. Their pet vampire will be in attendance

and ye are expected to come. All the details are in that letter. Oh, please return to the safe house before eight. If yer not then I suppose I'll have to come find ye two..."

Ryuko scowled as she watched Anderson vanish into the distance, the inky darkness rapidly swallowing body until only the barest echoes of his footsteps remained. Irritably huffing while crossing her arms across Senketsu, her mood considerably lighter without the former priest to constantly piss her off, Ryuko turned to Ichigo before glancing at the still unopened letter in his hands. Quirking an eyebrow at the fancy script stenciled across the front of the letter she leaned closer and asked, "So are you going to open it or what?"

***" Hmm... it's similar to the invitations Satsuki sent you,"***

Mugetsu pointed out, her gaze momentarily shifting upon noticing Ryuko's shoulders stiffening in surprise.

"An invitation for what? How to be an asshole like Anderson in three easy steps?" Ryuko muttered sarcastically while rolling her eyes, hands clasped against the nape of her neck. Craning her head upwards as she walked down the sidewalk behind Ichigo, blue eyes staring at the hundreds of stars twinkling in the nearly cloudless sky, Ryuko started wondering how Mako, Satsuki and the others were doing only to run headfirst into Ichigo's back. Stumbling while holding her sore nose, the pain quickly dissipating, she raised her fist and lightly growled, "Hey, why'd you stop?"

The letter firmly held between his fingers, the edges crumpling slightly under the pressure, Ichigo's voice contained a mixture of shock and disbelief as he shook his head, "It's an actual invitation... for us to meet with the queen."

"Let me see that!"

Snatching the letter from Ichigo's fingers without warning Ryuko read it several times before scoffing, "It has to be a fake. There's no way in hell Anderson would be allowed within ten feet of anyone that important."

" ***What about his boss?***" Senketsu's multicolored eye narrowed as he looked at Ryuko, several different tangents running through his mind, ***"It can't be easy running an organization like Nudist Beach, especially with someone like Ragyo Kiryuin around."***

"You have a point," Ryuko reluctantly admitted, her anger and irritation diminishing as she haphazardly tossed the letter back to Ichigo. Grumbling in mild annoyance as she walked down the sidewalk next to Ichigo, one hand running through her hair as the other tapped gently against Senketsu's skirt, Ryuko rolled her eyes and snorted, "That Armstrong woman must have some serious connections. I mean, meeting the Queen of England? I don't think even Ragyo could pull off a stunt like this."

" ***A meeting with the queen...***" Mugetsu's voice trailed off as she contemplated what she wanted to say, ***"You shouldn't let your guard down even if that's the truth, Ichigo. I don't know if Anderson was lying or not but I would rather not have several more holes torn through my prim and perfect uniform. It was highly annoying regenerating my fabrics last time."***

"Don't you give me any of that," Ichigo retorted, one eye twitching as he grabbed Mugetsu's lapels. Pulling slightly on the Kamui's fabric, thankful that the streets were bare apart from Ryuko and him, Ichigo leaned downwards and scowled, "That ridiculous gun of his tore right through my damn body! Do you have any idea how weird it feels having to regenerate?"

" ***That is not important,***" Mugetsu bristled, her eyes narrowing at Ichigo's excuse, ***"It is your duty to make sure my Life Fibers are always clean and proper. You should have moved out of the way before the bullets hit us."***

"You keep this up and I'll stop washing you with that brand of fabric softener you really like," Ichigo threatened in response, causing his Kamui's eyes to widen fearfully.

" ***A-Anything but that!***" Mugetsu sputtered nervously, her Life Fibers involuntarily shuddering as she remembered the very first time Ichigo hand washed her.

Ichigo couldn't help but shake his head at how easily Mugetsu caved under pressure. Feeling a bit guilty when he heard Ryuko chuckling next to him, Senketsu's additional laughter causing a thoroughly flustered and embarrassed Mugetsu to verbally lash out at her fellow Kamui, Ichigo sighed and gently patted his Kamui while grumbling out a half-hearted apology, "Look, I promise not to switch out your favorite fabric softener."

Mugetsu stared at Ichigo for several seconds, her eyes searching for any sign of deceit, before huffing and giving the Kamui equivalent of a pout, "***Alright, but I want you to give my threads an extra good wash when we get back.***"

"Fine... no need to get so upset about it," Ichigo conceded, rolling his eyes as he reached into Mugetsu and pulled out his cell phone. His brow creasing into a scowl when he saw the time, a light sigh escaping his lips as he rubbed the back of his neck, Ichigo turned to Ryuko and asked, "So, what do you want to do for the next two and a half hours?"

Ryuko shrugged as she clasped her hands against the back of her head and hummed softly, "Don't know. I've never been to the movies before."

"You've never been to the movies?" Ichigo frowned in confusion, his hands folded in Mugetsu's pockets as they turned the corner and returned to the relatively busy tourist district of London. Looking away to the side when Ryuko glowered at him, her blue eyes narrowing from a mixture of mild embarrassment and annoyance, he scowled before continuing, "I know for a fact the Film Club had a weekly movie night. I even saw Mako and Ururu there a few times. You never went?"

"I tried, damn it!" Ryuko angrily growled, a frustrated scoff escaping her lips as she stopped one foot against the sidewalk, "But that asshole of a club president kept attacking me whenever I showed up! It was so annoying listening to that bastard's stupid movie puns over and over again!"

Senketsu's single eye blinked owlshly before he helpfully added, ***"It was rather strange how the Film Club never gave up. You would think after the third time they would simply let you stay."***

"Don't think too hard about it, Senketsu. They were idiots," Ryuko grumbled before turning her attention back to Ichigo, "Anyway, to tell you the truth I have no idea what's playing."

"I guess we'll find out what's playing when we find a movie theater," Ichigo replied with a small shrug before his mood suddenly shifted. Glaring down into Mugetsu's eyes, the Kamui blinking innocently back up at her wearer, he pulled on her lapels and warned, "As long as you don't ask questions throughout the whole movie this time."

***" But the movie didn't make any sense, Ichigo!"*** Mugetsu exclaimed defensively, her eyes betraying the confusion she felt, ***"Half the plot was made up on the spot and all the characters were acting like idiots! How could I not ask any questions?"***

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The darkening afternoon sunlight filtered through the glass ceiling of the hidden hanger as an elderly gentleman clad in the antiquated attire of the Third Reich hobbled forth from the shadows, his fellow officers confined to wheelchairs due to their advanced age. Wooden cane tapping hollowly against the steel floor every other second, an irritated scowl forming on his wrinkled features, the old colonel scoffed derisively as he beheld the stout man standing at attention before him, "Wipe that insufferable smirk off your face, Major! I know

it was you that ordered First Lieutenant Alhambra to confront Alucard. What kind of game are you playing?"

Shoulders shrugging as he held his hands outwards, a conniving grin adorning his face, the Major's tone contained nothing but mocking amusement as he answered, "I'm afraid there is no easy way I can tell you anything, Colonel. The orders I received are of the highest classification, issued personally by His Majesty."

"His Majesty?"

The aged Nazi's eyes widened in complete surprise at the casual tone pervading the Major's answer before a seething rage overwhelmed his mind. Ignoring the pain radiating from his leg as he stumbled forward, his lips pulled back exposing stained teeth, the colonel didn't hesitate to punch the shorter man in the face. Nearly frothing in rage as he threw his cane away in order to grab the Major's white suit with both hands, his teeth gnashing together, the colonel slammed his good knee into the stout man's stomach and shouted, "Verräter! Is this why you've refused to turn us into vampires? Who the hell are you working for? Tell me, you fat ugly pig!"

Punching the shorter man once more when he didn't receive an answer, nary a sound of pain escaping his lips while he collapsed against the floor, the colonel stared at the downed traitor and decided enough was enough. Fingers twitching as he reached for the Mauser holstered inside his jacket, dark thoughts of the pain he was about to inflict coursing through his mind, the colonel was caught off guard when Zorin Blitz appeared at his side in a burst of Hirenkyaku.

"That's enough out of you, *colonel*," Zorin grinned sadistically, the intricate tattoos adorning the right side of her face distorting and twisting with the motion, as she held her scythe against the underside of the man's neck. Chuckling as spiritual energy coursed through her weapon, the scythe's blade instantly glowing with a deep

sapphire light, Zorin flexed her fingers and scoffed, "Move and I'll sever your head clean off."

"F-First Lieutenant Blitz?" The colonel fumbled over his words, sweat dripping down his face, as he stared with trembling eyes at the blade perched under his chin.

"Heh... the rank you're looking for is Sternritter," Zorin corrected, her mismatched green eyes narrowing in malicious joy as the pathetic man squirmed nervously. The muscles in her arms bulging as she pushed more spiritual energy through her weapon, the sharp blade beginning to vibrate like a chainsaw, she leaned forward until her face was mere inches from the old Nazi and grinned, "Let's see how much I can make you squeal before you wet your pants..."

"There is no need for such rudeness, Zorin..."

The colonel's eyes quivered in shock as he watched the Major slowly stand back up and turn around, not a scratch or bruise on the stout man's features. Humming softly while calmly brushing a hand against his suit before fixing his collar, yellow eyes alight with barely concealed glee, the Major's lips curled upwards into a grin as he motioned for Zorin to step aside with a polite wave of his hand, "Our dear colonel is simply confused about what is happening, his feeble mind unable to appreciate the seriousness of this marvelous development. So please allow him this golden opportunity to vent his frustration. After all, it is quite unhealthy to keep one's emotions bottled up."

Zorin grunted irritably as she glared at the colonel, the spineless man withering under her gaze, before reluctantly removing her scythe from his neck. Stumbling forward once the threat of imminent death vanished, the constant pain from his injured knee helping to push past the fear permeating his mind, the colonel rubbed his throat before freezing when he became acutely aware of the hundreds of soldiers surrounding him. Nervously swallowing at the strange white uniforms worn by those supposedly belonging to the Lost Battalion, their red eyes staring out from beneath black goggles and white

military berets, his fingers trembled as he turned to the Major and sputtered, "W-Who are you people?"

"We are... who we are," the Major answered cryptically, one arm tucked behind his back, "The rest is, as they say, quite unimportant..."

Seething violently at the knowing grin plastered on the stout man's face, any lingering fear dissipating under his rage, the colonel clenched a hand into a fist and charged forward, "You impetuous pig of a man! I'm going to wipe that asinine grin off your face if it's the last -"

A scream of pain tore from the colonel's throat as his hand collided with the Major's face and promptly exploded in a spray of blood and broken bones. Moaning as he collapsed to his knees, blood splattering in a large pool on the ground, the elderly Nazi held his ruined wrist in a death grip. His breath coming out in short and labored pants, beads of sweat dripping down his face, the colonel craned his neck upwards and gasped at the fading blue lines covering the Major's unblemished skin. The immense pain radiating from his hand diminishing when several other officers appeared behind the Major, their movements accompanied by the characteristic sound of Hirenkyaku, the Nazi officer cackled insanely and shouted, "What the fuck are you?"

"It seems, my dear colonel, that your usefulness to His Majesty has just about reached its tragic end."

The Major chuckled as he stood over the downed Nazi officer, glasses gleaming with a malevolent light while gloved hands were clasped firmly against his back, and watched Zorin Blitz step forward and grip the injured man's arm. Unflinching as the elderly Nazi was pulled back onto his feet the Major clapped his hands sarcastically before continuing, "The resources and equipment you provided, courtesy of your late führer, have been most helpful but it is time for the final act of this wondrous performance. It would be extremely



rude to delay the Schatten Ausrufung when the guest of honor has been waiting ever so patiently..."

"You hear that, *colonel* ? It's not time for you to die yet," Zorin laughed as she hefted the smaller man into the air, the blood from his stump of a hand running down her arm, before twisting around and tossing him into the crowd of soldiers. Flaring her spiritual energy when the vampiric soldiers immediately turned on the terrified colonel, her body outlined in a faint blue-white aura, Zorin slammed her scythe against the floor and shouted, "None of you undead fuckers are allowed to drink his blood, got it? His Majesty wishes for our former commander to remain among the living for just a bit longer!"

Terrified screams echoed across the hangar as the colonel was dragged away into the shadows, Zorin spitting in annoyance as she tagged along in order to make sure the undead soldiers didn't do anything stupid. Turning away as the artificial vampires descended upon the remaining Nazi officers, the sound of tearing flesh causing the smirk on his face to imperceptibly falter, the Major carefully avoided the bloodstains splattered across the floor as he marched towards the waiting Doktor and Quilge Opie. Head tilting to the right as he momentarily shifted focus towards the remaining soldiers standing at attention, blood red eyes easily visible through their goggles, a pleased laugh escaped the Major, "I must say, Herr Doktor, you've made astonishing progress these past few years. Tell me, how long will this current battalion last?"

The Doktor bit his finger, the latex glove slowly developing a crimson stain, as he answered, "Only two weeks at the most."

Even after nearly seventy years of constant and backbreaking research on the mindless horror once known as Mina Harker, who was appropriated by the Sternritter under His Majesty's direct orders, the Doktor's experimental results were still woefully inadequate. Alucard's disturbing spiritual energy permeated every inch of the abomination kept locked away in his laboratory, the inaudible screams penetrating the soundproof walls without pause. Thousands

of test subjects had perished in his search to replicate vampirism yet the Doktor knew without a shred of doubt that he'd only begun to scratch the surface of the creature eloquently dubbed 'Alucard's Echo.'

"Despite my best efforts the conversion process continues to clash with His Majesty's gifts," the Doktor's voice was muffled, his teeth clenched around his finger, as he turned away from the Major, "Attempting to enact the procedure on a Sternritter or Echt Quincy inevitably leads to death in a matter of seconds."

"I suppose that shall have to do."

A pleased smirk adorned the Major's face as the rest of the Sternritter fell into line alongside him. His footsteps echoing hollowly against the metal plating as he marched forward, the ambient afternoon light reflecting off his glasses, he straightened his back and looked upwards into the skylights before continuing, "Now that Ragyo Kiryuin has accelerated her plans we mustn't dally. The fate of the entire world and humanity is at stake and I for one do not wish to be converted into any sort of clothing. Quilge, how are things proceeding in London?"

"Slightly problematic but still within His Majesty's predictions," Quilge Opie answered stoically, his officer's hat tucked neatly underneath his left arm, "The Grand Couturier's unwarranted appearance during Alhambra's mission accelerated Nudist Beach's suspicions of our organization. Not to mention both the Hellsing Organization and Iscariot know of my... ties... to our former partners."

Absentmindedly playing with the pendant hanging around her neck, the Quincy Zeichen emblem glittering in the sunlight, Rip Van Winkle perked up when the tall silver haired Sternritter walking next to her began rapidly shifting his fingers. Staring blankly over the rim of her glasses as she translated the symbols, the Captain's red eyes narrowing slightly once he finished signing, she shrugged her shoulders and scoffed, "As if I know why His Majesty ordered us to leave those children alone. "

"Oh dear, I nearly forgot you were only ascended to the Sternritter just the other day..."

One finger adjusting his glasses, the frame pushing up the bridge of his nose, Quilge's lips twisted into a minute frown as he addressed the newly promoted Sternritter, "From your naïve comment you probably have yet to view the Daten obtained at Honnouji Academy. Ragyo Kiryuin is truly a most dreadful woman. Those children, as you called them, are amongst a handful of beings capable of killing her and thus His Majesty has seen fit to not antagonize them for the foreseeable future."

Rip Van Winkle scowled at Quilge's dismissive attitude, her blue eyes narrowing in annoyance, but her retort was cut off when the Major saw fit to speak, "Let us leave the matter of dealing with Ragyo Kiryuin to our allies. Despite the Grand Couturier's rude intervention in our former comrade's final mission, which drew the suspicion of the beautiful Olivier Mira Armstrong, we have lost little and gained much. Thanks to the late Alhambra's valiant effort the Schatten Ausrufung continues to march towards the inevitable grand finale."

"There is still the matter of Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi," the Doktor worriedly replied, his lower lip drawn into his mouth, "The Schatten Ausrufung could be put in jeopardy if they should choose to get involved."

"That is why I confronted Ichigo Kurosaki when he arrived in London," Quilge answered calmly as he placed the officer's cap back on his head, lips curling into a knowing smirk, "His Majesty foresaw the possibility of Nudist Beach forming an alliance with the Hellsing Organization. So through a series of carefully calculated questions and responses, all within earshot of Alucard's fledgling, the likelihood of the Life Fiber Hybrids purposefully working alongside Alucard has been rendered frightfully small."

A worried expression adorned the Doktor's face, "But it's not zero! If even one of the children decides to turn against us we will - "

"You worry too much over trivial matters, Herr Doktor."

An amused chuckle echoed throughout the hangar as the Major reached into his coat and pulled out a small electronic transmitter. Holding the surveillance bug up to the light, several sets of eyes widening in surprise, the stout man's smile turned malicious as he continued, "Do you presume to think that His Majesty hasn't considered such things? Preposterous! The power dwelling within Life Fibers is not something to be taken for granted. Plans are already in place to limit the influence of the children outside of their stated mission. For what better way is there to deal with a problem than having someone else solve it for you?"

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## **Kamui Tales #28 - Sisterly Bonding**

Ryuko Matoi found herself at a loss for words when she found Satsuki waiting patiently outside her front door. Staring in disbelief at the former Student Council President for a few seconds before quickly sticking her head outside, blue eyes searching for any sign of the Elite Four, Ryuko decided to bite the bullet and asked, "What do you want?"

"It should be obvious, Ryuko," Satsuki's face twisted into a disapproving frown as she closed her eyes and finished, "I am here in order to get to know you better."

A stiff and uncompromising wind blew through the open doorway after Satsuki's proclamation, her long black hair waving elegantly in the cold breeze. As she stared into her sister's cold gaze, the look on her face all too familiar by this point, Ryuko broke out in a cold sweat and seriously wondered if she could dive out the back window before being caught. Ryuko had always assumed Satsuki was aloof and stoic, prone to only rare outbursts of emotions limited to annoyance and disapproval, but the aftermath of the disaster at Honnouji

Academy had quite thoroughly shown that was not the case. It took two days, and the help of Ichigo's sisters, but Ryuko finally realized what was wrong.

Satsuki had no idea how to act like a sister.

According to a thoroughly disturbed Ichigo, who had rushed over to her apartment as soon as possible, Satsuki had gone to his old man for parental advice on being a good sister. While that would normally not be an issue due to her sister's disdain for most of Isshin Kurosaki's antics, which was something she fully supported, Ryuko had grown worried when Ichigo told her dad laughed insane before escorting Satsuki into the Kurosaki household. The events that transpired in the following four hours Ichigo had immense trouble explaining but it had somehow involved a slideshow presentation, several embarrassing family movies, two family albums and a very specific video.

"Get to know me better, huh?" Ryuko scoffed, hiding her fear and apprehension beneath irritated bluster. Folding her arms across Senketsu, her Kamui reciprocating her nervousness at Satsuki's purpose, she cocked her head to the side and snorted, "Look... I get that you're my sister and all but I'm supposed to meet Mako in an hour. Why don't you come back later or something?"

As she turned around to walk back inside the newly refurbished Mankanshoku household, courtesy of a generous donation from Uryu's dad, Ryuko was nearly blinded when an intense blue-white light burst into existence. Forced to take a step backwards when Satsuki's backdrop of light appeared in all of its radiant glory, one hand covering her eyes, Ryuko grumbled when her sister slammed one foot against the floor and exclaimed, "Your meeting with Mako Mankanshoku can wait! For I wish to spend time with the sister I thought dead for seventeen years!"

An awkward and silent moment followed Satsuki's impassioned declaration before Ryuko's face fell, "... did Ichigo's old man tell you that?"

Satsuki blinked owlshly in surprise before smirking proudly, "But of course. Ichigo's father gave me quite a bit of useful advice in familial bonding. Granted some of his points were horribly outdated and that video was a crime against humanity. I can see why Ichigo was so determined to burn it when I arrived..."

"It's just... I mean..." Ryuko found herself fumbling over what to say before sighing loudly. Throwing her hands into the air and grabbing her jacket, Senketsu's jealous growling falling on deaf ears, she slouched forward as she walked out the door, "You know what? It's just not worth arguing with you about it. So what do you want to do today?"

Adjusting the collar of her white and blue sweater as she walked alongside her sister, the cold air causing her breath to come out in faint wisps, Satsuki scowled briefly before responding, "I thought we could start by getting to know each other on a more personal level."

Ryuko nearly tripped over her own feet at her sister's accidental innuendo. One eye twitching as she buried Satsuki's innocent phrase in the deepest recesses of her subconscious Ryuko took a deep and calming breath before muttering, "Sure, I guess we can do that. Third times the charm after all."

Satsuki raised an eyebrow at Ryuko's comment, "What was that?"

"... Nothing."

# Guns on the Roof

*Here is Chapter 45 of To My Death I Fight. It's the last of the major exposition chapters of the story (i.e. Ichigo, Ryuko and Satsuki talking and undergoing character development but I thoroughly enjoy having character develop in unexpected, but natural, directions. I think it helps give my story originality without going completely off in a weird direction.*

*There are several shout outs and call backs to my earlier chapters, including a few throwaway lines you might have thought were nothing more than background information. I do my best to make sure everything ties together nicely with not even the smallest piece of information forgotten. So once again don't forget to read and review once you're done reading the chapter. I hope you enjoy it!*

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## Chapter 45 - Guns on the Roof

Batou adjusted the collar of his black suit for what felt like the hundredth time as he walked down the expansive hallway of Buckingham Palace, recently purchased leather dress shoes echoing softly on the polished marble tiles. Curling one finger around his tie and pulling gently, the constricting cloth refusing to loosen from around his neck, the grey haired Nudist Beach commander couldn't fully express his disdain for formal attire. Even though it was free of Life Fibers the clothing was much too tight and restrictive to be effective in combat. Purposely ignoring the mental image of Aikuro, the undercover nudist demanding he strip and become a true nudist, Batou shook his head and asked, "Any last minute questions?"

"I got one," Ryuko asked, a hint of irritation in her voice, "Where the hell's Anderson?"

"He's busy tracking down a lead on Xcution," Batou replied offhandedly, a small grimace spreading across his face at Olivier's latest orders. Looking over his shoulder when he heard an angry grumble from Ryuko, the teenager obviously waiting for a better explanation, he sighed and added, "Look, the guy's not the most social person on the planet even at the best of times. Do you really want him in the same room as the Queen of England *and* Alucard?"

Twin looks of realization passed across Ichigo and Ryuko's faces at what the former priest would do before the latter huffed and folded her arms across Senketsu. As she stared at the heavily armored guards lining both sides of the passageway Ryuko glanced down at her exposed midriff and couldn't help but feel she was completely underdressed. Meeting the Queen of England wearing just Senketsu had to be rude on at least ten different levels. If not for Anderson's blunt explanation of the Hellsing Organization wishing to see their Kamui she would have worn something over Senketsu, whether he liked it or not.

***" You were thinking of wearing other clothing again, Ryuko,"*** Senketsu commented, picking up on Ryuko's train of thought from weeks of practice. His fabric bristling around her body in annoyance, multicolored eye narrowing, the Kamui scoffed and blinked, ***"I only tolerated the jacket because you were cold. In a social setting such as this I will not allow you to wear anything else."***

Briefly watching Ryuko scowl before pulling on Senketsu's handkerchief, the Kamui glaring back as she argued about what to wear in front of the queen, Ichigo turned his attention to the large windows lining the side of the hallway and let out a tired sigh. The early afternoon skies, which had been clear earlier in the morning, were now overcast with the faint rumble of thunder in the distance. According to the news it was supposed to constantly rain for the next few days, which meant nearly endless complaining and grumbling from Mugetsu about her Life Fibers getting wet.



"Alright, we're here," Batou snapped his fingers in front of Ryuko's face, drawing her attention and cutting Senketsu off midsentence, before motioning with one hand towards the two guards on either side of the doors at the end of the hallway. Once he saw them stop reaching for the handles he turned around and lowered his voice, "I'm going in first and hopefully answering most of their questions. When you two are called in, there are three rules you need to follow. One - don't talk to your Kamui. Two - no talking *from* your Kamui. Three - don't, and I'm going to repeat that, *don't* mention Anderson... at all."

Ichigo frowned at Batou's emphasis on the third rule, "Why?"

A tense expression crossed the nudist's face before he sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, "It's none of my business to talk about Anderson's past. If you're really interested you can ask the bastard yourself... just don't tell him I sent you."

Turning towards the doors before either teenager could ask any further questions about Anderson, Ryuko huffing in annoyance before grabbing Ichigo's arm and stomping towards one of the many plush chairs lining the hallway, Batou took a moment to fix his appearance. After making sure his hair was slicked back and his tie on straight, his arms held outwards as one of the guards waved a metal detector over his body, the Nudist Beach commander took a calming breath and walked into the regal chambers just as an aristocratic voice finished exclaiming, "... Millennium truly is! The Last Battalion!"

Batou swallowed the nervous lump welling up in his throat as everyone in the room turned towards him, the creaking of the mahogany doors opening drawing their collective attention. Straightening his posture when he noticed the queen sitting at the far end of the large room, her upper body cast in shadow despite the full weight of her attention solely on him, he calmly walked forward and nodded his head, "I apologize for being late. The name's Batou - Nudist Beach commander in charge of Information and Interrogation."

"Nudist Beach?"

Enrico Maxwell stiffened at the rather peculiar name. Violet eyes staring suspiciously at the newly arrived older man, the lack of a response from Integra Hellsing suggestive she was expecting him, the leader of Iscariot scoffed lightly and asked, "Forgive me if I come across as rude but with such a name shouldn't you be naked?"

"We get that a lot," Batou politely waved off Maxwell's question as his attention was drawn to Alucard standing in the background. Mildly unnerved by the vampire's piercing red gaze, the shadows surrounding the nigh immortal man appearing to twist and contort, the nudist commander clasped his hands behind his back as he stood at the far end of the table from Integra, "My commanding officer wishes to clear up any misunderstandings between our organizations. I've been given orders to answer any questions you might have."

Integra's blue eyes narrowed at Batou's willing cooperation. Aware of Alucard slowly making his way towards the Iscariot side of the room, the shadows surrounding her lifting with his departure, she leaned forward onto her elbows and spoke, "Very well then, let us get started. Olivier Armstrong claimed you would bring evidence regarding Ragyo Kiryuin and the Revocs Corporation, which she quite vividly described as a threat to the entire world. Show it to me."

Batou grimaced briefly at the already anticipated request before sighing as he reached into his suit and pulled out a perfectly sealed vial. Firmly holding the airtight object between his fingers, an alien glow bathing the members of the Round Table nearest him in shades of ruby and crimson, the nudist's voice was completely level as he spoke, "This is a Life Fiber."

"My word... that's a Life Fiber?" Sir Shelby M. Penwood muttered in a mixture of fascination and apprehension, his position as the closest member of the Round Table to Batou affording him an advantageous viewpoint.

Maxwell leaned forward in his seat, the stack of classified documents chaotically scattering in front of him, upon seeing the glowing red thread floating safely and securely within the container. It was on the periphery of his senses, a fleeting existence coming and going in less than a second, but the young leader of Iscariot could not mistake the feeling of otherworldliness surrounding the thread held in Batou's fingers, "Are you suggesting that... that *thing* is your hand is the same Life Fibers as those Revocs claims are woven in all their clothing?"

Placing the vial back in his pocket, the eerie red glow vanishing, the nudist commander grumbled under his breath before answering, "Everything created by the Revocs Corporation contains at least a trace amount of Life Fibers."

"Assuming you are telling the truth..." Integra's voice was cold, her tone level and direct, as she stared directly at Batou, "How do Ragyo Kiryuin's plans for Great Britain coincide with the upcoming embargo vote?"

Batou leaned over the table, his hands firmly planted on the surface, before he answered, "In order for her plans to succeed at least ninety percent of humanity needs to wear Revocs brand clothing. Although we've dealt a few major blows to her operations, yesterday's financial reports put her market share at just over eighty-eight percent. And the latest census shows England has roughly two percent of the world's population. If she succeeds in overturning the embargo everyone on this planet will be consumed by Life Fibers."

Heavy muttering immediately filled the spacious chamber as the members of the Round Table turned to each other and discussed the ramifications of Batou's explanation, their minds easily coming to the inevitable conclusion of what would happen if the embargo was lifted. As he sat across the table from the British representatives, their incessant whispers about Ragyo and Revocs going in circles, Maxwell's violent eyes narrowed as he folded his hands in front of his face. His mood slowly worsening with every passing second as he was forced to continue listening to their inane arguments, the

stupidity of their words a plague onto his ears, a loud and reverberating echo filled the room as he slammed a hand onto the table.

"Preposterous!" Maxwell shouted, the once neatly stacked documents falling haphazardly to the floor around his seat, as he angrily sneered at Batou, "You'd have to be insane to even begin to believe humanity could be consumed by clothing! It's ridiculous behind anything imaginable!"

"Do you know what's happening in Japan right now?"

The biting tone in Batou's voice compounded with the nudist's scathing glare caused Maxwell to close his mouth. Warily sighing as he looked around the table, his grey eyes focusing on each member of the Round Table before settling on Integra, the nudist paused for a few seconds before answering his own question, "Since roughly two weeks ago Nudist Beach has been engaged in an all-out war against Ragyo Kiryuin. We're holding out for the moment but thousands of people have died and hundreds of thousands have disappeared entirely."

Her eyes widening in shock, the knowledge of a war still ongoing in Japan cause for great concern, Integra whipped her head towards Sir Penwood and demanded, "Why haven't we heard about this?"

"I-I don't know," Sir Penwood sputtered nervous, hands gripped tightly together as he wracked his mind for an answer, "The American's USS George Washington is currently stationed at NAF Atsugi. Surely they would have interceded..."

"There's one last nasty little ability I forgot to mention..." Batou trailed off as he sat back down, hands crossed in front of his mouth. Rubbing a finger against the bottom of his chin, subtly aware of Alucard's slowly increasing smirk in the corner of the room, the nudist took a moment to articulate his thoughts before adding, "We're not sure how they do it, hell we spent the last ten years or so trying to devise a counter, but Life Fibers can... eat... any

unnecessary memories. Anyone wearing Revocs clothing could be standing right in front of the damn Grand Couturier and not even see her."

Integra's lips pulled into a mixture of a scowl and grimace when she failed to find any signs of deceit on Batou's face. If the nudist commander spoke the truth, and wasn't simply weaving together an extravagant farce of a story, it would explain the strange news leaving Brazil in the wake of her servant's departure. She had watched with rapt attention when the world-renowned Grand Couturier of Revocs fought Alucard, her body easily regenerating from the Jackal's powerful ammunition, but it was the aftermath that was most disconcerting. Every major news network covering the 'terrorist attack' failed to mention both the Grand Couturier as well as that other woman. It was like they weren't even there.

"Something troubles me," Integra tilted her head slightly to the right, her eyes narrowing at Maxwell before inquiring, "Doesn't Revocs make the Vatican's clothing?"

One of Maxwell's eyebrows rose, a strange expression adorning his face, before he sighed and pulled at his sleeve, "I will not deny Revocs creates most of the Catholic Church's formal attire. However the secrecy required for Iscariot to exist and function as it does means our uniforms must be woven via techniques centuries old. Neither Yumiko nor myself are wearing these so-called Life Fibers."

"So we're working against time..."

The leader of the Hellsing Organization's attention shifted to Walter standing quietly at her side, the aged butler's disposition readily apparent to the younger woman. The recent upsurge in vampire attacks, which were heavily linked to the Jahrtausendarmee, was bad enough on its own. Adding the recent revelation about Ragyo Kiryuin's plans, the slaughter of every single human a far more pressing concern at the moment, turned the already grim situation into nearly a complete disaster. Leaning back in her seat, the wood creaking slightly, she took a moment to gather her thoughts before

speaking, "Mr. Batou, how long do we have if the embargo is kept in place? A month? A year?"

Batou frowned at the inadvertent mentioning of his hated nickname before answering, "Our more conservative estimates give us several weeks, maybe a month or two if we can manage to hit a few more Revocs Distribution Facilities. Taking out the Paris Distribution Facility bought us some time but not as much as we thought. Realistically we think she only needs a few more weeks."

That was not the answer Integra wanted to hear and from the increasing worried expressions from both the Round Table and Iscariot, the latter doing his best to hold onto a mask of stoicism, they were equally perturbed. Two weeks was not nearly enough time to coordinate their military forces and launch an all-out assault on Revocs facilities across the globe. That was assuming, of course, Great Britain's allies allowed them to do so in the first place. If Life Fibers could truly eliminate any unnecessary memories, preventing the wearers from noticing anything odd, it might also work in reverse.

Her shoulders stiffening when Alucard chuckled in amusement Integra held a single finger in the air and scowled, "We can discuss the details later. For now there is another matter I need to address. Olivier's other agent spoke of Kamui - clothing woven purely from Life Fibers with the power to stand against Ragyo Kiryuin. The teenagers from the other night wore said garments. Where are they now?"

"I thought it would be safer for Ichigo and Ryuko to remain outside for the moment... given what happened the other night," Batou replied, barely missing Iscariot's reaction to the latter as he focused on the centuries-old vampire.

Turning towards Walter, who subtly nodded while pressing two fingers against his ear, Integra folded her hands beneath her chin as the chamber doors slowly swung open. Her blue eyes hardening as she carefully observed the two teenagers, the distinctiveness of their uniforms standing out more than anything else, she made a mental

note of Maxwell's peculiar reaction as she addressed them, "I apologize for my servant's behavior upon your arrival. He was a bit overzealous in carrying out my orders."

Ryuko barely heard Integra's apology as her attention was drawn to Alucard, the vampire's red eyes shining brightly in the shadows. As Senketsu tightened around her body, the Kamui vividly remembering the ease in which the vampire destroyed his armor, she opened her mouth to reply with a snide comment but stopped upon noticing the Queen of England sitting at the far end of the room. Absentmindedly rubbing at a crease in her Kamui's sleeve, a deep sigh quietly leaving her mouth, Ryuko bit her lip and mumbled, "Yeah... it's fine, I guess."

"Now then... your Kamui," Integra pointed a finger at Senketsu and Mugetsu. Intrigued when the two uniforms appeared to move, the eye-like patterns seeming to focus on her, she continued, "I was told they possess the capacity to defeat Ragyo Kiryuin. Could you demonstrate this for us?"

"That would be a rather bad idea given the cramped quarters."

Ichigo and Ryuko spun around when the mocking voice appeared out of nowhere behind them, the latter nearly leaping away at the young boy standing in the doorway. As over a dozen surprised gasps resonated through the chambers, everyone apart from Alucard shocked at the new intruder, Ichigo slowly moved his hand towards Tournesol hidden inside Mugetsu and asked, "How did you get in here?"

"Why, through the front door of course," the boy playfully quipped while stepping out of the shadows, one hand placed squarely against his hips. Cat-like ears twitching as he walked forward, his white uniform a sharp contrast to Senketsu, he shook his head and commented, "I would have introduced myself sooner but Mr. Batou's speech was just too interesting to pass up. So I decided to sit back and wait until he finished."

Upon noticing the interloper Yumiko rapidly slid in front of Maxwell, her left foot shifting outwards while her fingers tightly clenched the hilt of the katana sheathed at her waist. As she prepared to behead the intruder, her hidden eyes catching Pip Bernadotte leaning back while aiming his revolver at the boy's forehead, Yumiko was mildly startled when Ryuko rushed forward without caution. Her index finger already curled around the Scissor Blade hidden in her pocket, a metallic ringing echoing as the weapon extended back to full size, Ryuko pressed the tip of the blade underneath the boy's chin and growled, "Think you can sneak up on us, huh? I sure as hell didn't see you outside so why don't you explain where you were hiding."

"I'm not here to fight anyone," the boy replied, his gloved hands raised in a placating gesture. Carefully pushing the Scissor Blade away from his chin, Ryuko's piercing blue eyes causing a bead of sweat to drip down his neck, his cat-like ears twitched once more as he cautiously moved around her before walking towards the table, "I'm just a simple messenger."

Her lips pursed into a grimace as she watched the youth approach the table, eyes drawn to the Quincy Zeichen emblazoned on the black sash tied around his left bicep, Integra looked at Walter and growled, "Explain this."

Walter's aged features shifted into a disturbed frown while he leaned forward and answered, "Forgive me, Ma'am. I don't know how he bypassed security but Miss Ryuko's comments suggest he wasn't outside a moment ago. Perhaps some form of teleportation or rapid movement?"

"You shouldn't bother with such ridiculous questions."

A Cheshire-like smirk plastered on his face as he stomped to a halt at the far end of the table, Batou having already moved next to Ichigo, the youth reached towards the ground before pulling an old television out of nowhere. Gently placing the antique device on the table, one gloved hand patting it for good measure, he huffed and



chuckled, "Your minds wouldn't be able to make sense of it anyhow. I can be both everywhere and nowhere."

Ichigo scowled at the wording of the youth's phrase, his gaze immediately pulled to the familiar symbol etched onto the armband. Tensing as the boy strolled carefree towards the table, brown eyes narrowing at the easily recognizable suppressed spiritual energy, he asked, "Who are you?"

"All your questions will be answered in due time," the boy responded as he cocked his head at Seras and smirked, causing the fledgling vampire to flinch from a combination of shock and surprise. Smiling as he returned to the task at hand, pink eyes sweeping slowly across the room, he took a step backwards before giving a mocking bow and snapping his fingers, "Greetings gathered representatives of the Vatican, Great Britain and Nudist Beach! I am here today to relay a message to all of you from my superior, the Major. Please be sure to pay careful attention and take plenty of notes."

When nothing happened for several seconds, the thick silence permeating the royal chambers nearly palpable, the boy blinked several times in confusion while the smirk slowly slid off his face. Wiping a gloved hand against his white shorts before trying twice more, the sound echoing loudly throughout the room, he grumbled in defeat and began manually adjusting the television. As a burst of static blared forth from the monitor, the faint but distinctive sound of someone screaming apparent in the background, a voice with a thick German accent could be heard, "Something seems to be wrong with the connection, Schrodinger. I can't see anything... oh wait, stop right there. Perfect."

"Sorry, Major, but perhaps you should think about upgrading. This thing doesn't even work half the time," Schrodinger halfheartedly apologized as he finished, "But it seems you have your hands quite full over there."

The Major's glasses gleamed malevolently as he finally appeared on the screen, his white suit standing in stark contrast to the blue and

black background. Smiling as another scream pierced through the connection, the sound of someone yelling for help unnerving everyone in attendance, he glanced to his left and shrugged, "Everything's going fine. I'm just finishing a bit of leftover business, that's all."

A deep laughter, tinged with psychosis and sadism, lingered in the air as Alucard slowly approached the television, "Hello, Major. You haven't changed at all these past sixty years."

"Why, if it isn't Alucard," the Major visibly straightened on the screen and raised a hand, "It's been far too long, wouldn't you agree?"

As Alucard's laughter deepened, his crimson eyes brightening to blood red, Integra gave the vampire a piercing glare before demanding, "What do you want?"

"Finally I get to see the fraulein herself - Sir Integra Hellsing." A disturbed chuckle emanated from the screen as the Major bowed, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Her hands clenched firmly in front of her face, blue eyes narrowing when the previously faint screams continuously grew louder, Integra felt her patience quickly reached its end as she harshly demanded, "What is your purpose? What do you hope to accomplish from all this?"

Several seconds of complete silence, broken only by a brief burst of static, followed Integra's outburst before the Major's laughter could be heard in the background, "My purpose you say... what a nonsensical question coming from a woman of your intelligence, my beautiful fraulein."

Accompanied by a flash of blue-tinted light, the brightness causing several members of the Round Table to cover their eyes, the screen shifted focus from the Major to his former superior officer. Bound and freshly gagged while sitting against the wall, unbalanced eyes expressing terror and fear at the horde of artificial vampires

surrounding him, the colonel attempted to scream for help only for the Major's voice to cut him off, "I don't think a one word answer will suffice... but let me put it in the simplest possible terms. My purpose... is a complete absence of purpose. In this cruel and unfair world there are some people, male and female alike, for whom the means do not always require an end. For which the act of merely accomplishing something is for all they strive. I speak, of course, of myself."

With a quick snap of his fingers the dozens of vampires descended on the helpless colonel, his screams of fear devolving into ones of pain and agony. Staring wide-eyed at the slaughter, his stomach churning, Maxwell forced himself to remain calm as he bluntly stated, "You people are completely and irrevocably insane. Every single one of you."

Ryuko couldn't help but gag in disgust at the bloody slaughter playing out on the screen, her blue eyes only catching a glimpse before she forced herself to turn away. Lips pursed into a tight grimace as she attempted to block out the squelching sound of tearing visceral, Senketsu's eye closed shut as well, her knuckles bled white as she gripped the Scissor Blade with both hands and shouted, "You sick fucker!"

"What was that?"

His image appearing on the screen once more, the screams of the colonel fading away in the background, the Major smiled as he turned to Maxwell, "Did I just hear someone from Iscariot questioning my sanity... and is that the voice of the lovely Ryuko Matoi? Oh my, I didn't expect to see our esteemed allies so soon after the unfortunate disaster at Honnouji Academy. It's so good to see you both alive and well."

Forcibly ignoring the collective stares of the Round Table and Iscariot as he stood next to Seras, the fledgling vampire's blue eyes widening at the revelation, Ichigo clenched a hand into a fist and

scowled, "Tell me something. You're a Quincy... so was everything that happened at Honnouji Academy part of your plan?"

Maxwell's breath hitched in his throat as he turned towards Schrodinger. Finally recognizing the Quincy Zeichen around the boy's arm, the symbol standing out more than the youth's strange appearance, the leader of Iscariot's violet eyes narrowed, "Quincy? How did you people survive?"

Batou frowned while subtly pressing a finger against the small of his back, the expensive receiver sewn into his suit immediately recording every single word with absolute clarity. He had instantly recognized the symbol etched onto the uniform of the bound colonel, the significance of its meaning not lost to the former soldier. Keeping a calm demeanor as he walked forward, careful to let his arm fall back to the side, the nudist commander stared at the smirking Major and grunted, "I suppose you think your colleagues managed to fool the General. The truth is she pegged you Quincy for Nazis the moment Kinue returned from Brazil."

Clasping both hands behind his back, head cocked slightly to the side, the Major's glasses reflected a deep yellow light as he chuckled, "Contrary to what you may believe we are not now, nor have we ever been, Nazis. Even the thought of being compared to such crude people sickens me. The resources and capital of the late führer were quite essential to our plans. Once we had that we cut them loose and went our separate ways... as our dear former colonel can attest."

"I thought something was odd sixty years ago..."

The shadows surrounding Alucard twisted and writhed as he walked closer to the television, lips curled into a grin and exposing fanged teeth, "It was far too easy killing you people. So if you aren't Nazis than what are you?"

"Nazi... Quincy... meaningless labels by ignorant people." The screen flickered and faded, static briefly covering it, as the Major

clapped his hands together, "In the end we are the Jahrtausendarmee... or if you wish simply Millennium. In that regard, I hope Quilge wasn't too rude with you, Ichigo Kurosaki. It is something quite difficult to control my more zealous men."

"Golly! So you're the leader of those troublesome Quincy!"

Everyone turned upwards when a playful and saccharine voice resonated throughout the room, the subtle threatening tone causing a select few to break out in a nervous sweat. Sitting high in the rafter, arms folded on her legs while pink boots swung back and forth without care, was a smiling Nui Harime. Her long blonde pigtails bouncing as she cocked her head to the side, sapphire eyes swiveling around before focusing on a particular individual, the Grand Couturier gave a happy wave of her hand and giggled, "Bonjour!"

Ichigo's eyes widened at the Grand Couturier's sudden appearance before he quickly pulled up Mugetsu's sleeve, exposing Iori's prototype watch wrapped around his wrist. As he watched the invention, which was specifically created to alert him to Nui's presence before she got too close, continuing to silently tick every second Ichigo scowled. Something strange was going on. Turning back to the Grand Couturier he stated loud enough for everyone to hear, "You're a COVERS clone."

Nui beamed at Ichigo's deduction, a truly happy smile on her face, before answering, "That's right, Ichigo! But you can wipe that frown off your face. I'm actually here to -"

A burst of wind tore through the room as Yumiko Takagi vanished from Maxwell's side, his silver hair rustling briefly from the movement, only to quickly reappear several feet in front of a still smirking Grand Couturier. Hidden eyes darkening at the uncaring expression on Nui's face, sapphire eyes watching the attacking paladin without a hint of worry, Yumiko growled as she twisted sideways and tightly gripped the katana at her waist. The blessed blade shimmering in the ambient light of the royal chamber, a faint

metallic ringing echoing through the air, she attempted to decapitate the teenager only for the Grand Couturier to effortlessly dodge out of the way.

"Gosh, you're really trying to kill me..."

Nui pouted when Yumiko's katana cut through the end of her pigtail, dozens of blonde hairs floating gently through the air. Slowly floating downwards while watching the paladin flip around before using the rafter as a springboard, the wood and metal cracking under the force, she tucked her arms cutely against the small of her back and hummed thoughtfully. It was really rude of the human to attack her without even a hello, especially when she was busy talking to her favorite cousin. Her body a blur of motion as she danced around the flurry of rapid slashes, Yumiko's anger continuously increasing when her attacks constantly missed, Nui giggled childishly as she landed on the ground with nary a noise.

"That was a lot of fun!" Nui commented, one hand flattening a barely noticeable crease on her pink Lolita dress as she turned around towards Yumiko. Cocking her head to the side, sapphire eyes staring blankly ahead, she stuck her tongue out and added, "You know, I was given strict orders to not kill any humans... but if you keep this up I'll be forced to show you a thing or two!"

"Nui Harime..." The crimson highlight in Ryuko's hair briefly glowed as she glared at the Grand Couturier, her fingers tightening around the Scissor Blade as blue eyes tracked the teenager's every move, "What the hell are you doing here?"

The corners of Nui's lips curled into a knowing smile as she turned away from Yumiko, who was all but prepared to continue fighting. Pink boots tapping lightly against the marble floor as sapphire eyes studied each and every human in the room, lingering just a little longer on Schrodinger, she pressed a hand against her cheek and sighed, "I'm surprised you would ask such a silly question, Ryuko. I go wherever I want! Nobody can stop me! That stupid coward's little

reports were so dry and boring that I decided to come and see how my big sister and favorite cousin were doing!"

A tense silence spread throughout the room at the Grand Couturier's revelation, several sets of eyes widening more than others, but it was the sound of Alucard's amused chortling that drew the most attention. His boots echoing against the floor as he slowly walked forward, a light metallic click the only sound as the Casull and Jackal appeared in his hands, the centuries-old vampire's red eyes shone from underneath his fedora as he asked, "Nui Harime, was it? I was starting to grow bored waiting for you to introduce yourself. Did you come all this way just for me to put a few more bullets through your skull?"

Nui's smile widened at the thinly veiled threat from the vampire. Leaning forward, her interest in Schrodinger momentarily forgotten, she clapped her hands together and exclaimed, "I remember you! The way you impaled those humans was inspiring, you know, but I'm actually here on business. So I can't fight you today. Too bad!"

The excited tone in Nui's voice caused Ichigo to stiffen. As Mugetsu tightened protectively around his body, her unconscious growling causing Seras to perk up at the noise, he took a step forward and asked, "What business?"

Her melodious laughter echoed throughout the room as she nearly instantaneously appeared next to Schrodinger, perfectly manicured fingers gripping his shoulder before he could so much as react, "Much like this plagiarizing Quincy I'm here to give a super duper important message... but to the fat man on the television!"

"If it isn't the epitome of madness..." The Major laughed on the screen, his shoulders rising and falling rapidly as he locked gazes with the amused Grand Couturier, "... the creature born from the intersection of insanity and the id... the Grand Couturier of Revocs - Nui Harime. You are truly a monster in every sense of the word. Standing upon the pedestal of dementia with Alucard himself. Why, I can feel my skin simply crawling with disgust just by talking to you."

"Flattery will get you nowhere!"

Closing her eyes as she released Schrodinger and walked around the side of the table, fully aware of the cute glare Ryuko was giving her, Nui pirouetted on her heel while her mouth twisted into a saccharine smile. It was really great seeing her family again after so long, the looks on their faces forever etched into her memory, but unfortunately she couldn't afford to spend any real quality time with them. There was still a lot a work to do before Shinra Koketsu was ready for its big reveal and the more time she wasted speaking to these pathetic humans and Quincy the longer it would take. Leaning over the table with her chin propped on her hands, the two closest members of the Round Table flinching away, Nui tilted her head to the right and stared at the image of the Major, "Did you honestly think such a cheap trick would work against Lady Ragyo? It was super cute that you tried but she wasn't born yesterday, you know!"

Static flashed across the screen before the Major chuckled, "It would be incredibly foolish for me to underestimate the might of the Revocs Corporation. Suicidal, one might be so bold as to say, to assume an easy victory against a being of such magnitude as Ragyo Kiryuin. The legions of hell, in all their unholy and iniquitous glory, wouldn't stand a chance against that incandescent woman."

"Enough of this. Your impetuous voice is starting to wear on my nerves."

Maxwell slammed his hands against the table as he stood up, violet eyes staring at the screen before slowly turning towards Nui Harime. Grimacing as he momentarily locked gazes with the Grand Couturier, the sheer depth of her sapphire eyes causing a shudder to run down his spine, he waited until Yumiko returned to his side before briefly sharing a glance with Integra. As the young leader of the Hellsing Organization's brow furrowed, her attention shifted to Seras as she gave the barest of nods, Maxwell's left eye twitched violently as he snapped his fingers, "You are truly insane. The full weight of the Catholic Church will be more than enough to ground both Millennium and Ragyo Kiryuin into dust!"



The moment Integra tapped her finger against the table, which incidentally coincided with Maxwell's own action, Seras pushed off the ground and sprinted towards the Grand Couturier. The saccharine expression never leaving her face as she turned around, sapphire eyes widening in mild surprise at the supposed human's speed, Nui was taken off guard when Seras managed to lock a forearm around her neck before she was forcibly pulled away from the table. Perplexed that a mere human was restraining her, even though her COVERS clone was much weaker than her actual body, Nui frowned and harshly drove her elbow into Seras' stomach. Spittle leaving her mouth as she gasped in pain, the muscles in her arm momentarily bulging at the strain of holding the Grand Couturier, Seras quickly recovered before adjusting her grip and slamming the teenager headfirst in the ground.

Sighing as she finally pinned the Grand Couturier against the floor, one hand twisting Nui's right arm around while the other tightly gripped her neck, Seras frowned at the teenager's strength before turning to Integra, "Don't worry, I got her."

"Stop us, you say?"

The sarcasm permeating the Major's voice, compounded with his incessant mocking laughter, put Integra on edge. Drawing her gaze away from the restrained Grand Couturier, her blue eyes narrowing at the disturbed grin on the Quincy's face, she subtly gritted her teeth as he continued, "Such a laughable notion. It may come as quite the shock but Iscariot isn't one of my true enemies. You people don't even rank in the top three! Second on the list is the illustrious mistress of the struggling Grand Couturier, whose perturbed mind is wondering how your little assistant managed to pin her down with such contemptible ease. My true enemy has always been Britain... the Hellsing Organization... you know, to be perfectly clear, it's that man laughing to the left."

Alucard's slow chuckling quickly devolved into psychotic laughter as he stared at the screen, the shadows surrounding his body twisting

chaotically, "A declaration of war, is it? Perfect! I cannot wait to destroy you people again!"

"You really should get your priorities straight," Schrodinger quipped offhandedly, the cat-like grin returning as he marched away from the restrained Nui Harime, "I mean, we're just going to exterminate a few cities, murder a couple million people, while Ragyo Kiryuin plans on massacring humanity."

"Priorities, you say..." Alucard's voice echoed as he trailed off, his attention momentarily focused on the strange youth, "Once I finish what I started sixty years ago by tearing the beating heart out of your fat little Major that monster of a woman is next."

Integra glowered at the smirking Major, her skin crawling in disgust at the mere sight of his insane grin and psychotic yellow eyes. There was no telling how many innocent lives he's taken over the past six decades in pursuit of his demented goal. Blue eyes glancing towards the bound Grand Couturier, Seras' vampiric strength barely enough to contain the surprising strong teenager, the leader of the Hellsing Organization faintly sighed as she slowly stood up, "Seras, please remove Nui Harime from Her Majesty's presence. The Grand Couturier has much to answer for..."

"Nope!"

Smiling as a faint purple light enveloped her faux body Nui leaned forward before slamming the back of her head into Seras' nose hard enough to shatter it. As blood spurted through the air, the fledgling vampire staggering back and involuntarily releasing the highly dangerous teenager, Nui giggled victoriously while hopping back onto her feet. Her blonde pigtails bouncing softly as she turned around and watched the young woman regenerate, blue eyes shifting to a familiar red, she stuck her tongue out as the colors began fading from her body, "Gosh, it's a really good thing I didn't come in person! Fighting weird things like you would have ruined my favorite dress!"

"Damn it!" Ryuko growled as she watched Nui slowly dissipate, a feeling of complete helplessness coursing through her veins. Biting her lower lip while taking a step forward, the Scissor Blade shaking in her grip, she stared into the Grand Couturier's purely white eyes and scowled, "Tell us where Ururu is, you bitch! I swear, if you hurt one hair on her head I'll -"

"You should shut up before you say something you'll regret, Ryuko."

As her limbs slowly unraveled, the colorless Life Fibers uncurling and dissipating into nothingness, the saccharine smile constantly plastered on Nui's face shifted imperceptibly into an annoyed frown. Tilting her head towards her estranged sister, the glazed and cold look in her eyes unnerving Ichigo and Ryuko, she waited until her COVERS clone was nearly gone before adding, "I'll be seeing you real soon, Ryuko... and you too, Mr. Quincy. Lady Ragyo has special plans in store for you..."

"Oh my..."

The Major clapped his head together when the Grand Couturier's clone finished breaking down. Pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, the lenses shimmering opaquely from the motion, he held one hand towards the screen and asked, "That was quite the marvelous spectacle, wouldn't you agree? But before I go, leaving you people to crawl around in the darkness, I wish to point out that the purposeless slaughter and murder I strive towards is inherently different than Ragyo Kiryuin's planned annihilation of humanity. Where would be the fun in that? An absence of people means war could not exist and without a planet there can be no battlefields full of screams and putrefied corpses. You cannot stop us, my dear fraulein. For every soldier cut down two more shall rise."

"That's enough," Integra locked eyes with an amused Alucard before growling, "Alucard... kill him."

"Like hell he's getting off that easy!"

Ryuko's sneakers momentarily slipped on the varnished wooden table as she rushed towards the cat-like Quincy. Hearing that fat bastard laughs while he casually talked about killing millions of innocent people had thoroughly and truly pissed her off. Growling in annoyance as she leapt passed a mildly surprised Maxwell and pushed off into the air Ryuko twisted the Scissor Blade around in her grip before arcing it towards Schrodinger's exposed neck. A slightly worried look crossing the cat-like boy's face as he dodged out of the way, a resounding crash echoing throughout the chamber as the Scissor Blade slammed into the ground, Schrodinger barely noticed Ryuko's grin before Ichigo punched him in the face.

"You're not going anywhere," Ichigo kept his eyes firmly locked on the Quincy, one hand gripping the cat-like boy's white uniform as Ryuko and Batou approached them. Ignoring the trail of blood leaking from Schrodinger's most likely broken nose onto Mugetsu's sleeve, the Kamui shivering in disgust before making her Life Fibers impervious to the unwanted substance, Ichigo pulled him closer and scowled, "There's a few things I want to know so start talking. First off, what -"

The sound of shadows twisting and distorting was the only warning Ichigo received before Alucard appeared next to him, the Casull already lodged in Schrodinger's mouth. Letting go of the Quincy and stepping back just as the vampire pulled the trigger, excessive blood and viscera splattering across the floor as Schrodinger's head was blown apart, Ichigo turned away from the still twitching body while suppressing the nausea welling up from his stomach, "Why did you kill him?"

"I don't question my Master's orders," Alucard replied, holding the smoking Casull in the air as Seras shattered the television with one well-placed bullet. Turning around and sauntering back towards his Master, his red eyes briefly locking with Ryuko's uniquely shaped ones, the vampire's smirk widened as he spoke, "You continue to amuse me, monster girl."

Batou grimaced as he knelt next to Schrodinger's headless corpse, Ryuko's angry response to the vampire lost in the background. Careful not to step in any of the dead Quincy's pooling blood the nudist commander sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. Olivier wasn't going to appreciate this little development. Knowing that the Jahrtausendarmee were actually Nazis, despite that man's admission to the contrary, planning to slaughter an entire country for shits and giggles left a sour taste in his mouth. As he shook his head and began rifling through Schrodinger's pockets, his grey eyes searching for anything important, the nudist paused when an irritatingly familiar voice cheerfully asked, "Searching for something, Batou?"

"Just looking for this kid's orders," Batou grunted as he finished searching Schrodinger's pockets only to come up short. There was literally nothing on the kid - no orders, identification or anything useful. It was almost as if the Quincy magically appeared at the front of the room. Standing up and turning around, lips pulled into a grimace when he saw Seras and Pip standing just a few meters away, the nudist commander rubbed his hands together and frowned, "These bastards are organized far too well for my liking. Not only do they have a dedicated command structure but also supernatural powers to boot. Damn it, the General is going to be really pissed when I tell her about this."

"I've heard a few things about Olivier Armstrong," Pip reached for the packet of Lucky Strike in his pocket and sighed, "If half the rumors are true she might be one of the few people to scare me more than Alucard."

Fixing the cuffs of his suit, the tight fabric bothering him more with each passing minute, Batou stared at Pip before scoffing, "Nice shirt... hey, that reminds me. You know any good bars?"

Almost immediately the relaxed expression on the French mercenary's face vanished, a nervous chuckle leaving his lips as he raised his hands and took a cautious step backwards, "It's been

nearly five years, Batou. The funny thing is... I don't drink on the job anymore."

Seras blinked owlshly at Pip's obvious lie before turning away from Schrodinger's corpse, "What are you talking about? Of course you drink. I saw you the other night... during... your..."

Turning around as the fledgling vampire's voice began to strangely trail off, shock clear in her blue eyes, Batou involuntarily staggered backwards when he noticed the Quincy's body had vanished into thin air. As several surprised gasps filled the chamber, Ryuko's appropriate cursing heard loud and clear as she looked into the rafters, the nudist commander frowned and asked the obvious question, "Where the hell did he go?"

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Ragyo Kiryuin sighed wistfully as she stared at the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier encompassing Honnou City, the expensive glass of wine in her hand momentarily forgotten. Slightly amused maroon eyes gazing out over the darkening horizon, her silver hair illuminating Satsuki's former private chambers in a cacophony of rainbow light, the CEO of Revocs cocked her head to the side while briefly pondering the current war against Nudist Beach. Contrary to both her expectations and desires the organization was putting up quite the admirable struggle, Isshin's personal involvement undoubtedly contributing to their recent success.

"That man is going to be the death of me..." she quipped sarcastically with a small shake of her head, the wine gently swirling counterclockwise in the glass. In order for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet to reach its glorious fruition, covering not only humanity but also the very planet itself in Life Fibers, she would need to directly confront Isshin. Sipping the sour liquid as her mind ran through several likely scenarios, lips pursed together at the easily foreseen difficulty in overcoming such a monumental obstacle, Ragyo pulled

her thoughts away from the only man she ever truly loved and towards more pressing issues.

Folding her arms underneath her bosom, the white dress she wore helping to accentuate the gesture, she leaned her head back and hummed, "I wonder how Ichigo and Ryuko are doing?"

It was mildly irritating she hadn't been able to capture either teenager in the aftermath of failed coup d'état during the climax of the Great Culture and Sports Festival. She had been so focused on bringing dear Amu back into the family, molding her into the perfect daughter, that she allowed them to escape with the nudists but perhaps that was for the best. Standing aside and watching as Ichigo and Ryuko continued growing stronger, the Life Fibers composing their bodies coming into maturity, meant the efforts of seventeen years were finally coming to fruition. Why, at the current rate their Life Fibers were maturing it would only be a few weeks until they were a match for her precious Nui or Amu.

"Still... their childish desire to protect the naked pigs in human clothing could prove quite the annoyance. A mother can only take so much backtalk from her daughter," Ragyo muttered thoughtfully, taking another sip of the wine, before the corners of her lips curled into a pleased grin.

Despite her estranged daughter's belligerence and overall uncouth demeanor, created through a mixture of her former husband's lack of parenting skills and subsequent murder, she was growing into a fine young woman. As shameful as it was Ryuko had chosen the naked pigs over her family, fighting and killing her own kind, she was still a much better daughter than Satsuki. It was a pity, especially after investing so much time and effort, but unless Ryuko and Ichigo fully embraced their true nature and abandoned humanity she would be forced to kill them. That was just how things worked, after all.

Perking up when the door to her new chambers opened, the miniscule Life Fibers in the air instantly alerting her to the intruder's

identity, Ragyo looked over her shoulder and asked, "What is it, Hououmaru?"

Rei Hououmaru, clad in a newly stitched and upgraded Écusson Raiment, respectfully bowed as she stood on the opposite side of Ragyo's desk, "I have Yuu Akiyama's latest field reports, Ma'am. As of five hours ago he's managed to either subvert or blackmail seventeen members of the House of Commons. Based on the latest polls we have almost enough votes to overturn their embargo."

A single silver eyebrow rose in mild surprise at the report, the rainbow glow from her hair brightening momentarily. Pure white heels clicking gently against the floor as she turned away from the windows and walked towards her desk, the wine glass placed gently upon the surface, Ragyo spent a few minutes skimming through the reports before her maroon eyes widened in excitement at the contents, "That coward is certainly doing a rather thorough job... and with Alexander Anderson growing increasingly closer to capturing him. That man certainly doesn't know when to give up."

"I also have the financial reports, Ma'am," Hououmaru added, reaching into her raiment and pulling out a PDA. Swiping a single finger across the surface, the tablet quickly illuminating to life, she handed it to the Kiryuin matriarch before folding her arms against the small of her back, "Despite your superb recommendations Revocs market shares have remained steady at eighty eight point three percent for the last three days. Unless we manage to overturn Great Britain's foolish embargo we'll be forced to wait at least another month for market saturation to return to required levels."

Even as she stared at the data streaming across the small screen, her eyes easily memorizing the information, Ragyo already knew who was to blame for the second worst setback to the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet - Kinue Kinagase. When Nui Harime returned from Brazil and excitedly told her that the same nudist who wore a Kamui was also a Life Fiber Hybrid the Kiryuin matriarch had been nearly stunned in disbelief. It should have been impossible for that woman to be a hybrid. The knowledge needed to intricately weave



Life Fibers inside a host, slowly transforming their flesh and bones in the process, was something not even her former husband's mildly intelligent mind could comprehend on his best of days.

The rainbow glow from her silver hair fading as she turned back towards the windows, arms folded underneath her bosom, Ragyo stared at the COVERS floating protectively outside in the darkening skies and shook her head, "The Hellsing Organization is proving to be quite the annoyance. Quel dommage... I had such high hopes that Mr. Akiyama could deal with Great Britain by himself but it seems my personal involvement will be necessary after all."

As the last traces of daylight vanished over the horizon, vestiges of autumnal red and orange shifting to purple and black, Ragyo mused about the best ways to deal with the Hellsing Organization. Using Mental Refitting was out of the question. The strength necessary for the Marionette Threads to have the intended effect on Integra Hellsing without being detected requiring meeting with the woman alone for at least an hour, which would be impossible given the presence of the creature known as Alucard. Although she would never admit it, the mere notion of nervousness anathema to her entire existence, Ragyo didn't know what to make of the so-called vampire. According to Nui the creature's body didn't contain even the faintest trace of Life Fibers, nor his clothing, yet he could regenerate from the most lethal of wounds.

*"I cannot afford to underestimate this Alucard,"* Ragyo frowned, the gesture lost on Hououmaru as the older woman looked away from her assistant, *"Legendary creature aside... his strength was enough to overwhelm my precious Nui's clone. Not to mention the fact he nearly killed Ryuko when Senketsu was in Senkou. Dealing with Alucard is going to require a delicate touch..."*

"And what of the Quincy?"

Hououmaru's inquisitive tone broke Ragyo out of her thoughts, the rainbow light shining from her silver hair dimming as she turned towards her assistant, "According to the Grand Couturier's...

report... they refer to themselves as the Jahrtausendarmee, which matches Yuu's information, and count amongst their members the four Quincy that assisted Nudist Beach during the Great Culture and Sports Festival."

"Millennium Army... what an audacious name," Ragyo mockingly commented, her lips twisting into an amused smirk at the thought of Hououmaru attempting to read one of the Grand Couturier's personally written reports. Staring at the pinpricks of glowing red light surrounding Honnouji Academy, the hovering COVERS floating protectively within the barrier, she pushed the thought of Nui hastily writing down everything she saw and turned around, "The Grand Couturier played her part well. That mocking Quincy didn't even see her plant the tracking Life Fiber within his ugly uniform, which means I'll be paying a visit to this Major very soon. Speaking of which... has the embargo vote been scheduled, Hououmaru?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hououmaru nodded and tapped her PDA nearly a dozen times, "The prospective vote is currently being held at five in the afternoon, Greenwich Mean Time, two days from now. Do you intend to plead your case?"

"Plead my case?" Ragyo couldn't help but laugh at the very thought of begging humans for anything, the rainbow light from her hair quickly intensifying and permeating every shadow of the room. Walking away from her secretary towards the newly installed closet, maroon eyes widening sadistically, she chuckled once more before continuing, "As long as Yuu does his job my presence will be mere formality. A sign that the internationally praised CEO of Revocs truly cares enough about the poor and destitute to give away nearly a billion dollars worth of Revocs all-season clothing."

Throwing open the closet doors without care, a brilliant white light nearly blinding Hououmaru even with her aviator sunglasses, Ragyo's lips twisted into a smirk as she heard her assistant turn away and shut her eyes. Her heels clicking softly as she stepped into the closet, thumbs curled gently under the straps of her white dress, she stared at the multitude of dresses and outfits lining both sides of

the closest with fervent passion. A deep sigh escaping her lips as she allowed her dress to fall to the floor, the multitude of Life Fiber infused clothing surrounding her instantly coming to life, maroon eyes stared at each outfit before she seductively asked, "Now, which one of you shall I wear?"

One finger absentmindedly adjusting her sunglasses as she stood outside the closet, amber eyes instinctively closed even though her back was turned, Hououmaru patiently waited nearly five minutes before she heard the sound of high heels clicking against the ground. Slowly opening her eyes while turning around, the white glow from the closet quickly replaced once more by a rainbow light, the leader of Xcution deeply bowed her head and said, "You look as exquisite as ever, Ma'am."

Adorned in a pure white business suit with matching skirt, her silver hair now laying flat similar to her eldest daughter's, Ragyo heels clicked against the floor as she smirked, "It is quite unfortunate the Grand Couturier used most of the remaining Life Fibers in Great Britain. Having my COVERS clone forced to travel halfway across the world should give Yuu enough time to *convince* a majority of Parliament to overturn that ridiculous embargo."

"I shall inform the pilot to prepare your private jet," Hououmaru's tone was respectful as she fell in line behind Ragyo, her fingers automatically tapping the screen of the PDA and forwarding the message to the necessary people.

Amber eyes briefly gazing on the Kiryuin matriarch's newly straightened hair, the rainbow light as brilliant and magnificent as ever, the leader of Xcution mulled over her words before asking, "Please forgive my extraordinary rudeness, Ma'am, but would it not be best to hide your appearance? Great Britain is one of the few places in this world completely free of Life Fibers. Your illustrious presence might do more harm than good in persuading the House of Commons into seeing the truth."

The moment Hououmaru finished speaking a cold and bitter sensation permeated the room, the cacophony of light shining from Ragyo's hair dimming to nearly nothing. After remaining for several tense seconds, her breath shallow from nervousness, she relaxed when the CEO of Revocs shook her head and sighed, "La vie est drôle. I can only imagine the look on Isshin's face..."

Folding her arms together against the front of her form-fitting suit as a multicolored aura surrounded her body, the intensity nearly enough to cause Hououmaru to look away, Ragyo closed her eyes before raising a hand and snapping her fingers. As the sound of shredding fabric filling the room, dozens of Life Fibers gently floating through the air before dissipating into nothingness, the leader of Xcution took one look at Ragyo's purely black hair and bowed deeply at the waist, "Is there anything you wish for me to do while you're occupied for the next few days?"

Ragyo opened her eyes, now a cold blue like Satsuki's, and frowned momentarily before replying, "Yes... recall Esdeath and the others back to the home office. With the international market firmly in our grasp I see no need for them to remain in the foreign offices, especially with a man as intelligent as Kisuke Urahara in Karakura Town. If he's half as intelligent as I think, he's most likely devising a bypass for the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier."

"Understood..." Hououmaru watched Ragyo walk towards the exit to her office before adding, "And what of the Grand Couturiers?"

"My precious Nui and Amu are finishing up the second to last stage of Shinra Koketsu. Bothering them at such a critical juncture over something so trivial as an embargo seems rather childish," Ragyo's tone had a sarcastic edge as she paused at the door, one manicured hand leaning gently against the frame. Staring over her shoulder at the secretary, the corners of her lips curled into a smirk, she chuckled as a manic expression crossed her face, "As for me... I think it is time I put on one final performance. Don't you agree, Hououmaru?"

Prostrating herself before the CEO of Revocs, her eyes closed, Hououmaru didn't hesitate to respond, "But of course, Ma'am."

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Heinkel Wolfe's breath emerged in misty wisps as she pirouetted around, black cassock fluttering in the midnight breeze as twin pistols slid out of her sleeves into gloved hands. Grey-green eyes narrowing in mild irritation at the dozen armored soldiers standing in the middle of the street, their modified automatic weapons pointed directly at her, the paladin leaned to the right as they took aim and fired. Blurring into motion as bullets streamed through the air, her body twisting and dancing around the projectiles, barely a second passed before Heinkel raised her arms and fired off a total of six shots. As the echoes from her pistols, modified herself, faded away Heinkel's sneer shifted into a pleased smirk when all twelve soldiers instantly collapsed to the ground in puddles of their own blood and visceral.

"I must be losing my touch," she muttered absentmindedly, eyes narrowing at the trails of blood snaking through the cobblestone street towards the gutter. Faint trails of smoke wafting upwards from her pistols as she turned towards the sole vampire, his red eyes glowing from behind black goggles, Heinkel cocked her head to the side and scoffed upon noticing the Quincy Zeichen stitched on his beret, "It should have only taken four shots to kill all your men."

The vampire didn't utter a single sound as he rushed towards her much faster than a normal human, a glowing blue blade clasped firmly in his right hand. Waiting until the very last second before leaning to the side, straw-colored hair slowly waving chaotically in the breeze as the Seele Schneider harmlessly passed inches from her face, Heinkel's eyes momentarily narrowed before her arm quickly snapped upwards. The muzzle of her pistol pressed against the underside of the vampire's chin, his crimson irises expanding

from a mixture of shock and fear, a pleased smirk tore at the corners of the paladin's lips as she pulled the trigger.

As a splatter of blood and visceral sprayed through the air, the vampire's body lurching backwards before rapidly disintegrating into dust and ash as the holy bullet permeated his corpse, Heinkel let out a wistful sigh. Since her arrival in Berlin in pursuit of a lead on Millennium she'd been ambushed a total of three times, all of which involved a single vampire commanding a small squad of heavily armed soldiers. Allowing her arms to fall limply to her sides as she looked around, the dozen corpses spread throughout the street cooling in the late autumn night, the paladin turned to leave when the muffled sound of her cell phone ringing caught her attention. Upon recognizing the number she held the phone against her ear, "This is Wolfe."

There was a brief moment of silence before Enrico Maxwell's authoritative voice sounded across the encrypted connection, *"You sound busy, Wolfe. I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."*

"You were right, sir," Heinkel casually admitted with almost a hint of reluctance while grey-green eyes scanned the nearby rooftops. The soft echo of her boots on the cobblestone street the only sound as she walked away from the massacre, the developing fog hugging the round helping to conceal her presence, she holstered her remaining pistol before continuing, "Since arriving in Berlin I've been ambushed three times, each group led by a vampire. We're leaking information to the blasted Quincy like a sieve."

*"I've already enacted protocols to weed out Millennium's agents in the Vatican,"* Maxwell slowly responded as he sat in his office, the pale moonlight streaming through the windows behind his desk, *"But at this point it's safe to presume the Quincy have eyes and ears in every major organization. It wouldn't be surprising if they managed to subvert a member of the Round Table."*

Shoulders stiffening when she heard the sound of footsteps marching in the distance, the closed environment making it slightly

difficult to pinpoint their exact location, Heinkel mentally counted to three before pulling out a pistol and firing a single shot at the nearby roof. As the hidden sniper's chest exploded in a burst of blood, a choking gurgle managing to leave his lips before life left his body, she adjusted the phone against her ear and asked, "Have we located their headquarters yet?"

" *Unfortunately not.* "

Suppressing the angry sneer threatening to tear its way out from his throat, violet eyes narrowed in frustration, Maxwell leaned back in his chair and scowled, *"Nine hours ago Yumiko managed to capture one of Millennium's soldiers, an artificial vampire instead of a Quincy, but the abomination against God burst into blue flames before he could say anything. Stay on guard, Wolfe, and do not underestimate the resourcefulness of this scum or his leader."*

Heinkel grimaced, her lips pulled back as she contemplated Maxwell's final words, "You don't believe that Quincy's declaration of being the Jahrtausendarmee's leader?"

The leader of Iscariot didn't immediately reply to the question as he stood up, the phone clenched tightly in his hand, and stared at the documents spread haphazardly across his desk. Picking up the nearest one, the Latin easily translating as he read it, Maxwell turned towards the hovering moon and scowled, *"In any other case... perhaps I would have been inclined to believe such preposterous nonsense. But after meeting with the Vatican's Athenaeum, First Division Peter, I am all but certain that fat bastard is lying. What few records withstood the test of time clearly describes the Father of the Quincy in almost supernatural clarity. This Major, or whatever he deigns to call himself, is not that man..."*

As traces of pale moonlight penetrated the surrounding fog Heinkel narrowed her eyes and asked, "Do we at least know what Millennium is planning?"

" *They have set their sights on England.* "

Stopping midstride at the angry tone in Maxwell's voice, her glasses shining coldly in the ambient light, Heinkel cocked her head to the side and muttered, "I thought you would be happy about this, Maxwell. After all, you predicted this would be the case given everything we know."

" Yes... *but that was before the Jahrtausendarmee were known to be Quincy!*" Maxwell shouted as he slammed a hand against his desk, the stacks of papers scattering to the floor. After several tense seconds passed, Heinkel holding her phone away from her ear for good measure, he frowned and carefully walked around the fallen documents towards the bookcases lining the walls of his office, "*I had my suspicions when Integra Hellsing mentioned Quilge Opie by name but I foolishly ignored such words as Protestant slander and mockery. In any case, there is almost a guarantee that Millennium is not only composed of multiple Quincy but also led by their long presumed dead king. That has His Holiness very worried, Wolfe. This is no longer a matter in which we can afford to be picky with our allies. Taking down such an ancient and well-entrenched organization is going to require every resource at our disposal... and then some.*"

The sound of a train in the distance, its horn blaring through the air, barely managed to cover the curse leaving Heinkel's mouth at that piece of information. Completely silent as she walked past a young German couple, their hands clasped tightly together in the cold night, Heinkel pursed her lips and inquired, "How ancient are we talking about?"

" *The first records mentioning Quincy predate the founding of the Catholic Church,*" Maxwell's brow creased as he carefully removed a single book from the shelf, the weathering on the binding an indication of its age. Ever since returning from that cesspool of Protestantism otherwise known as England he'd been in an apprehensive pool, the knowledge of the Quincy's survival constantly at the forefront of his mind. Shaking his head to dissuade any further thought on the matter he continued, "*We thought them extinct, killed*



*by agents of God more than two centuries ago for their unholy blasphemy. I do not pretend to understand why they would so boldly emerge from the shadows now of all times... or their Major's fascination with Alucard... but this situation troubles me for an entirely different reason. That impetuous Quincy mentioned allying with Nudist Beach at Honnouji Academy."*

Heinkel frowned as she stared at the nearly full moon, her face illuminated in shades of pale white. As a church bell tolled in the distance, the three rings signifying the time, she shook her head and pondered, "I've heard of Honnouji Academy. It's some high-class school in Japan run by Ragyo Kiryuin's daughter, right?"

*" It's still being kept under wraps... Ragyo Kiryuin's hold over the media is surprising firm... but Satsuki Kiryuin has been missing from the public eye since October 21st. That is coincidentally the same day Nudist Beach claims to have started fighting against Revocs,"* Maxwell explained, pacing across his office as a mixture of silence and static came across the connection for nearly a full minute.

"I don't like this," Heinkel muttered after almost a minute of silent thought, her shoulders tensing at the rapid movement at the periphery of her senses. A single pistol sliding into her free hand, a full clip of blessed bullets snapping into place, she turned her head slightly to the left and narrowed her eyes at the figure darting across the rooftops, "First Ryuko appears out of nowhere and fights Alucard, then the Grand Couturier of Revocs interrupts a highly secured meeting in the heart of London and now Ragyo Kiryuin's only daughter and sole heir is missing. I hate to say it but Anderson's insane rambling thirteen years ago about that woman might contain a hint of truth."

*" Perhaps..."* There was no mistaking the disdain in Maxwell's voice at the admittance. Even if Heinkel was completely correct, and Anderson's actions all those years ago were the result of Ragyo Kiryuin's provocations, his rampant slaughtering of the Holy Conclave could not go unpunished, *"... but there are more important matters at the moment than bringing Anderson to justice for his*

*inexcusable actions. Millennium's focus on Hellsing and Alucard has afforded us a once in a lifetime opportunity. To nip this potential problem in the bud before it spirals out of control I thought actions would speak louder than words."*

"I see... so you're preparing a surprise attack," Heinkel concluded gruffly, her straw-colored hair waving gently in the breeze as she stomped to a halt. Switching her phone and pistol around, the weapon now sitting comfortably in her right hand, the paladin adjusted her glasses and bluntly stated, "While I would like nothing more than to bring to wrath of God down upon the Quincy, smiting them from existence for their heresy against the Lord, this is still an incredibly risky decision, Maxwell. If we go after Millennium in England there's no telling how the Hellsing Organization would respond. Alucard is not a creature to be unnecessarily provoked..."

*" Your concern is noted, Wolfe, but defeating the Jahrtausendarmee before they grow too powerful is a holy imperative. The scars from the Catholic Church's last... encounter... with the Quincy are not so easily forgotten."* Sitting on the edge of his desk, the phone held firmly in one hand, Maxwell leaned over and picked up an enveloped emblazoned with the papal insignia before continuing, *"When the dust is settled it shall be the church that once again stands in the ring with our fists raised high in victory. His Holiness has already issued the various mobilization orders. Nothing is being left to chance. I've been given direct control over the Knights of Malta, the Knights of Saint Stephen, the Knights of the Order of Calatrava La Nueva, the Knights of the Sagely Brethren and the Swiss Company Executive Office. The Vatican's Administration of Holy Relics, Third Division Matthew, has also moved into action. We shall cut the head off the snake before the Quincy even know what hit them."*

"Understood... and what of Ragyo Kiryuin and Revocs?" Heinkel frowned at the silence across the connection before throwing her body forward, the sniper bullet tearing a hole through the nearby wall. Rolling into a crouch, pistol immediately firing three times into the newest squad of soldiers, Heinkel ignored the various screams of

pain when she noticed the faint glint of metal on a roof nearly half a kilometer in the distance. A single bullet racing across Berlin moments before the rocket was launched, a thin trail of smoke drifting into the night, there was a second of silence before the projectile exploded into a cacophony of sound and light.

Frowning when she still didn't receive a response, two more shots leaving her pistol as she took care of the remaining soldiers, Heinkel held the phone closer to her ear and growled, "What's the matter, Maxwell? If both Nudist Beach and Millennium are telling the truth than Ragyo Kiryuin is only days, perhaps weeks, away from devouring humanity. Even if these Quincy are unholy creatures, abominations designed for the deepest pits of hell, they pale in comparison to what that monster is planning. Several million lives, Protestant or otherwise, might be a necessary sacrifice to save the rest of humanity."

A heavy sigh came across the connection followed by barely audible muttering before Maxwell spoke, *"I informed His Holiness of our... increasing concerns surrounding Ragyo Kiryuin and her true nature. Despite both the mounting evidence and the Grand Couturier's appearance in London he was insistent we focus our efforts upon the Quincy. It has been decreed that all of Iscariot's forces, loaned or otherwise, are to be used for no other purpose than the complete and total eradication of the Quincy. Once they are dealt with, and their king brought to the Vatican in shackles, then the full force of the church shall move against Ragyo Kiryuin."*

"I see..." Heinkel slowly turned around when a figure landed on the other side of the road, his red eyes giving away his undead nature. Lips curling into a faint smile as the vampire tensed backwards, his Seele Schneider flaring to life, she raised the phone closer to her mouth and asked, "So it's a crusade?"

" Yes!" Maxwell replied excitedly, his left eye twitching as he tightly gripped the phone, *"I don't know how the Quincy survived but we shall not allow them a second chance! The moment they rear their heretical heads we shall descend upon them like the wrath of God!"*

*Their self-proclaimed king, that blasphemous demon that takes the name of our Lord, shall kneel at our feet whilst facing judgment for his crimes against God! Once you have finished your business in Berlin return to the Vatican, Wolfe."*

Raising her arm until it was shoulder-height, wisps of pale smoke gently wafting from the muzzle, Heinkel's grin twisted sadistically when the vampire flinched backwards in fear. Taking a single step forward, the undead creature involuntarily shifting away, a tense silence filled the street before she spoke, "Yes, sir. And what of Ryuko?"

*" We shall deal with her when the appropriate moment presents itself,"* Maxwell's tone was pensive, his violet eyes narrowed as he turned towards the large windows behind his desk and continued, *"Oh, it sounds like you have some business to deal with on your end, Wolfe. I'll see you soon."*

Lowering the phone away from her ear as soon as Maxwell hung up, her fingers quickly snapping it shut, Heinkel carefully placed it back into her pocket before turning her full attention towards the increasingly nervous vampire. Opaque glasses gleaming in the moonlight as she looked squarely into his crimson eyes, the quivering irises visible through his goggles, she glanced towards the bodies dotting the street and asked, "Be perfectly honest, vampire. Were you expecting these soldiers to actually slow me down?"

The Seele Schneider in his grip shaking nervously as he swallowed the lump in his throat, the carnage surrounding them destroying what little confidence he had left, the vampirized soldier sprinted forward with the sole purpose of killing Heinkel before she could do the same to him. Before he was even halfway across the street, his supernaturally augmented speed distorting the shadows around his body, the vampire gasped when he saw the woman standing directly in front of him with both pistols aimed directly at his face. Time appearing to slow to a crawl as the twin muzzles bored into his soul, the seconds turning into hours as death appeared to loom over his

neck, the vampire barely managed to start swinging his Seele Schneider before two gunshots echoed across Berlin.

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November 7th, 2002 - 4:45 PM GMT

As thunder roared through the heavens, the torrential and constant downpour of cold rain enveloping the city of London forcing most of the population to remain indoors, two men could be seen crouched on a roof across the River Thames from Westminster Palace. His Anti-Life Fiber armor sleek from the rain Batou stared through a pair of high-grade binoculars at the convoy winding through the streets in the distance. Depressing a button above the right lens and zooming in on the limousine in the middle, the Revocs logo clear as day, he leaned back and wiped rain out of his eyes, "Ragyo's about to reach Westminster Bridge. ETA forty-five seconds. Damn... it seems the media's already swarming the area. Are your men in position?"

Pip Bernadotte smirked while pushing his slouch hat forward, small rivers of water dripping out of the folds and onto his camouflaged uniform, "Do you take my men for amateurs out on their first job, Batou?"

Reaching into a pocket and pulling out a carton of Lucky Strike, a cigarette quickly finding its way to his lips, the mercenary ignored the nervousness and trepidation building in his bones as a gust of wind tore across the city. A small orange flame flickering above the lighter as he cupped his hands in front of his mouth, wisps of smoke gently rising into the rain, he chuckled and nodded at a nearby building, "The Wild Geese are spread across the area in teams of three, like your personable boss demanded. Five of the best snipers money can buy are armed with some of those special Anti-Life Fiber bullets Mr. Anderson left behind. If she so much as sneezes at the wrong person Ragyo Kiryuin's head is going to explode into a fine mist."

"It's not that simple," the nudist commander replied gruffly, his hand tearing the cigarette from Pip's mouth.

Purposely ignoring the annoyed string of curses spewing from his compatriot as he took a deep drag, the nicotine helping to calm his excited nerves, Batou propped his back against the edge of the roof and shook his head. Grey hair damp from the rain, streams of water coursing down his face, he spat to the side before turning to Pip, "You read the field report on Brazil the General sent over?"

"I never read those things," Pip chuckled, the mirth never reaching his remaining eye, and sat down next to his old friend, "Besides, I was there."

The last of his Lucky Strike cigarettes already in his mouth, the tip glowing a dull orange as smoke wafted upwards, the mercenary inhaled deeply as he thought back to that night. Shaking his head at the memory, water dripping off his hat, he turned to Batou and smirked, "After Alucard made his grand entrance I was on my way to deal with the local top dogs when the Grand Couturier slammed into the side of the hotel. Watching that blonde girl tear that Quincy apart was unnerving. Merde... I couldn't even see her move. It was like she took one step and appeared fifteen feet away."

"Trust me when I say the real Grand Couturier is much worse," Batou leaned over the side of the roof as the convoy passed below, his eyes focused on the white limousine. Turning around when the receiver in his ear flared to life, several teams reporting no sign of anything strange, he pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and sighed deeply, "And don't get me started on Ragyo Kiryuin. Even if she is a COVERS clone, attacking her with anything less than three Kamui is suicidal. She'll just regenerate from the Anti-Life Fiber rounds and come straight for us, carving through any innocent civilians in her path."

"Ah, but isn't that why we have Alucard?"

Pip chuckled as he reached for his MP5, recently modified to use a mixture of bullets and Anti-Life Fiber rounds, and held it firmly in both hands, "Given the vampire's rather nightmarish set of skills he's probably the only thing able to take down that woman. And if the Grand Couturier decides to pop out of the woodwork... well, Seras and the others should be more than enough to kick her ass."

"Not the only one..."

His voice trailing off when a quiet burst of static blared across the receiver in his ear, the undercover member of Echo November Two describing what was transpiring near Westminster palace in vivid detail, Batou grunted as he spun back around. Elbows propped against the edge of the roof as he raised the binoculars back to his eyes, the digital display automatically focusing on the white limousine parked in front of the building, a crackle of thunder split through the storm as Ragyo emerged in all of her regal glory. As dozens of flashes went off simultaneously, the media drinking in the Revocs CEO's presence, something about the entire scene caused Batou to frown, "Uh oh... this is bad."

Glancing over the edge of the roof, his one good eye narrowing when he could find anything out of place after a cursory glance, Pip asked, "Uh oh? What, did the woman already start killing people?"

"Worse..." Batou grumbled in frustration as he handed the binoculars to the mercenary, "Her hair looks completely normal."

It took Pip less than five seconds of looking through the binoculars to understand what his old friend meant. Zooming in as much as possible on the tall woman strutting towards Westminster Palace, her pure white suit conspicuously repulsing the rain while a smug smile adorned her face, he hummed thoughtfully and muttered, "I could have sworn Madame Kiryuin's hair was a rather unique shade of silver instead of black. Either all the magazines got it wrong for the last twenty years or we're looking at a nearly perfect body double."

Batou remained silent as Anderson's guttural voice growled in his ear, the former priest's description of the woman matching up perfectly with what he already knew. Running a hand down his rain-soaked face the nudist stared at the convocation on the other side of the River Thames and sighed, "No, that's her all right. Ragyo's too smug and confident to send somebody else to do her job. She's probably hoping a normal façade will help persuade a few of the more indecisive members of the House of Commons."

"Well then..." Holding the cigarette between his fingers and exhaling softly, the cloud of smoke quickly dissipating in the rain, Pip frowned as his men inside Westminster Palace reported nothing amiss and quipped, "Let's hope Ichigo, Ryuko and Seras are ready for whatever tricks Ragyo Kiryuin has up her sleeves. After all, it would be really bad if all the beautiful women in the world turned into scraps of clothing."

As Batou stared silently at the mercenary before harshly slapping the back of his head, the slouch hat falling into a nearby puddle of water, Ichigo stood inside the Central Lobby of Westminster Palace with a pensive expression plastered on his face. No matter how much he thought back to the Major's gleeful and ecstatic declaration of war, the Quincy's insane vow of murder still fresh in his mind, what irked the former substitute shinigami was how he failed to see this coming. It should have been obvious the moment Quilge Opie appeared out of nowhere on his way to stop Satsuki's Raid Trip. He should have just finished beating the crap out of the Quincy and moved on. If he hadn't let the man stall for time, giving cryptic hints that were nearly useless in the end, he could have reached Karakura Town and stopped Satsuki sooner.

"*Damn it, Uryu knew something was wrong with these guys from day one,*" Ichigo's frown deepened into a scowl as he remembered his friend's initial hesitation on working with the other Quincy, the reluctance subtle enough that he barely caught it. It had only been due to Armstrong's insistence on having as many allies as possible



when facing Ragyo, along with the old goat's promise they would behave, that Uryu agreed to fight alongside the four Sternritter.

Brought back to the present when the Wild Geese mercenaries standing across the room broke into laughter, one of them cursing in French while adjusting the hastily modified weapon slung over his back, Ichigo turned to Ryuko and asked, "Hey, are you going to be all right?"

Ryuko mumbled angrily under her breath as she stared at the mosaic pattern covering the floor. Leaning back against the wall, her attention briefly drawn to the crimson bang floating above her left eye, she sighed loudly and scoffed, "What do you think? My bitch of a mother is about to walk through those doors and there's nothing we can do."

"Maybe..." A crackle of thunder reverberated through the skies as Ichigo's voice trailed off. As a flash of lightning illuminated the stained glass windows encircling the lobby, the darkness of the storm temporarily replaced by shades of purple and blue, he folded his arms across Mugetsu and added in a determined tone, "I don't know how but if she tries anything we'll find a way to stop her."

"So it seems the rumors were true after all. You really are that woman's daughter..."

His shoes tapping lightly against the floor as he calmly walked out of an adjoining corridor, a slightly nervous Seras Victoria standing at his side, Walter C. Dornez drew to a stop several feet from Ichigo before clearing his throat. Shifting his attention between the two teenagers while adjusting his tie, eyes briefly focusing on the hallway to the right, the aged butler gave a curt bow and continued, "Please forgive my rudeness, Miss Matoi, but I'm here to inform the both of you that Ragyo Kiryuin has reached Westminster Palace. In fact, she should be passing through in roughly five minutes."

"Huh?" Ryuko blinked and looked down the hallway, "But it's only like one hundred feet away."

The butler's aged face twisting into a bemused smirk at her comment, "Even the most powerful kings and queens must go through security. Now then, Mister Bernadotte and his men are coordinating with Nudist Beach to prevent any further incursions from the Grand Couturier. Life Fibers sensors have been installed at various locations throughout the building, linked across a central network with zero blind spots, with live updates every three seconds. The last thing we need is for that girl to pop out of nowhere like that Quincy."

"I've fought Nui before," Ichigo commented, a frown developing on his face as he glanced at Seras, the fledgling vampire giving off a nearly identical but much weaker spiritual energy than Alucard, "So I know how she generally fights. If she tries anything Ryuko and I will be more than enough to stop her."

Another crackle of thunder, courtesy of the worsening storm, tore through the skies as Walter snapped his feet together. His monocle gleaming opaquely as he motioned towards Seras, the blonde woman waving nervously in response, he looked at Ichigo and replied, "Your confidence is heartening but nevertheless Miss Victoria shall stand guard alongside you in the Central Lobby. In the unlikely event of Ragyo Kiryuin showing her true colors you three shall be expected to stall long enough for reinforcements to arrive."

Ryuko took a step forward, her eyebrow twitching, and scowled, "By reinforcements do you mean that undead bastard?"

"But of course," Walter answered curtly, bowing his head once more while taking a large step backwards, as he brushed a bit of dirt off his shoulders, "The strength of your Kamui is second to none, barring a few extreme examples, but Nudist Beach's information on your mother is quite extensive. Attempting to put down such a monster requires both extensive planning and overwhelming power... not to mention regeneration. The latter two of which Alucard possesses in abundance. Now if you will excuse me, I shall take my leave. Sir Integra wishes for me to guard the Speaker of the House

of Commons. If Ragyo attempts to use what you refer to as 'Mental Refitting' I might be one of the few people capable of countering it."

As the butler took his leave, one of the Wild Geese falling into step behind him complaining about paying for all their drinks, Ryuko huffed and folded her arms across Senketsu. Turning her attention to Seras, the sudden tension in the atmosphere unnerving the vampire, Ryuko snorted before her lips twisted into a smirk, "So a vampire, huh? I saw what you did to Nui the other day but you should have forced her head through the entire floor. The bitch fucking deserves it..."

Seras chuckled nervously at the compliment, the venom tinting Ryuko's words about the Grand Couturier raising several questions in her mind. There was no doubt Nui Harime was supernaturally strong for someone not a vampire. Having her nose severely broken, the impact nearly giving her a concussion, was proof enough yet despite all that something continued to gnaw at the corners of her mind. Folding her arms across her chest, the gesture inadvertently accentuating her figure, Seras mentally sighed and took a deep breath, "Master told me about your fight... how you managed to regenerate your entire leg. You were human once, right?"

"Hey, I'm still as human as anyone here!" Ryuko growled harshly, her voice causing any remaining conversations in the room to rapidly die away. Thumping a fist against her chest, Senketsu grumbling at the harsh treatment, she cocked her head to the side and added, "My body might be... I don't know... half Life Fibers or something but it's inside that counts! And if that vampire asshole tries to call me a monster one more time I'm going to kick his ass!"

The confidence permeating Ryuko's tone took Seras by surprise, "But aren't you worried about losing everything about yourself... including what makes you human?"

"I don't know a lot about vampires besides the common stuff," Ichigo rubbed the back of his neck, his expression pulled into a grimace, and thought for a moment before continuing, "But it doesn't take a

genius to see you're nothing like Alucard. You might be a vampire like him but that doesn't change who you are."

Relaxing slightly as Ichigo's advice helped assuage some of the conflicting feelings coursing through her body, the orange haired teenagers advice about being human making her feel a little better, she barely missed seeing Senketsu's neckerchief fluttering. The Kamui's eye narrowing in apprehension as he stared at Ryuko, his entire uniform shivering, he bluntly stated, ***"Ryuko, my threads are quivering strangely. I think that vampire is hiding somewhere nearby."***

"Kamui are such fascinating creatures..."

As the shadows of the room stretched and contorted, the darkness of the storm raging outside momentarily intensifying, Alucard's body phased through the wall behind the teenagers. Lips twisting into a mockery of a smile at their surprised expressions, crimson eyes focused exclusively on Ichigo, reverberating laughter echoed throughout the chamber as he asked, "A monster raising itself to the level of a human? How truly insulting."

"Hey!" Ryuko sneered at Alucard, her anger briefly alleviating the trepidation in her chest, "What the hell is your problem with Ichigo?"

The brim of his fedora falling over his face as he turned towards Ryuko, the perpetual blood-tinted glow of his eyes temporarily obstructed, the vampire's manic smirk widened at the ridiculous question, "My problem... is that what you're asking? Denying one's own nature as a monster... deluding yourself into believing you have the same rights as a human... and now you suggest you'll be able to stop that monster of a woman drawing ever closer. Don't make me laugh. Only humans have the right to destroy monsters such as us."

Even as he frowned at Alucard's answer, the last comment catching his attention more than anything, Ichigo stepped forward and scowled, "I don't care what you say. So what if my body is made of

Life Fibers? That doesn't make me any less human. It's not what you look like that makes you human but your actions and beliefs!"

Something changed in Alucard's bemused expression, a shift in his eyes so subtle that Ichigo barely caught it, before the shadows surrounding his body began writhing chaotically. His shoulders shaking as a series of disturbing chuckles reverberated through the lobby, the light from the chandelier dimming before returning brighter than ever, twin pools of crimson light pierced the veil of shadows composing Alucard's face as the sound of high heels clicking against the ground drew their attention. Strutting down the hallway clad in a pure white business suit, her incandescent radiance seemingly repulsing the surrounding darkness, Ragyo Kiryuin smirked as she drank in the surprised expressions on Ryuko and Ichigo's faces. "La vie est drôle. I must say it's quite the pleasure seeing you here, Ryuko."

When Ryuko didn't respond, her eyes quivering in shock at Ragyo's uncanny resemblance to her older sister, the woman's gaze swept past Alucard towards Ichigo. Running a hand through her temporary black hair, the other holding a pearl-white briefcase, she chuckled, "How is your delightful father doing these days, Ichigo? Isshin's premature departure from Honnouji Academy prevented me from giving him my personal regards. And I was looking forward to getting to know that man a little better..."

Swallowing the lump growing in her throat, Ragyo's presence causing a bead of sweat to trickle down her neck, Ryuko gritted her teeth and snarled, "Where the hell is Ururu?"

Ragyo's eyes immediately swiveled back to Ryuko when she felt her second daughter's power suddenly increase. It seemed that the Life Fibers woven throughout Ryuko's body, permeating every facet of her existence and soul, eagerly responded to her childish displays of emotion. Her lips curling into a highly amused smile as she closed her eyes, the gesture causing Ryuko to growl, she shook her head and sighed, "That's not how a daughter should speak to her mother. Honestly, I have no idea how Souichiro could have raised such a

crass and belligerent young woman. It simply fills my heart with regret that I was unable to see my own flesh and blood for over seventeen years."

Purposely ignoring the enraged expression spreading across Ryuko's face, her daughter's bang of red hair glowing alongside her emotional state, Ragyo arched a single eyebrow when Ichigo said, "We're going to stop you and save Ururu."

"I'm afraid I don't know anyone by such a crude name. If you're referring to dearest Amu she's currently at Honnouji Academy doing her job," Ragyo responded politely as she walked past Seras, the young vampire barely catching her attention. Heels clicking to a stop when Alucard appeared in her path, the shadows radiating from his body clashing with the illuminating cacophony of rainbow light threatening to tear her clone's disguise apart, Ragyo's lips stretched into a sadistic grin as she locked gazes with the vampire, "Judging by your late Victorian attire am I to assume you are the man my precious Grand Couturier calls Alucard?"

"It's been nearly five years to the day since you last walks these halls... Ragyo Kiryuin."

Alucard's smirk devolved into full blown psychosis, razor sharp fangs glistening in his mouth as he reaching into his overcoat and pulled out the Jackal. Crimson eyes alight with an unholy glee as his red fedora blew away, the clothing quickly dissolving into shadows, he pointed the muzzle at Ragyo's forehead and grinned, "I can feel it in my blackened heart as easily as that day so long ago, the anticipation and trepidation of fighting another monster. If I tear out your heart with my bare hands, shoot you until you're nothing but a splatter of blood on the floor, will regeneration bring a monster like you back to life?"

Taking a single step around the vampire, hints of rainbow light from her concealed silver hair visibly repulsing the aura of shadows threatening to envelop the lobby, Ragyo's currently blue eyes narrowed in mild annoyance as she answered, "I heard you

managed to give my rebellious daughter and Ichigo quite the warm welcome. It's not everyday I encounter a creature powerful enough to overwhelm pure Kamui but your threats, as sincere as they may be, do not concern me. For you see, my dear Vlad, regeneration is nothing more than a crutch for fools too weak to avoid attacks."

"Is that so?" Alucard's voice deepened, his black hair writhing around his body upon Ragyo's mentioning of his human name. As the shadows composing his true form flowing chaotically in the confined lobby, a deep red aura surrounding his form, the vampire laughed before pulling the Jackal away from the CEO's head. Pointing the gunmetal black weapon towards the ceiling, several seconds passing in a tense silent as he visibly reined in his power, Alucard turned around and added, "You Life Fiber creatures are truly interesting. I can't wait to tear both you and Nui Harime apart."

"I see my dear daughter left quite the impression," Ragyo offhandedly commented, just barely missing the stunned expression on Ryuko's face. Smoothing out a crease on her sleeve as she strutted towards the doors leading to the House of Commons, her disguise once more firmly in place, she looked over her shoulder at her shocked daughter, "I look forward to hearing how things are progressing with Ichigo, Ryuko."

As the doors closed behind the CEO of Revocs, the background noise from the hundreds of men and women inside instantly abating upon her arrival, Alucard briefly glanced at Seras before bluntly asking, "Do you intend to stand around all day, Police Girl. Make yourself useful and go upstairs."

"Yes, Master."

Looking away to the side as her master left through the wall, a ripple of shadows signaling his departure into the nearby chambers, Seras took a deep breath as relief flooded her body. The power she felt dwelling inside Ragyo Kiryuin, that rainbow light threatening to explode outwards and turn her to dust, had been truly terrifying. Quickly regaining her composure as she turned towards Ichigo and

Ryuko she clapped her hands together and pointed to the left, "The press seating is up these stairs and through the first door on the right. So if you will please just follow me..."

Folding her arms across Senketsu as she stepped into line behind Seras, a sour expression on her face, Ryuko nudged Ichigo in the ribs and whispers, "Hey, I have a really bad feeling about this."

"Yeah..." Ichigo looked outside as a flash of lightning tore through the darkened skies, "... I know."

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A regal expression adorned Ragyo's face as she slowly walked through the doors towards the podium at the center of the room, her white heels clicking softly against the round with every step. As the conversations in the background immediately died away upon her arrival, hundreds of people turning to face her, the CEO of Revocs gave a pleasant smirk when several camera flashes went off simultaneously. It was amusing how much thought and preparation the Hellsing Organization went through for her timely arrival. She could detect mercenaries stationed at key areas through the room, a sign of Integra Hellsing's overbearing caution, but it was Alucard's constant presence in the shadows that drew her attention the most.

Purposely pushing such trivial matters to the back of her mind as she reached the podium, the Life Fibers woven throughout her body sensing Ichigo and Ryuko's presence above, Ragyo gently placed her suitcase by her feet and nodded politely, "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen."

"Your timely arrival is appreciated, Mrs. Kiryuin," the Speaker of the House of Commons cleared his throat as he looked at the documents on his desk, "Due to the nature of the 2002 Extension of the Revocs Embargo Act, which specifically targets your conglomerate's internationally and domestically produced products,



you have been invited to give a rebuttal. Is there anything you wish to say before we commence with the vote?"

"Yes... I find this entire proceeding highly insulting."

Her tone passionate as she swept an arm through the air, blue eyes catching sight of Alucard smirking in the corner of the room, Ragyo's gaze focused on the man standing right behind the speaker before she continued, "Who was it that authorized the spending of billions of dollars to revitalize the French economy, pulling it out of the recession the Americans have only just recovered from? What company has donated free clothing to the world's entire homeless population, giving millions of poor and destitute family free and comfortable clothing good for all year? And that's not to mention the more than three million people currently working for Revocs worldwide. The fact of the matter, esteemed members of Parliament, is that Revocs has done more to help humanity than most countries can claim... including your own government."

Excited muttering permeated the air as Ragyo finished speaking, the myriad of international reporters in the upper balcony drinking in her every word. As Ryuko's hands tightly gripped the wooden railing, the material cracking under her supernatural strength, the Speaker forced himself to look away from the Kiryuin matriarch's intense gaze. Turning towards his fellow politicians, most of their expressions mirroring his own, he ran a finger under his collar and coughed, "Very well then... are there any question for Mrs. Kiryuin before we proceed?"

Standing up with several papers clasped in his fingers, the few cameras allowed in the chambers swiveling towards him, one member of the House of Commons cleared his throat and adjusted his thick glasses, "Mrs. Kiryuin... several rumors persist involving Revocs' merger with Sears-Macy's, specifically the subsequent elimination of the brand name and entire board of directors. Can you comment on these rumors?"

"I assure you everything involved in the merger was legal," Ragyo's eyes briefly focused on her daughter before sweeping across the room towards the well-dressed man standing to the right of the Speaker. Sensing something off about his presence, both his posture and tenseness suggesting he was more than just another guard, she shook her head and continued, "Sears-Macy's was brought down due to the arrogance and insanity of their CEO... who was caught trying to blackmail several other companies. If I recall correctly the FTC conducted quite the thorough investigation, which cleared Revocs of any involvement in the affair. But from your tone I'm of the notion you're more concerned with my company's so-called monopoly of the apparel market."

Another man, in his late sixties, leaned forward and asked, "But is that not what it is? Forgive my ignorance but controlling nearly ninety percent of all clothing sales sounds an awful lot like a monopoly. Surely you can understand the red flags your current business practices raise? Why, in the last four years alone Revocs swallowed or drove out of business nearly twenty companies, half of which existed for over forty years."

Ragyo's expression shifted as she leaned forward, perfectly manicured fingers gripping the edges of the podium, "I do not appreciate your insinuations against my company. Revocs does not nor has it ever interfered with rival businesses. We do not stifle competition, exert illegitimate influence over market prices or prevent other companies from attempting to rise from the dirt. The last time I authorized a change in the price of our apparel was four years ago during the worldwide recession... and as our financial reports show I ordered the price *lowered* . It may seem counterproductive but I don't care if a few upstart companies managed to carve out a niche in the clothing market. A few ten million dollars lost per year does not bother me the slightest."

"Still..." A third member, a middle-aged woman, flipped through the documents in front of her with a puzzled look in her eye, "By most international definitions your company's market share does

constitute a frighteningly large monopoly. But your last statement, in regards to a 'few upstart companies,' goes completely against your drive to overturn this embargo. Why would Revocs, which made nearly six hundred billion dollars in the last fiscal year, be so eager to return to England?"

"It's a matter of principle."

Running a hand through her black hair, earring swinging slightly from the gesture, Ragyo's tone was formal and precise as she continued, "Your government's embargo was put into place five years ago based upon false evidence and testimony by those seeking to destroy my company. I merely wish to reverse such a grievous error and give the people of England a choice in what they want to wear."

Before anyone could respond to Ragyo's answer, several members of the House of Commons leaning forward to speak, the Speaker banged his gavel to regain control of the floor, "I thank you for your testimony, Mrs. Kiryuin. Members of the House of Commons... I apologize for the abrupt interruption, I'm sure many of you still have questions, but it is time for us to vote on the 2002 Extension of the Revocs Embargo Act."

A deathly silence fell over the chamber as the hundreds of members of the House of Commons voted, their decisions and any opinions registered electronically before being forwarded to the monitor built into the Speaker's desk. As sporadic flashes of light appeared in the press balconies, Ryuko accidentally shoving a tall silver-haired cameraman as she leaned over the railing, the Speaker waited nearly eight minutes for the last vote to be sent. Putting on a pair of glasses, his eyes glancing at the screen on his desk, he announced, "All the votes have been submitted. Six hundred and thirty nine members have voted with eleven abstaining. Those in favor of repealing the embargo, thereby allowing Revocs to once again import their products, amount to three hundred and nineteen. The number of votes against the repeal is three hundred and twenty. By majority ruling the embargo remains in place."

The moment the Speaker announced the verdict the room erupted into an excited cacophony, the correspondents in the upper balcony already reporting to their constituents. Smirking in triumph when she noticed the furious expression on her mother's face, the CEO's fingers gripping the podium tightly enough that cracks were clearly visible, Ryuko perked up when a strange sensation washed over her body. As Senketsu's fabric tightened in response to the feeling, the Kamui sharing her apprehension and confusion, she turned around when someone politely tapped on her shoulder.

"Huh?" Craning her head at the rather tall cameraman standing right next to her, red eyes barely noticeable beneath his hat, Ryuko briefly recalled what she did and grumbled, "Look, I'm sorry I hit you. It was an accident."

Instead of acknowledging the apology the man handed her a thin manila envelope before nodding and walking away, his tall stature somehow vanishing into the much shorter crowd of people. Her blue eyes narrowing in a mixture of confusion and suspicion as she looked at the folder, her name printed clearly on the front, Ryuko turned to Ichigo and asked, "Who the hell was that guy and how did he know my name?"

Scowling as he looked through the crowd, his eyes trying to track the taller man, Ichigo opened his mouth to answer when several piercing screams echoed from the floor below. Spinning around and leaning over the railing, Ryuko and Seras standing on either side of him, he was shocked to see one of the Wild Geese mercenaries holding a pistol firmly against the Speaker's head. An irritated growl leaving her lips as she took several steps backwards, the folder in her hands harshly pushed into Seras', Ryuko planted a foot on the railing and was about to leap over the side when she ran face-first into a translucent red barrier. Her body shaking as the Anti-Life Fiber barrier spun into existence, Senketsu's screams of pain audible to a select few, Ryuko shouted angrily when she was launched violently into the far wall of the chamber.

"My sincerest apologies, Ryuko," the mercenary commented with a light smirk, mirthful blue eyes shining from under the stolen beret. Pressing the gun firmly against the Speaker's temple, his body shifting to put the man between Walter and himself, he added, "The thing is... I'd rather *not* fight you."

Slamming a fist against the barrier, the deep red surface rippling momentarily before an electrical shock ran up his arm, Ichigo scowled at Mugetsu's grunt of pain as he seethed, "You damn coward!"

The mercenary grinned as he gave Ichigo a small nod, "Why thank you. Oh... I wouldn't recommend that vampire at your side try anything. While she could pass right through the barrier unharmed I've laced the sprinkler system with holy water blessed by three different bishops."

"Impressive as always, Yuu. You continue to surprise me with your ingenuity," Ragyo let out a deep and sensuous sigh as she leaned her head backwards, black hair shattering like glass and revealing pure silver once more.

Opening her eyes, maroon staring sadistically at the hundreds of politicians surrounding her, she took a step forward and smirked when the rest of the Wild Geese mercenaries raised their modified weapons at her. As her heels clicked gently against the floor, her stride unchanging, the CEO of Revocs chuckled as one by one the mercenaries clutched their stomachs before collapsing to the ground in unmoving heaps, "Now then... as for you humans, to be perfectly honest I'm rather upset. I was all but certain you would see the beauty of Life Fibers and repeal this ridiculous embargo. Instead my foolish daughter and her allies manage to convince you otherwise. C'est la vie..."

As an unholy rainbow light filled the chamber, the politicians frozen in fear and terror, Ragyo's silver eyebrows quirked when she distinctly heard a subtle yet familiar sound. Reacting instinctively when Alucard fired the Jackal, her hand deflecting the bullet into the

ceiling, an unnatural calm washed over the room as Ragyo inspected the damage to her body. Maroon eyes narrowing as her mangled hand quickly regenerated, flawless flesh emerging from rainbow light, she stared at the vampire and smirked, "Come now, surely you don't intend to kill me with so many innocent humans around?"

"Kill you?"

Alucard laughed as he marched forward, wisps of smoke rising from the Jackal's muzzle, "You're just a weak clone of a monster too scared and pathetic to come herself. Killing you would amount to nothing in the end. What I'm going to do is destroy you, tear you apart one Life Fiber at a time, and then kill that man over there. Unlike you, he clearly is the genuine article..."

"Will you now?" Ragyo raised a finger, strands of rainbow Life Fibers writhing in the air, and stared at the balcony above. Lips twisting into a mockery of a smile at the anger coursing through Ichigo and Ryuko's body, their Life Fibers resonating in time with their emotions, she chuckled clicked her heel loudly on the ground, "That is quite the bold declaration, my dear Vlad, but your petty attachment to these humans shall prove most amusing. Let's see how you -"

The Kiryuin matriarch found herself violently cut off, the Life Fibers dissipating back into nothingness, as several carbon nanofilament wires wrapped tightly around her fingers before clenching them shut. An annoyed expression on her face as she looked over her shoulder at Walter, beads of sweat dripping down his face at the effort required to overwhelm just four of her fingers, she remained silent as the aged butler smirked, "I'm sorry but there shall be no Mental Refitting today, Ragyo Kiryuin."

"Humph," Ragyo's earrings jingled quietly as she flexed her hand, breaking the wires in the process, and turned towards Alucard, "Mr. Akiyama, please deal with that nuisance. It seems I shall be preoccupied with more important matters for the next few minutes."

Before the youth could respond to the order, Ragyo's attention completely focused on the excited vampire, Walter was already moving into action. Swinging his arms across his body, dozens of razor-sharp wires emerging from his sleeves, he attempted to slice Yuu's head clean from his body only to find glowing Life Fiber wires blocking his path. The grin covering his face slowly vanishing as he held an arm outwards, his hidden Lache Raiment barely able to block all of Walter's wires, Yuu harshly kicked the Speaker away before commenting, "A fellow practitioner of ayatori... huh, I thought I researched all fifteen masters. Well then, how about the two of us fight in a fair, cowardly way?"

"Cowardly, you say?"

Walter took a step forward as Alucard engaged Ragyo's COVERS clone, the woman's fist punching clear through his skull in a shower of blood and visceral while the Jackal blew apart her heart. Taking a second to adjust his tie, his monocle shining opaque in the incandescent lightning, the aged butler flexed his fingers dramatically and gave a disarming smile, "Well... I do suppose poisoning half of the Wild Geese with tainted alcohol is quite cowardly but I'm afraid cowardice is unbecoming of a man such as myself. You'll just have to settle for a good, old-fashioned fight to the death."

"Is that so..." Yuu's eyes shifted upwards when a flash of red and blue light pierced the chamber, courtesy of Ichigo and Ryuko activating their respective Kamui. His thoughtful expression turning into a cocky one, drawing a confused look from Walter, he abruptly kicked the Speaker's desk and knocked off the front panel. As the bomb inside was exposed for everyone to see, panicked screaming tearing through the air, the member of Xcution pointed to the three-minute timer counting down, "In a little less than three minutes this building will go up in flames, killing everyone within a two block radius. Now I'm sure Lady Ragyo and Alucard won't be harmed by something like this but the blessed silver shavings laced into the outer casing will make sure nobody else does."

The Hellsing butler's eyes widened in shock, "You're insane."

Waving a finger as he deftly stepped away from the older man, the audible sound of fabric tearing signifying that Ryuko and Ichigo had nearly torn through the Anti-Life Fiber barrier, Yuu took the opportunity to fix his beret. As an earthquake shook Westminster Palace courtesy of Alucard gripping Ragyo's head before forcing it straight through solid concrete, shattering not only the wall but the surrounding structures, he pointed to the ground and said, "Oh, I wouldn't take another step if I were you..."

A cloud of smoke burst from the ground just before Walter could react, the high-pressure smoke grenade exploding beneath the butler's feet and covering the entire room in a cloud of acrid smog. Coughing harshly as he sprinted forward, all thoughts of personal safety gone as his wires cut through the air, the aged butler couldn't help but curse as the smoke cleared with Yuu having long since escaped. His wires vanishing as he turned around, Ichigo and Ryuko quickly landing besides him, Walter ignored the standard anxiety of feeling Alucard release his first restraint and crouched in front of the bomb.

"Damn it," Ichigo grimaced as he stared at the explosive, the complexity of the device mind-boggling, "That guy managed to put a bomb in this place? How the hell did he get it through security?"

"I don't know," Walter replied sarcastically, his wires cutting through the rivets holding the bomb in place with a flick of a wrist. Brushing off his pants as he turned to the two teenagers, Seras having joined them despite the holy water circulating in the sprinkler system, the aged butler cleared his throat and explained, "By the way, I have no idea how to disarm this thing without setting it off. Miss Matoi, I'm aware that Senketsu has the ability to fly..."

"I'm way ahead of you!"

Huffing as she tossed the Scissor Blade to Ichigo, the hardened Life Fiber weapon turning a dark shade of blue upon contact, Ryuko dug her fingers into the bomb's steel casing and sprinted towards the nearest window. Glass shattering as she leapt into the raging storm,



her legs morphing into jet engines as Senketsu mentally shifted into Shippu, Ryuko spun around as a roll of thunder echoed above the city before rocketing vertically into the sky. Blue eyes narrowing in the pouring rain when an arc of lightning tore through the air, the cliché digital timer on the bomb showing less than thirty seconds, Senketsu tightened in worried around Ryuko as she reared her armor back and threw the device into the darkening clouds.

Her hair whipping around her face as she gently fell towards the ground, the propulsion from Senketsu's jet engines cutting off momentarily, Ryuko turned away and closed her eyes when a cacophony of light and heat tore through the atmosphere. Eyes still squinted as the light died down, a clap of thunder soon overtaking the artificial explosion, she sighed in relief as Senketsu commented, ***"That was close, Ryuko. Are you all right?"***

"Yeah," she clenched her hands into fists, eyes narrowed, before spinning around and flying back towards Ichigo, "But for some reason I can't help but feel I know that guy..."

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Humming softly as the helicopter circled the HMS Eagle, her finger tracing a smooth path along the side of her musket, Rip Van Winkle's eyes opened lazily when static blared through the device hidden in her ear. As Quilge Opie's voice came through loud and clear, her fellow Sternritter delivering the most recent news from Great Britain, she looked out the helicopter's window at the aircraft carrier floating in the darkened waters and smirked, "So Ragyo Kiryuin decided to start the fireworks a little early this year."

" Yes," Quilge's tone was level and steady as he stood next to the communication's officer, the trans-dimensional connection firmly established between the Silbern and Earth, *"Once she failed to repeal the embargo Ragyo decided to simply do things her way, which is rather concerning. The Daten gathered suggested the*

*woman would take her loss most gracefully, if only to keep up public perceptions. Her clone's subsequent slaughter of dozens of humans has His Majesty wishing to know the status of your assignment."*

Rip Van Winkle was deathly silent as she listened to the constant thrum of the helicopter rotors, her musket held tightly against her body as the flight deck of the HMS Eagle appeared out the window, "Tell His Majesty that I'm almost done here. I simply have a few little things to tidy up and the Schatten Ausrufung will be fit to proceed."

*" Understood," Quilge paused momentarily before adding, "Please maintain radio silence until successful completion of all clean-up operations. The presence of two Kamui in London has caused His Majesty to adjust several aspects of the Schatten Ausrufung. Nothing major, of course, but merely precaution in the likely event Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi decide to interfere with our goals."*

The helicopter rotors whined down to a stop as Quilge's voice cut off, the Sternritter leaving Rip Van Winkle to her own devices as he returned to his previous duties in the Silbern. Her shoes tapping gently onto the flight deck, the Quincy Zeichen hanging around her neck glittering in the bright moonlight, the Sternritter scoffed under her breath when she saw three vampires dressed in the formal attire of the Royal British Navy standing several feet away, "Lousy, filthy undead."

One of the traitorous crewmen blinked in confusion at the barely audible muttering, "What was that, Ma'am?"

"Oh, nothing that someone like you should worry about!" Rip answered with false cheerfulness as she strutted across the deck, her nose wrinkling in disgust at the scent of undeath permeating the atmosphere. It bothered the newly risen Sternritter to be working alongside undead, Quincy and humans so desperate for power they would sell their own souls in the process, but His Majesty's words were sacrosanct. Whistling an old song as she leaned over the edge of the ship, her musket held against the back of her neck, Rip spun

around and smirked, "My word... this is quite the pretty ship! I hope it wasn't too difficult seizing control."

"Welcome aboard the Eagle, Ma'am," the sole vampirized officer smugly announced, his crimson eyes shining underneath his hat, "Everything has been built to your specifications. Both the ship and its former crew are at Millennium's disposal."

Rip continued to smile as she propped her musket against the deck, both hands tightly gripping the barrel as her necklace dangled gently in the wind. Cocking her head to the side, one leg curled against her body, the mirth previously heard in her voice slowly vanished as she asked, "How does it feel to become a vampire, lead a mutiny against your friends and commit high treason against both country and humanity all in the span of a few hours?"

Ignoring the shocked expression from the three vampires as she twirled away from them, her musket tapping gently against her shoulder, Rip's long blue hair shifted ominously in the ocean breeze as she laughed and cheerfully added, "But we certainly couldn't have done any of this without your help. The Major is most impressed with your traitorous service towards the Jahrtausendarmee and His Majesty has deemed you three worthy of a very special reward!"

One of the two crewmen swallowed nervously at the Sternritter's tone before sputtering, "H-His Majesty?"

"One... two... three targets..."

Blue-white spiritual energy exploded from Rip Van Winkle's body as she leaned backwards on her left leg and pointed the musket at the vampires, a pinprick of sharp blue light visible within the barrel. Tilting her head slightly to the side, blue eyes narrowing as the smirk on her face twisting into a sadistic grin, she closed her eyes and announced, "I am the huntress of the Wandenreich. Rip Van Winkle... Sternritter X - The X-Axis. And your reward for becoming vampires and slaughtering your friends and colleagues is death. Auf wiedersehen, my newly minted captain."

The three vampires disappeared in a flash of supernatural speed before the Quincy finished speaking, their fangs and crimson eyes clearly visible in the moonlit sky. Perched on top of the ship, his hand gripping a ledge soaked with the blood of his former comrades, the vampirized officer growled furiously, "The damn bitch set us up to die! And what the hell is a Sternritter?"

"I see three targets..." Rip continued coldly, the light from her musket deepening while her glasses gleamed opaquely in the pale light, "Tinker tailor soldier sailor... my arrow always pierces the heart."

Her smirk widening as a single flash of light emerged from her musket, the characteristic Heilig Pfeil never appearing, Rip chuckled as all three vampires died simultaneously. Stepping to the side as the officer's undead corpse slammed into the flight deck, a large hole visible where his heart should be, the Sternritter turned around as dozens of vampirized soldiers marched out from the lower levels. Hands clasped together over her musket's muzzle as the soldiers stomped to a halt several meters from away, red eyes shining beneath white berets and black goggles, Rip cheerfully leaned forward and grinned, "Ladies and gentlemen of the Wandenreich! I am pleased to announce that His Majesty has declared that we shall be the opening shot in this glorious war against both the Hellsing Organization and Revocs. Now sit back and relax... the ball is in Hellsing's court. Provided, of course, they survive the unholy fury of Ragyo Kiryuin..."

# London's Burning

*I present to you chapter 46 of **To My Death I Fight** . I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it. So in the last month or two I've become aware that bets have been made about who Ichigo will end up with - Ryuko or Satsuki. On one end there is the vocal camp that wishes for him to go with Ryuko (Fresh Strawberry) and on the other those that want him with Satsuki (Pure Strawberry). I'm not even going to mention those that want Ichigo to end up with - Nui, Ururu, Jakuzure, Mako or anyone else.*

*As with most guesses pertaining to this story I find this hilarious in every single possible way. In order to sate your curiosity (and prevent the buildup of an angry mob) I shall reveal to you that that answer is one of those two choices. But will it be the way you hoped or dreamed? The answer may surprise you. I put up a poll on my profile. I'm curious about the overall opinion on the matter.*

*So here is the standard 'Please Read and Review!' and before the actual chapter I have a few shout outs and special thanks (I may have missed some):*

**1. Chrisman1991 (deviantart)** - For creating the meme image about my story involving Ichigo's "love" interest. This is also where I first learned of the Pure/Fresh Strawberry terms. I could have also sworn there was one for Nui lurking somewhere. Crazy Strawberry maybe?

**2. That-Booky-Chick15 (deviantart)** - For all the wonderful fanart she's done for my story. In the last few months she's drawn over a dozen pictures involving scenes from Kamui Tales, Mugetsu, Senketsu, Ryuko, Nui, Ichigo and Satsuki. She even created a human version Mugetsu. You should all check out her artwork.

**3. Uber Prinny Lord** - For all the work he's put into my tvtropes page. I don't know how he did it but he literally doubled the size of the page in about a week.

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## **Chapter 46 - London's Burning**

The storms that had plagued London for nearly a week, covering the island in a torrential downpour of rain and misery, began to abate directly following Ragyo Kiryuin's murderous appearance at Westminster Palace. As he stood in the middle of the nearly empty tarmac at London Heathrow Airport, all civilian traffic cancelled in the aftermath of the previous day's events, Yuu Akiyama pulled the green cap further over his eyes and listened to the revving engines of the private jet pulling out of the hangar. Owned by one of the Revocs Conglomerate's many subsidiary companies, the connection buried under so much red tape and bureaucracy that it would take even Houka Inumuta more than a day to piece everything together, it was the only way he could leave Great Britain after the aircraft Ragyo's clone arrived on was confiscated by the Hellsing Organization.

"Where do ye think yer going?"

Yuu stiffened when he felt a sharpened metal blade perched threateningly against his neck, the thick Irish accented voice betraying who was standing behind him. The bayonet held in his gloved right hand barely trembling as he held it against the Xcution member's neck Alexander Anderson's voice came out as little more than a growl, "Move and I'll sever yer head clean off yer body."

For several seconds a mildly surprised expression spread across Yuu's face, the youth shocked by Anderson's arrival, before his lips twisted into a smug grin, "Heh... it looks like you finally caught me, Father Anderson."

Anderson's green eyes narrowed behind his glasses at the sarcastic reference to his former occupation, the light rain causing the lenses to grow opaque. As he stood on the tarmac behind Yuu, his cassock

growing slick with moisture, the former priest tightened his grip on the bayonet and sneered, "It wasn't hard. I just had to wait until ye weren't wearing yer unholy uniform."

"I only wear my raiment for special occasions," Yuu replied in a nonplussed tone, uncaring of the deadly blade pressed against his skin, and folded his hands in his pockets, "Speaking of which... I'm surprised you managed to find me. I spread enough false clues and information that MI:6 thinks I'm currently fleeing to Ireland. How did you know I was here?"

"It wasn't difficult... tracking ye, I mean. Yer traps were brilliant. Anyone else would have fallen for yer deviousness hook, line and sinker."

A sharp crackle of thunder reverberated throughout the atmosphere in the middle of Anderson's answer, the cold wind momentarily picking up and causing the former priest's cassock to flutter chaotically around his body. Keeping the bayonet pressed firmly against Yuu's exposed neck as he slowly circled around the Xcution member, his boots softly stomping in the recently formed puddles of water, Anderson let out a wistful sigh while his expression grew pensive, "But I raised ye from an infant left on my doorstep. It's a damn shame it came to this, Yuu."

"I suppose I'm just full of surprises," Yuu shrugged as Anderson came to a halt in front of him, one hand adjusting the brim of his cap. Cocking his head to the side, a mirthful grin on his face, the Xcution member chuckled and motioned with his hands, "It's all part of being a coward. You never do what anyone expects."

"Is that so?"

Anderson's fist smashed into the youth's face before he had a chance to even blink, blood and spittle flying through the air as he crashed bodily onto the tarmac. A grunt of pain leaving his lips when his head bounced off the ground, trails of crimson oozing from his nose and coppery taste permeating his mouth, Yuu attempted to sit

up only to find a bayonet pointed directly between his eyes. Standing above him with rain dripping from his cropped blonde hair, the freshly created scar on his left cheek standing out in the rain, the former priest gnashed his teeth and snarled, "Than why on Earth did ye pledge yer soul to that abomination of a woman?"

The silence that followed Anderson's question was deafening and for nearly a minute the falling rain was the only sound that could be heard. Eventually pushing himself back onto his knees, blue eyes never leaving the blade hovering in front of his face, Yuu spit out mixture of blood and saliva as he fixed the collar of his jacket. A gloved hand running through his brown hair, Anderson's punch having knocked off his cap, the member of Xcution smirked before contending, "That's quite ironic coming from you, Father Anderson. I mean... you murdered hundreds of sentient creatures in the name of God. And let's not get started on what you did thirteen years ago..."

"I destroyed unholy fiends on Earth!" Anderson snarled, one hand gripping the front of Yuu's jacket before hauling the youth back onto his feet. As lightning arced across the overcast skies, an expression of utmost rage visible on his face, the nudist commander's glasses gleamed malevolently as he continued, "Creatures that devoured and consumed the souls of humans, trapping them in an endless sea of torment and agony. I hunted dark and foul beasts, corrupted and blackened souls determined to spread their vile plague throughout Europe! And thirteen years ago I killed men, colleagues I've known for years, to prevent yer unholy mistress from getting a foothold in the Vatican!"

"True..." Yuu graciously admitted with a sly grin stretching across his face, a gloved hand curling around the bayonet in front of his face, "But you only delayed Ragyo for two years. She still managed to get what she wanted only you weren't there to stop her. Ah, I see you understand. If you had been a bit less fanatical in your approach you could have actually done something useful."

Anderson's grip on Yuu's jacket momentarily slackened as the former priest contemplated the youth's words, the anger and



annoyance slowly leaving his face, before it quickly returned in full force. Sneering as he slammed the hilt of his bayonet into Yuu's stomach, the teenager breathlessly falling back to the ground, Anderson's presence seemed to double as he spat, "I've made mistakes in my fifty five years on Earth... mistakes that I will have to face once my time has come. Ye, on the other hand, are but a coward... too scared and spineless to stand against that monster working to destroy every living creature on this planet!"

Coughing harshly as he struggled to breath, the nudist commander's attack hurting more than he expected, Yuu wiped the blood trailing from his nose onto a sleeve and smirked, "Let me tell you a story. When I was eleven and living in Harobaro House in Rome one of my sisters, no relation, misplaced several of her toys but the director at the time wouldn't buy her new ones. You see... he was a bit of an ass when it came to money. Despite the generous donation by Masaki Kurosaki, which could have easily paid for new toys, he wouldn't spend a single *centesimo* on what he called 'trivial things.' He was convinced she merely hid her dolls so he would get her new ones."

The former priest remained completely silent while Yuu spoke, his shoulders hunched forward, before scoffing, "Is there a point to yer tale?"

"Don't worry, it gets better," Yuu held a hand against his stomach as he stood up, a slight wince escaping from between his lips, "Anyway, the next day I found her toys. She left them outside in the rain and they were all but ruined. So I borrowed one of the knives from the kitchen and destroyed them. When the director found out... well, he was understandably upset. I was sent to my room, confined there for a week, but my sister got brand new dolls."

A faint clap of thunder, signifying the finale of the storm, reverberated in the distance as Anderson stoically stared at the Xcution member with an unreadable expression. Swinging his arm through the air after several tense seconds, his bayonet leaving a faint blue trail of light in its wake, the former priest's footsteps were heavy as he

growled, "Leave, Yuu, and hope by the grace of God that we never meet again. For if I see ye on the field of battle I will not hesitate to gut ye like a fish. Every action must have consequences... even yers."

"Heh," Yuu quietly chuckled as he slowly walked towards the private jet, its engines immediately revving up to full power. Pausing as he stepped into the plane, one hand holding onto the door as a contemplative look entered his eyes, the Xcution member reached into his jacket as he turned around and shouted, "Father Anderson!"

Hesitating momentarily before looking over his shoulder as Yuu called his name, the jet's engines nearly drowning out the sound, Anderson instinctively reached up and caught the small object descending through the air. One eyebrow quirking as he opened his fingers, green eyes narrowing at the significance of what he held, the former priest strained his ears as the nineteen year old mockingly saluted him, "It's been nice catching up with you! Give my regards to Ryuko!"

As the private jet taxied down the runway and vanished into the cloudy skies, the intense wind causing Anderson's cassock to flap violently around his body, the sound of metal and plastic crackling could be heard. Relaxing his fingers while turning around and walking away, the crushed remote detonator falling in scraps to the ground, the former priest scoffed derisively as his footsteps echoing heavily against the asphalt. A weary sigh leaving his mouth as he stared into the heavens, rain falling lightly onto his face, Anderson shook his head and scowled, "That stupid cowardly bastard..."

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Integra Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing harshly bit down on the end of her cigar as she marched through the artificially illuminated corridor, the thick concrete and steel walls making the underground bunker impervious to all but the most dedicated airstrikes. The situation

surrounding the HMS Eagle was bad enough on its own but Ragyo Kiryuin's actions the previous day, which indirectly led to hundreds dying, could not be ignored. A small puff of smoke escaping her lips alongside an annoyed sigh upon noticing the man standing just down the corridor, his expression saying all that needed to be said, Integra removed the cigar from her mouth and sarcastically asked, "I suppose your people already know the identity of the Quincy currently commandeering the Eagle?"

"Maybe..."

Batou's grey eyes narrowed as he thought back to the Great Culture and Sports Festival, "The four Quincy that fought at Honnouji Academy called themselves Sternritter. From what little information we could gather each of them has an epitaph that describes their particular power. One of them, a man by the name of Lille Barro, carried a long-range rifle and had the title of 'The X-Axis.'"

"I see..." The shadows of the corridor appeared to lengthen as Integra placed the cigar back in her mouth, "You think this Lille Barro is the Quincy on board the ship?"

Folding his arms across his chest while leaning against the wall, his face pulled into a grimace, the nudist commander shook his head and answered, "Unlikely... Ragyo Kiryuin personally killed him. Obliterated his body with some sort of rainbow energy blast. Whoever's on board the Eagle is probably his replacement."

"A replacement?"

Walter's voice trailed off as he stared at the floor, a gloved hand perched against the underside of his chin while he attempted to piece together the enigma that was Millennium. Quickly brought back to reality when Integra turned around, her blue eyes narrowing at the aged butler's sudden silence, Walter explained, "It's deeply concerning to think people as strong as these Sternritter could be replaced at such an astonishing rate. But more importantly it raises the dreadful question of what these Quincy are truly planning. They

claim to be in opposition to Ragyo Kiryuin yet their Major seems determined to wage war against Great Britain. Quite frankly, Ma'am, none of this makes any sense."

Integra couldn't help but scoff derisively at the thought of attempting to understand a man as insane as the Major. Clamping her teeth down upon the cigar as she turned back to Batou, the nudist's expression unreadable, she replied, "No matter the circumstances we cannot afford to have our attention divided. Ragyo Kiryuin's little stunt yesterday resulted in over four hundred casualties before Alucard managed to destroy her clone... not to mention the fact she could send another clone whenever she damn well feels like it. Dealing with her is much more urgent than whatever these Quincy have planned."

"And yet we cannot afford to ignore these Quincy," Walter gently chided while walking around the leader of the Hellsing Organization, stopping only when he stood directly between her and Batou, "The uniqueness of the situation all but speaks for itself. Since taking control of the ship Millennium has only responded defensively, shooting down our forces while not launching any attacks of their own. It's a textbook case, Ma'am. They're luring us to attack."

"The Eagle's an Invincible-class VTOL aircraft carrier." Pushing off the wall and turning towards Integra, the dim artificial lighting causing shadows to rapidly shift across his face, Batou narrowed his eyes before continuing, "I knew a guy who served on the Ark Royale a couple of decades ago. Attempting anything against a ship that well armed would be suicidal. You'll get blown clean out of the water."

A perturbed expression crossed Integra's face as she pondered the nudist commander's answer, his extensive military record helping to give validity to his suggestion. Taking a large drag from the cigar in her mouth, an annoyed scowl firmly planted on her face, she cocked her head to the side and scoffed, "I don't suppose it's possible to just ignore the damn thing. Moving vampires across large bodies of water is troublesome at the best of times but the real issue is the Quincy. Their only known weakness is Life Fibers and I don't see

Ragyo Kiryuin giving us access to the damn threads. So what do we do with our vampires? Would sending them on a battleship work?"

Walter gave a curt shake of his head before speaking, "No. Between the preparation and the voyage it would take nearly a day to reach the Eagle's current location... and that's providing they stay put. And sending a faster vessel wouldn't work. That ship is stocked with high-caliber anti-aircraft armaments capable of piercing through any unarmored vessel. What about an aerial drop? Sending an aircraft with a lot of decoy chaff might fool the Eagle's defenses."

Integra's eyes narrowed as she removed the cigar from her mouth, a thin layer of ash coating her fingers, "It still wouldn't fool that damn Quincy. He managed to take out both helicopters at a range of nearly four kilometers. It stands to reason he wouldn't be encumbered or fooled by the decoys."

A resigned look adorned the nudist commander's face as the lights in the corridor briefly flickered, the incandescent bulbs dimming to a faint orange. Something about this whole mess just didn't feel right yet they had a point - leaving that ship in the hands of Millennium was an international incident waiting to happen. Running a hand through his grey hair Batou turned to Walter and shrugged his shoulders, "If you're determined to get on that ship you need to find a way to neutralize that Quincy's line of sight. It wouldn't be surprising if his range extended all the way to the horizon. You could try approaching underwater... but then you need to worry about the depth charges and anti-submarine missiles."

"That is a problem," Walter stoically agreed, "Perhaps a two-staged assault would prove successful? Blind the Quincy visually before launching the attack."

Reverberating laughter filled the nearly empty corridor as soon as Walter finished speaking, a cold chill permeating the air while the lights in the distance flickered once more before going out entirely. The psychotic chuckling continuing as Integra's shadow immediately stretched away from her body, uncountable number of blood red

eyes blinking into aware in the writhing mass of darkness, Batou took an instinctive step backwards and reached for his weapon when two white gloved emerged from the chaotic mass. As the rest of Alucard's body spun into existence, the shadows peeling off his overcoat and arms, the vampire looked between the three humans and spoke, "What you're saying is... against their stockpiles of missiles and arrows your only hope is to find a way to get me on the flight deck. Isn't that right?"

The young leader of the Hellsing Organization didn't bat an eye at the vampire's entrance, "Considering the Quincy's range it may not be possible."

"Wait a second..." A knowing smirk tugged at the corners of Walter's mouth as the aged butler leaned forward, "I know an aircraft that could get you on board that ship. There's only one left in existence but it should do the trick - the Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird."

As Alucard's lips twisted into an unholy mockery of a smile, crimson eyes glowing at the prospect of the upcoming slaughter, Batou stared at Walter and frowned, "Please tell me you have a plan to get him back. The SR-71 might get him there, providing the Quincy doesn't shoot it out of the sky first, but there's no way it'll fly afterwards. So unless your vampire knows how to steer a twenty thousand ton ship he's going to be stranded in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean."

"How troublesome," Integra admitted while scratching her chin in thought.

"Hold on... that's ingenious!" Walter's tone was ecstatic as he turned towards Integra, "This Quincy seems to have the ability to hit anything he can see... why not use that against him? We could send a transport craft after Alucard, keeping it at least twenty-five kilometers from the ship. That would put it well beyond the horizon..."

Integra's lips curled into a replica of the smug expression on Walter's face, "... but still close enough to retrieve him. However given all we know about the Quincy we cannot assume he'll stay put. It's more than likely whoever is on board that ship will flee the moment Alucard gets within range. Batou, is it possible to send Ichigo or Ryuko with Alucard?"

"No," Batou's tone was blunt as he addressed the young woman, his gaze hardening upon noticing Alucard's black hair beginning to writhe chaotically. Absentmindedly scratching at the stubble coating his chin while doing his best to ignore the sensation crawling down his spine, the vampire's subtle presence something he hoped never to get used to, Batou folded his arms and explained, "Our orders just came through from headquarters. The moment your vampire gets back we're pulling out of Great Britain. Olivier doesn't like having two Kamui outside of Japan any longer than necessary, especially after the stunt Ragyo pulled yesterday."

"Why the delay?" Integra curiously asked, her coat fluttering lightly around her shoulders while turning her attention from Alucard to the older nudist, "You've already accomplished your stated objective - the embargo against Revocs remains firmly in place. The Hellsing Organization is more than capable of dealing with a few errant Quincy."

"Because it smells like a damn trap."

Batou grumbled while rubbing his exhausted eyes, the end result of staying awake for nearly a full day, as he leaned his head back and sighed, "If I learned anything after seventeen years of fighting Revocs it is how to spot an obvious trap. Think about it - two hours after Ragyo Kiryuin tries to kill everyone in Parliament the Quincy somehow manage to commandeer one of the most heavily fortified ships in the royal navy. In order to deal with *that* you want to send one of the most powerful supernatural creatures known to mankind into the only environment perfect for containing him. Call me paranoid but what do you think will happen once Alucard is gone?"

"I suppose you have a point. The Major might be far more cunning than I initially gave credit," Integra conceded with a pensive expression crossing her face. Biting down on her cigar, the paper and tobacco crumpling slightly under the pressure, she paused for a few seconds and narrowed her eyes, "But we cannot allow the Eagle to remain in enemy hands. Her Majesty has made it abundantly clear these Quincy are to be hunted down and executed to the last man."

The sound of a phone going off, the ringtone one of the more popular songs of the eighties, pulled everyone's attention onto Batou. His brow furrowing as he recognized who was calling, one hand deftly reaching into his pocket, the nudist commander stared at the short message on the screen for several seconds before stating, "Well at least there's some good news. Anderson just sent me a message concerning that Xcution member you fought yesterday, Walter. Apparently the guy managed to flee the country ten minutes ago."

"I'm surprised you let him go, Walter," Alucard's footsteps echoed in the corridor as the vampire moved closer to the aged butler, his crimson eyes glowing with veiled amusement, "Don't tell me you're getting rusty after all these years."

"We can't all be centuries-old vampires," Walter sarcastically answered, one hand adjusting the sleeve of his dress shirt, "But in my defense Yuu Akiyama's skill in the art of ayatori caught me completely by surprise. It's not every day you encounter a teenager nearly as skilled as you are in such an obscure form of combat, after all."

Integra's frown deepened as her mind focused on other matters, the conversation between Walter and Alucard lost in the background. With the last of Ragyo Kiryuin's forces out of the country, barring the woman deciding to send another COVERS clone, they could concentrate their full attention on Millennium. Stepping closer to Batou, small flecks of ash falling from her cigar, her tone was brisk as she spoke, "If you're not leaving anytime soon send Alexander Anderson to the manor. His experience dealing with a dedicated



force of supernatural creatures could prove useful in countering anything Millennium tries. Thoughts, Walter?"

"The idea is sound in theory, Ma'am," the butler responded stoically, "In the best case scenario nothing happens and Alucard returns to Great Britain safe and sound. However if Batou is indeed correct, and the Eagle is one large trap for Alucard, we'll at least be prepared for anything that might happen. In this worse case scenario Miss Victoria, as well as Ryuko Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki, should prove capable of dealing with a few of these so-called Sternritter until Alucard's return."

"Then it's settled," Integra's tone shifted dangerously as she turned to the smiling Alucard. Pulling the cigar out of her mouth, gloved fingers breaking it in two, she let out a deep sigh before raising her voice, "Alucard... after you have accomplished your mission I will be sending you to Japan. Once there your sole objective will be the complete and utter destruction of Ragyo Kiryuin and all of her forces through any means necessary. Is that understood?"

Alucard bowed his head while swinging an arm across his body, the psychotic grin never leaving his face, "As you wish, my Master."

Batou couldn't help but feel a strange sense of relief wash over his body at the thought of Alucard heading to Japan. Remaining silent as the vampire vanished into the shadows, his form dissipating into the darkness suddenly permeating the corridor, the nudist commander pursed his lips and mentally shrugged, *"Well... I suppose having two people capable of killing Ragyo Kiryuin is better than one."*

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Lounging lazily in a chair on the flight deck with a look of pure boredom etched on her face, splatters of dried blood and visceral coating the ground, Rip Van Winkle couldn't help but sigh miserably.

Blue eyes half-lidded as she tilted her head backwards, the moonlit horizon completely empty ever since she destroyed that squadron of fighter jets, the newly risen Sternritter looked at the pink alarm clock on the deck next to her and groaned. Blowing a strand of hair away from her eyes while a tired yawn left her throat Rip was caught completely off guard when an incredibly dark and nightmarish spiritual energy enveloped the ship.

"Oh no... it's *him* ."

Even at his current distance, separated from her by dozens of kilometers, the Sternritter instinctively knew Alucard was approaching. The coldness and vileness of the spiritual pressure, that infinite darkness that put any hollow or arrancar to shame, could never be replicated. Hands tightly gripping her musket as she spotted a pinprick of light in the distance, the faintest sounds of maniac laughter echoing in the deepest recesses of her mind, Rip's glasses fell down the bridge of her nose as she spun around and shouted, "He's coming!"

Stationed in the bridge of the Eagle, the illumination from the monitors reflecting off his black goggles, one of the vampirized soldiers ignored the nervousness permeating his undead body as he leaned forward and announced, "Hold on... there's something on the radar. It's... wait. This isn't possible! He's approaching at a velocity of over mach two point five at an altitude of eighty three thousand feet!"

While none of the soldiers were as tuned to sensing spiritual energies as the Sternritter they could all easily feel the growing presence over the horizon. Another soldier, beads of sweat cascading downwards from underneath his beret, swallowed the nervous lump in his throat while pressing a finger against the receiver hidden in his ear, "It's the SR-71 Blackbird but how the hell does he intend to land the damn thing? Ma'am, what are your orders?"

Rip Van Winkle remained silent as she stomped a foot against the flight deck, her dark blue hair waving slowly in the air when an aura

of spiritual energy enveloped her body. Slowly raising her musket into the sky, the muzzle pointed directly at Alucard, she gnashed her teeth and declared, "Alucard's coming! Just as His Majesty predicted! He has come for me but I shall not go quietly into the night!"

When alarms suddenly blared throughout the bridge, the various sensors and monitors bursting into life, one of the vampirized soldiers looked out the window at the contrails expanding in the sky. His red eyes widening in a mixture of stunned disbelief and surprise upon noticing the abrupt shift in their direction, a light gasp leaving his mouth as the true scope of Alucard's plan became apparent, he spun around and shouted, "He's trying to ram us! Evasive maneuvers! Get us the hell out of here and fire the damn guns! Alucard must not reach this ship!"

As the reverberations of the anti-aircraft armaments echoed across the open water, grayish smoke accompanying the bursts of light from the tracing shells, Rip Van Winkle stood unflinching on the deck of the Eagle. She could feel Alucard's crimson gaze focused exclusive on her, his bared teeth glistening with insanity in her mind. Slowly running a hand soothingly down the barrel of her musket, the feel of the familiar weapon helping to calm her erratic nerves, the Sternritter took a deep breath before narrowing her eyes. She would not allow her trepidation to ruin the Schatten Ausrufung, not when the success of His Majesty's plan was within reach.

Collapsing softly onto her back, the impact with the flight deck cushioned by her spiritual energy, Rip Van Winkle slowly and methodically raised her musket upwards until it was pointed nearly vertically into the sky. A sadistic grin spreading along her face as she propped one foot against the end of her weapon for support, the intricate carvings along the barrel glowing the same shade of blue as her spiritual energy, the Sternritter's voice was perfectly audible over the roaring of the artillery as she spoke, "Einer... zwei... drei... vier... fünf. I see one target. Tinker tailor soldier sailor... my arrows always pierce the heart."

An ephemeral flash of blue light shone from the end of Rip Van Winkle's musket as the true power of the 'X-Axis' made itself known. As anti-aircraft munitions continued peppering the rapidly descending SR-71 Blackbird, pieces of metal and electronics falling away from the increasingly damaged aircraft, there was a secondary explosion when five circular holes instantaneously perforated the fuselage. Sitting inside the nearly destroyed aircraft, the manic grin on his face widening despite most of his head and torso were nearly disintegrated into nothingness by the power of the Sternritter's specialized arrows, Alucard chuckled at the fear emanating from the Eagle.

"Cromwell restrictions..." The vampire's single remaining crimson eye stared at the darkened form of Rip Van Winkle through the SR-71's shattered canopy as his body was enveloped by a sickly red aura, "Three... two... one... released!"

The wave of dark spiritual energy that accompanied the release of Alucard's nearly unrestricted power harshly cut off the elated cheers from the vampirized soldiers in the bridge, their red eyes collectively widening in terror at the monster they could all now feel descending towards them. As the SR-71 was bathed in the same sickly red glow as the vampire, wisps of darkness and shadows flickering around the nearly broken form, Alucard's chuckling slowly shifted into fully psychotic laughter. His fully regenerated upper body oozing from the wrecked fuselage, dozens of shadowy phantasmal clawed arms writhing through the air while holding the aircraft together, the vampire's form was illuminated by the pale moonlight as he locked gazes with the frightened Quincy.

"No! I won't let you!"

Rip Van Winkle's voice cracked in fear, beads of nervous sweat dripping down her face, as she felt the vampire's spiritual energy growing larger and fouler. Aiming her musket at the falling aircraft once more, her body glowing with a deep blue light from the spiritual energy concentrated in her weapon, the Quincy narrowed her blue eyes and shouted, "I won't let you get anywhere near me!"

Bracing her body against the cold steel of the flight deck as she squeezed the musket's trigger, teeth clenched together while ignoring the rapid beating of her heart, almost every window on the bridge of the Eagle either cracked or shattered when a massive Heilig Pfeil conformed into the shape of a rifle bullet erupted from the spiritual weapon. A tired pant leaving her throat as her arms fell limply to the ground, blue eyes tracking the rapidly ascending arrow, Rip Van Winkle's lips pulled into a satisfied grin when a massive explosion detonated mere feet from the falling Alucard. Biting her lip as the SR-71 Blackbird began to spiral, the percussive blast changing its vertical trajectory, she sighed in relief when the aircraft crashed into ocean just a few hundred feet from the Eagle.

"That was too close for comfort..."

A light grunt leaving her lips as she stood back on her feet, one finger adjusting her round glasses, Rip Van Winkle forcibly ignored the jubilant cheers from the vampirized soldiers on the bridge and walked towards the edge of the flight deck. Pressing a hand against her forehead as her long blue hair waved in the cool ocean breeze, the pale light from the moon causing her glasses to gleam opaquely, the Sternritter's expression slowly shifted into a frown. It was slightly troubling that the wreckage of the SR-71 Blackbird hadn't yet sunk, the entire fuselage and both wings still visible above the surface of the water, but she wasn't too worried. As long as Alucard remained surrounded by at least a hundred feet of water he was effectively trapped until the Hellsing Organization or their allies could mount a rescue.

"But we can't allow that to happen just yet," Rip Van Winkle chuckled at her answer while twirling her musket around, a faint trace of blue light following the end of the muzzle. Quickly firing five normal Heilig Pfeil into the air with supernatural accuracy, the arrows ascending hundreds of feet before abruptly coming to a stop, her face was cast in a pale blue glow when a massive Quincy Zeichen appeared in the air. The smirk gracing her face widening as a translucent pentagonal barrier flared into existence, the spell enveloping everything within a

kilometer of the ship, the Sternritter clapped her hands together and announced, "You lose, Alucard. Kirchenlied: Heilig Königs Palisade."

Round glasses shining ominously as she propped her musket against the nape of her neck, the pale moonlight penetrating the Quincy technique transmuted into a faint blue, Rip Van Winkle visibly perked up when the receiver in her ear flared to life and the Major's perfectly audible voice came across the connection, *Ah, Rip Van Winkle. I assume your mission was a resounding success?"*

"But of course!" The Sternritter replied cheerfully while spinning away from the edge of the flight deck, her previous nervousness and trepidation already forgotten. Nearly skipping as she walked across the spacious deck, her shoes echoing lightly against the exposed metal, she leaned her head back and stared at the moon before continuing, "You can inform His Majesty that the Schatten Ausrufung is ready to move to the next stage."

The corners of the Major's mouth twisted into a facsimile of a smile at the wonderful news, his yellow eyes gleaming with barely concealed anticipation. Standing on the bridge of the Deus Ex Machina while staring at the dozens of screens lining the wall in front of him, carefully installed cameras giving a crystal clear image of the Eagle's flight deck, he clapped his hands together and replied, *"Excellent work, Rip Van Winkle. Casting Heilig Königs Palisade in such a tumultuous environment is no small feat even for the best of His Majesty's Sternritter. It's safe to say your recent ascension to our ranks was well deserved. I hope there weren't any complications dealing with Alucard."*

Rip Van Winkle snorted as she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, "Nothing beside the vampire attempting to crash the SR-71 Blackbird into the ship."

*"I can't help but feel a little... what's the word... disappointed in how easily Alucard took the bait."* Turning away from the screen and sitting down, his legs folded over each other, the Major sighed in discontentment before continuing, *"A creature of such darkness and*

*terror that even the illustrious Ragyo Kiryuin would be wary of directly confronting him... and he so easily fell into our trap? That's no fun but I must digress. As long as Alucard remains exactly where he is for the foreseeable future I am more than content to wait until the moment is right."*

The pale blue-tinted moonlight illuminated Rip Van Winkle's face as she strolled across the flight deck of the Eagle, her smirk widening with every step. Tilting her head to the side while stabbing her musket against the ground, a loud rapport echoing through the nearly silent atmosphere, she narrowed her eyes derisively and cheerfully answered, "And thanks to this remarkable palisade we don't have to worry about the Hellsing Organization or Nudist Beach mounting a rescue. For the next three hours Alucard and this ship are completely separated from the rest of the world! Nobody will be able to see him even if they were standing right on the other side of the barrier!"

A strange sensation pulled at the corners of the Sternritter's mind the moment she finished speaking, a dark and twisted spiritual energy emanating from the destroyed fuselage of the SR-71 Blackbird. The ambient sounds of the Eagle muted as she turned around, the light from the moon disappearing behind a cloud, a bead of sweat trickled down Rip Van Winkle's face while the increasing jovial voice of the Major came across the connection, *"Before I bid you a fond auf weidersehen, Rip Van Winkle, I have a message from His Majesty. He is pleased by your success this night and laments that your tenure amongst the Sternritter must be cut tragically short for the sake of peace. You can rest assured that your heroic sacrifice shall not be in vain."*

"Sacrifice?" Rip Van Winkle's gaze remained focused on the floating wreckage in the distance, wisps of darkness still clinging to the frame, as she asked, "What the hell are you talking about? My orders were to simply contain Alucard!"

*" Ah, but you did contain him!"*

Her blue eyes staring at the shattered SR-71 Blackbird as an oozing darkness slowly emerged from the fallen aircraft, the nightmarish spiritual energy permeating the atmosphere growing darker by the second, Rip Van Winkle could barely hear the Major's voice as her arms fell numbly to her side, *"The Heilig Königs Palisade will make sure Alucard cannot escape until every last piece is in place. The Wandenreich thanks you, Rip Van Winkle, but I do believe there are more important things you should focus on at the moment - such as surviving against the primordial force of nature that is Alucard. I wish you viel glück!"*

Pulling the receiver out of her ear as the Major's voice vanished in a faint burst of static, small pieces of plastic and metal crumpling in her grip, Rip Van Winkle nearly lost her balance when the spiritual energy pulsing from the wreckage instantly quadrupled. Her breath temporarily forced from her lungs under the increased pressure, beads of nervous sweat freely dripping down her face, Rip Van Winkle gritted her teeth as a blue-white aura surrounded her body. Even after being betrayed by His Majesty, left to die at the hands of an undead monstrosity, she was not about to go down without a fight. Twisting around to face Alucard, fingers tightly gripping her musket as spiritual energy accumulated in the barrel, she felt her gathered will slowly drain away upon witnessing the darkness oozing forth from the SR-71 Blackbird's fuselage.

"W-What is this?" Rip's voice was barely above a whisper, the klaxons of the Eagle falling upon deaf ears, as her trembling blue eyes stared at the familiar figure slowly and methodically walking across the surface of the ocean directly towards her.

As she stood alone on the flight deck of the ship, her blue hair swaying around her face, the Sternritter fearfully tore her eyes away from the silhouetted when the darkness oozing from the crashed aircraft surged forth. Limply collapsing to her knees as the imperceptible substance reached the edge of the Heilig Königs Palisade and began flowing directly up the vertical surface, waves of black shadows coalescing upon the translucent pentagonal barrier



while absorbing the ambient light, Rip Van Winkle remained woefully ignorant of the dozens of marching feet echoing below as she turned her gaze up towards the moon. The once pale white object, which had been dyed an artificial blue by her barrier, was slowly transforming into a deep red as the darkness finished encasing the Eagle. Reluctantly turning her trembling eyes once more to Alucard as the ship was bathed in a deep red glow, the crimson moon appearing to pierce directly into her soul, the once proud Quincy's voice nearly broke when she shouted, "T-This is impossible! You're a vampire! You can't walk on water!"

"You said this technique prevents anyone from seeing us. Is that correct?"

Alucard's amused chuckling reverberated throughout the Sternritter's mind as he approached the ship, the darkness oozing from his body roiling against the surface of the ocean while dozens of ephemeral arms emerged from the infinite depths. Holding a single hand in front of his face, shadows flickering like flames from the white glove, Alucard's crimson eyes shone with a deep and disturbing light as his body was enveloped in a blood-red aura, "How truly *wonderful*..."

The intricate seal on the back of Alucard's glove shone brightly as hundreds of unblinking eyes rippled outwards along the shadows permeating the interior of the barrier. For just a brief moment of time, as the water sloshing beneath the vampire's boots was consumed by the encroaching darkness, Rip Van Winkle thought she saw something shift in Alucard's appearance. It was barely perceptible due to her glasses sliding down the bridge of her nose, causing everything beyond twenty feet or so to twist into a faded grayish blur, but before she could fix her glasses and take a second look the Sternritter leapt backwards when several clawed arms burst forth from the puddles of dried blood on the flight deck.

Forced to use liberal applications of Hirenkyaku to dodge the surprising nimble appendages, the amorphous claws leaving several small tears in her white suit, Rip Van Winkle harshly bit her lower lip while raising her musket. Almost instantly the sensation of pain, as

well as the taste of copper in her mouth, helped to drive away most of the terror permeating every cell of her body. Knees slightly bent before she vanished in a burst of speed, the half a dozen limbs tracking her movements converging back into the shadows, the Sternritter compressed the trigger of her musket as she reappeared moments later floating in midair.

"How is this happening?"

Rip Van Winkle's body was illuminated by the blood-red moon, her white uniform glowing with a sickening red outline as dozens of vampirized soldiers marched through the hatches leading to the flight deck. As the undead soldiers briefly gained the advantage, their modified spiritual weapons causing Alucard's shadows to dissolve into nothingness, she continued to hit the vampire with her 'X-Axis' while screaming, "You're supposed to be a vampire so how are you doing this?!"

"It's been far too long... not since those shinigami centuries ago..." Alucard's tone devolved into guttural growls as one crimson eye pierced through the red veil of the night, the darkness bubbling beneath his feet surging over the water and slamming against the hull of the ship. Momentarily staggering as holes continuously perforated his body, shadows and blood oozing from the circular wounds, the vampire held his arms out and chuckled while his wounds regenerated, "So tell me, Miss Van Winkle, how long do you think a Quincy such as yourself will last before I catch you?"

The vampire's question was answered when several rockets, courtesy of the vampirized soldiers on the flight deck, streaked through the crimson-tinted atmosphere and slammed against his body. Heavy and purposeful footsteps raced across the ship as the soldiers dropped the launchers from their shoulders, the encroaching darkness retreating back over the sides, and pulled out their normal weapons. As bullets rained down onto the roaring inferno surrounding Alucard, the incendiary substance contained within the rockets preventing the flames from going out, one of the shoulders pulled off his gas mask and shouted to the petrified Rip Van Winkle

hovering above, "Ma'am! You need to use your Vollstandig! It's the only thing that can stand against -"

Thick gurgling replaced the soldier's declaration when one of the writhing claws completely pierced his throat, his weak blood tearing like paper against the unholy strength of the abomination continuing to make his way towards the ship. Red eyes widening in an expression of pain and terror before his head was crushed by the same appendage, blood and visceral spraying through the air and coating nearby vampirized soldiers, his body hadn't even begun to collapse to the ground before it was torn apart and scattered across the flight deck. Fumbling for the black Sanrei glove on her right hand while squeezing her eyes shut in a futile attempt to drown out the maddening screams from the soldiers Rip Van Winkle's heart was nearly in her throat as she hysterically exclaimed, "Vollstandig: Zielie!"

A cacophony of energy roared through the enclosed space as a column of energy exploded upwards, the blue-white light radiating harshly over the ship fiercely clashing for dominance against the encompassing darkness permeating the barrier. For a few seconds the sickening red light from the moon was overwhelmed when Rip Van Winkled reappeared, phantasmal wings composed of pure spiritual energy anchored on her back, before pillar shattered like glass. Breathing deeply from the exhaustion of activating Vollstandig, the strain of the artificial technique immediately making itself, she suppressed the urge to wince upon noticing the bemused expression adorning Alucard's half-destroyed face.

Swallowing the heavy lump in her throat when the mocking smile on the vampire's bullet-torn visage grew, the dark abyss surrounding the unholy creature nearly at the ship threatening to devour her very soul, Rip Van Winkle's trembling fingers quickly raised her musket and took aim before a single shot rang out in the night. Almost instantaneously after firing Alucard's body was nearly disintegrated into nothingness, dozens of perfectly circular holes perforating every inch of his body.

"T-There..." Rip Van Winkle muttered while subconsciously fixing her glasses, blue smoke rising from the muzzle of her musket as what remained of Alucard's corpse sunk into the inky depths of the ocean. Unlike the boring and dull Lille Barro, who always claimed one shot from the 'X-Axis' would be enough to kill anyone, she actually possessed an imagination. Using Vollständig might rapidly drain her stamina with each passing second but her enhanced schrift allowed her attacks to not only pierce the heart but every single vital organ, ligament and muscle of her opponent's body simultaneously.

Her face illuminated in a deep blue glow, courtesy of the Quincy Zeichen hovering inches above her long blue hair, she tensely lowered her musket and sighed, "Hopefully that should buy us some time to -"

"That form..."

Alucard's voice resonated with an unholy symphony inside the confines of her mind as his corpse dissolved into a mixture of darkness and blood, gaping maws reaching up through the surface of the water towards the Quincy far out of reach. Barely having time for her eyes to widen in terror when the spiritual energy permeating the enclosed space suddenly increased, the moon's crimson light turning an even deeper red, Rip was torn back to reality when the vampirized soldiers onboard the Eagle opened fire. Tendrils of shadows writhing around his body as he slowly walked across the flight deck, bullets penetrating his flesh while grenades coated the entire ship in a sea of flames and smoke, Alucard's laughter devolved into something completely inhuman when dozens of familiar clawed appendages burst forth from the ground and immediately attacked the beleaguered soldiers.

As the gunfire and screaming tapered off one at a time, the soldiers torn to pieces while their blood ran across the surface of the ship, Alucard stepped over the undead corpses and slowly turned his attention to Rip Van Winkle, "That Deathdealer possessed a similar ability. Vollständig, was it? It's quite the interesting technique, all your

strange attacks felt much more powerful after you used it. But I think it's time we ended this little dance, Miss Van Winkle."

"Go to hell, you monster!"

Screaming until her voice was hoarse as she pushed the 'X-Axis' to its absolute limit, the desire to destroy Alucard overriding any conscious thought, Rip Van Winkle didn't stop firing until the entire flight deck was enveloped in flames and smoke. Her breath coming out in ragged and deep pants as the exertion of using Vollständig continued growing worse, a metallic groan echoing throughout the area as the perforated Eagle slowly began sinking, she didn't dare blink as she scanned the ship for any sign of the vampire.

*" That couldn't have finished him!"* Her thoughts becoming increasingly desperate when she couldn't find Alucard, the smoke on the flight deck clearing enough for her to see the corpses of her soldiers, *"I can still feel his spiritual energy. So where did he -"*

"That was quite the impressive display," Rip Van Winkle gasped when Alucard's deep voice spoke from right behind her, his gloved hand firmly clenching her right shoulder. Barely able to muster the courage to look at the vampire, his eyes glowing an unholy crimson, the Sternritter's expression froze in terror as he continued, "Something like that would kill most people. Good try though."

She never even saw Alucard move before his fist impacted her face with enough force to shatter the Quincy Zeichen hovering over her head. Time seeming to slow to a crawl as blood and spittle burst from her lips, blue eyes wide in a mixture of pain and confusion, the Sternritter's mind was still attempting to understand what happened when she was sent violently crashing onto the Eagle's flight deck. Even as her body painfully tore through several reinforced walls, explosions erupting all around her, Rip Van Winkle couldn't understand why her Blut Vene had failed. It should have negated at least some of Alucard's punch yet it had collapsed the moment he made contact, the sheer strength behind the blow destroying His Majesty bestowed protection.

Briefly fading out of consciousness when she collided with the bow of the ship, her suit torn and bloody by the many wounds covering her body, Rip Van Winkle coughed as she slowly managed to stand back up. As she looked around the burning remains of the once immaculate ship, the corpses of the vampirized soldiers burning to bone and ash, it dawned on the Sternritter that the abominable spiritual energy from Alucard was actually growing denser and more twisted. Absentmindedly fixing the cracked glassed perching on the bridge of her nose Rip Van Winkle took a single step only to collapse onto her knees upon noticing the silhouette walking through the flames, "O-Oh god..."

The wavering flames crackling on the ship flickered and distorted as Alucard continued his relentless march towards the heavily injured Quincy. Unblinking eyes emerging from the encompassing darkness as he stopped to a halt several meters away from Rip Van Winkle, shadows mercilessly oozing forth from his overcoat while faint eldritch screams overwhelmed the unnaturally deafening silence, the vampire's sadistic grin widened as he gazed at the horrified woman, "What's the matter, Miss Van Winkle? You wanted to trap me within this barrier... so here I am..."

Trembling hands fumbling against the deck until she felt her musket, the spiritual weapon heavily damaged by her impact but still fully operational, Rip Van Winkle didn't even bother aiming as she panted heavily and pointed it at Alucard. She didn't care about the sheer implausibility of killing the vampire. All that mattered was preventing the unholy creature from getting any closer. But when she harshly squeezed the trigger, spiritual energy rapidly coalescing within the muzzle of her musket, there was a loud sound akin to shattering glass as the wings created by her Vollständig abruptly vanished into thin air.

Rip Van Winkle's vision swam as she staggered backwards, her knees weakening from the sudden loss of spiritual energy. Weakly leaning against the railing behind her for support as sweat trickled down her face she took one look at the inhuman mockery of a smile

on Alucard's face and raised her musket. The corners of her eyes growing dim as she aimed at the vampire, her every thought revolving around survival, the Sternritter choked violently when Alucard teleported the short distance between them and clasped his fingers tightly around her exposed throat. His supernatural strength easily hoisting her in the air, trails of blood oozing from the corners of her mouth as the Quincy weakly attempted to pull herself free, Alucard chuckled as he tore the musket from her hand.

"Look what I just caught," Fanged maws dripping with acidic saliva emerged from the shadows enveloping the Eagle as Alucard painfully pressed the musket against Rip Van Winkle's chest. His crimson eyes shining brightly in the blood-red moonlight, hundreds of eyes forming in the darkness composing his body, Alucard's tone turned nightmarish as he slowly opened his mouth, "I just caught you... Rip... Van... Winkle."

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Ryuko yawned loudly as she reclined on the only couch in the Nudist Beach safe house. Her black hair disheveled from a lack of sleep, blue eyes dropping with exhaustion, she propped her feet on the coffee table and listened to the rhythmic sounds of Senketsu's subdued snoring. It hadn't been that long ago, four or five hours at the most, since the Kamui dozed off into a deep slumber despite the ample supply of her blood and Ryuko couldn't help but wonder why the hell she was still up. Folding her arms across the navy-blue sailor uniform, Senketsu's entire form gently ruffling in time with his snoring, she tilted her head and yawned again while absentmindedly watching Ichigo help Batou move several metal boxes across the room.

"Be careful with that," Batou cautiously chided when he noticed Ichigo nearly trip and drop the crate in his hands, "Those spool grenades pack enough of a punch to destroy this building and everything around it."

Sighing tiredly as he carefully placed his own crate on top of the growing stack near the front of the house, Ichigo's scowl and subsequent eye roll not lost to the nudist, Batou rubbed a hand against his neck when his aging muscles and joints began complaining. As he crouched next to the stack of boxes, grey eyes carefully reading the label carefully stenciled on the sides, the nudist commander checked off another item on his mental checklist. Lips pursing when he looked at his watch, the hour hand sitting just past three, he pointed over his shoulder, "You and Ryuko can get some shuteye once we're done. Don't worry, I'll wake you two once Alucard gets back."

"I've been meaning to ask you..."

Ichigo trailed off when two nudists emerged from the back room of the safe house, a large piece of complicated and highly expensive machinery held in their straining arms. With complete silence descending upon the room four sets of eyes watched the soldiers checked over the piece of equipment for any issues, the plastic wrapping all but hiding the forest green paint, before giving their commanding officer a respectful salute and leaving. His attention firmly locked for several seconds on the apparatus on the ground, something about it reminding him of Honnouji Academy, Ichigo turned back to Batou and continued without missing a beat, "Where's Anderson?"

"He's at the Hellsing Manor."

The wooden floorboards creaked in protest as Batou walked out of the room in the same direction as the two nudists. When the nudist continued speaking a moment later from the adjacent corridor, his voice muffled by the walls, an annoyed curse echoed throughout the safe out as he accidentally dropped a crate on his foot, "Anyway... Millennium's planning something so Anderson's coordinating with the Hellsing Organization until their vampire gets back. Hopefully we can leave without getting into a fight... or Iscariot discovering he's still in the country."



An irritated scowl appeared on Ryuko's face at the nudist's mentioning of Iscariot, the resulting spike in her blood pressure causing Senketsu to briefly grumble before falling back asleep. She really hated the fact that ever since leaving Karakura Town everyone seemed to already know about her. It didn't make any goddamn sense - she never even *met* any of these people. While Anderson's stupid claim about raising her in an orphanage came to the forefront of her mind, which was frankly complete bullshit, what really confused Ryuko were those two people from the Vatican. It had only been for a moment but when she walked into the room, and just before noticing Alucard, she had seen the looks of recognition on their faces.

Huffing as she raised her arms above her head and stretched, a loud and tired yawn tearing its way out of her throat, Ryuko scratched her hair before shouting out the door, "And how often does *nothing* happen to us?"

Instead of immediately answering the question upon reentering the room, a heavy crate held firmly in his hands, Batou frowned and dropped the box on the table next to the teenager's feet. As Ryuko's entire body flinched from the loud impact, the short burst of adrenaline bringing her back to full awareness, the nudist commander easily ignored the resulting string of curses and began walking away, "There's a first time for everything. Now get off your lazy ass and help Ichigo."

The series of nearly inaudible curses spewing from Ryuko's mouth continued as she glared at the departing nudist, stopping only after Batou completely left the room. Leaning her head back against the couch once the target of her frustration was gone, an exasperated sigh causing her crimson bang of hair to flutter, she loudly groaned before pulling her feet off the table and stomping them against the floor. Blue eyes narrowing suspiciously as she stared at the large box sitting innocently on the table, hands propped on her legs as she sat forward, Ryuko shook her head and began to get up only to stop when Ichigo collapsed onto the couch next to her.

"You look exhausted, Ichigo," Ryuko playfully quipped as she watched Ichigo rub the bridge of his nose. As Senketsu began rustling around her body, the Kamui's multicolored eye blearily looking around the room, her smug grin slowly disappeared when she noticed the look on Ichigo's face, "Hey, what's wrong?"

Ichigo ran a hand down his face as he stared at the ceiling, "Something about this doesn't make any sense."

"Oh really?" Ryuko rolled her eyes at the obvious statement before nudging Ichigo in the ribs, "Is it those insane Quincy trying to kill everyone or finding out Nui Harime is my damn sister?"

"At Honnouji Academy they seemed almost desperate to stop Ragyo. Two of them even died fighting Xcution," Ichigo momentarily paused as he tried to piece together everything he knew about Millennium and Revocs, which was admittedly not that much, "They have to know Ragyo's getting closer their plans. So why would they go out of their way to declare war on England. It doesn't make any sense."

"The answer is obvious - they're fucking insane," Ryuko stated in annoyance before jumping off the couch. Groaning as she took a moment to stretch her stiff back, the muscles quickly popping back into place, she stalked around to the other side of the table before folding her arms over Senketsu and scoffing, "So if they show up and try to start anything we'll use Senketsu and Mugetsu to kick their asses!"

A few seconds passed after Ryuko finished speaking before a loud yawn filled the room, courtesy of Mugetsu desperately trying to stay awake. Her entire uniform shivering as multicolored eyes blinked tiredly she looked up at her wearer and stated, ***"All this talk about Quincy is making my fibers twitch strangely. Ichigo, I want you to iron me."***

Ichigo couldn't suppress the exasperated sigh welling up in his throat at his Kamui's incessant demand, Mugetsu's confused priorities

already giving him a slight headache. Running a hand through his orange hair while locking gazes with an increasing annoyed Mugetsu, her multihued eyes betrayed exactly how she felt about his stalling, his characteristic scowl returned upon noticing the smug smirk appearing on the corner of Ryuko's mouth, "Fine, I'll iron you... but only after we leave London."

" ***What?!***" Mugetsu's shocked tone pierced through the air when she heard the supposed treachery of her wearer. Rustling indignantly as she tried to lift her sleeve and show Ichigo the faintest smudge of dirt on her cuff, only to visibly deflate upon realizing his arm prevented her from moving, the Kamui growled and narrowed her eyes, ***"I can feel dirt and grime in my threads and it's only a matter of time before they're impossible to get out! You haven't washed me since yesterday so what are you waiting for?"***

"Because I know everything will go to hell the moment I start washing you."

It took Ichigo quite a bit of mental effort to ignore the subsequent growl from Mugetsu, the Kamui obviously finding his answer to her question unsatisfactory. As he leaned back against the couch, exhaustion beginning to set in his muscles, Ichigo frowned when he suddenly remembered something that had been bugging him for some time. Turning to Ryuko, who seemed to be on the verge of chuckling, he scowled and asked, "So what was in that folder?"

For a few seconds after he asked the question Ryuko simply stared at Ichigo before realization hit her. Loudly sitting down on the coffee table, the wood creaking under the combined weight from the heavy crate and teenager, she crossed her legs and snorted as she remembered the weird silver-haired camera man from the embargo vote, "Just some stuff about that guy from Xcution, which would have been a lot more useful if that asshole hadn't shown up literally seconds later! I didn't even get a chance to *look* inside the folder before I was flying through the sky with a bomb in my hands!"

Senketsu's neckerchief gently shifted as he looked up at Ryuko, ***"Ryuko... your blood pressure is increasing. Are you thinking about that man from Xcution again?"***

Ryuko huffed as she angrily folded her arms under her bosom, the simply mention of the smug asshole causing her heart rate to increase. Leaning back slightly on the table while her fingers gripped Senketsu's sleeves, the Kamui tightening around her body in an attempt to comfort her, Ryuko's voice was strained as she shook her head, "It may sound completely crazy but for some reason I can't help but think I actually know that bastard."

"He did seem to know you," Ichigo paused while he carefully thought about while little he knew of Yuu Akiyama, "Could he have gone to one of your old boarding schools?"

"If he did than I don't remember him. I didn't have any friends until I met you and Mako," Ryuko's voice was little more than a pained whisper as she looked away from Ichigo, a crestfallen expression on her face. Her childhood wasn't the best and Ichigo know about it, more or less, but that didn't making remembering the loneliness and isolation any less painful. As the minutes passed in silence between the two teenagers, the only sounds in the safe house coming from the nudists in the other rooms, Ryuko's saddened expression slowly vanished. The corners of her lips curling into a faint smile, she turned back to Ichigo and mumbled, "You know, Ichigo, I just want to say... um... I -"

"What the hell do you mean we can't contact Osaka?!"

Her left eye twitching in barely suppressed annoyance when Batou stormed back into the room alongside Richards, the nudist commander's angry shouting prematurely cutting off what she wanted to tell Ichigo. The Seki Tekko crackling as she clenched her hand into a fist and spun around, a few choice words about being interrupted already on the tip of her tongue, Ryuko paused with her mouth half open when she noticed the tense looks adorning the two men's faces. Turned towards his commanding officer, and thus

completely ignorant of the rapidly shifting emotions passing through Ryuko's head, the nudist cleared his throat before answering, "Sir, five minutes ago we lost contact with both Osaka and the field offices. Attempting to reroute the signal through public, private and military lines achieved similar results."

Batou's eyes narrowed as he tried to assess the situation, a prospect made increasingly more difficult due to the scant information. Unlike what a lot of people thought, usually those with no military experience, a full information blackout was exceedingly difficult to sustain. There was usually a time frame of thirty minutes, maybe an hour if they were really good, before communications were restored, which raised the question of motivation. Whoever was behind the blackout had an ulterior motive and the list of possible and acceptable targets, in London and across the country, could be counted a single hand.

"This doesn't make any sense," the nudist commander grumbled as he leaned against the wall, arms folded across his chest, "Even if someone possessed the necessary resources and equipment to pull off a stunt like this, our systems are completely isolated from London's. They shouldn't have been able to hack our network. Not after Houka Inumuta bolstered our firewalls and encryptions. Damn it... do we at least know if it's Ragyo Kiryuin?"

Keenly aware that both Ichigo and Ryuko were carefully listening to their conversation, the mere mention of the Kiryuin matriarch gaining their full and undivided attention, Richards coughed and cleared his throat before answering, "We won't know until we manually reboot the system and isolate the cause. It will take some time, sir."

A weary sigh echoed across the room as Batou rubbed a hand against his face, his exhaustion giving way to annoyance and trepidation. This was not the good news he needed to hear. Every military bone in his body, honed from years of service across the world, was screaming that he was missing something extremely vital. Grimacing when he pulled a cell phone out from his jacket's pocket, the military-styled device hardened against both tampering and

electromagnetic pulses, and saw he didn't have a signal the nudist commander frowned as his mind cycled through several scenarios, "Alright, even if Ragyo Kiryuin isn't behind this we still need to restore contact with headquarters. Wait... you said only communications going into or out of London are down. Does that mean we can still contact Anderson?"

"Yes, sir," Richards hesitantly answered, "We were able to reach Commander Anderson's phone. However... he's refusing to pick up."

"Of course he is..." Batou muttered while running a hand through his grey hair. Anderson might be an overly zealous crusader against Life Fibers but the former priest respected the chain of command, at least to the extent of following Olivier's orders to the letter, "If Anderson's not responding than it's likely Integra Hellsing's people already know about the situation. Contact Echo November One and tell them to stay on high alert. The shit is about to hit the fan."

As Richards snapped off a salute and quickly left the room, the noise from the back of the safe house increasing rapidly as several voices echoed through the enclosed space, Ichigo stood up and asked, "Millennium?"

"Probably," Batou grumbled, his footsteps creaking as he stalked towards the door and stared out the small windows. Reaching for the M-15 Anti-Life Fiber Assault Rifle propped against the wall, his other hand grabbing the full clip of sewing needles on the nearby crate, the nudist commander pursed his lips, "I know how Ragyo usually works. She always does things with a bit of flair or drama. She's never been this subtle."

Ryuko quirked an eyebrow as her anger from being interrupted dissipated. Arms folded over Senketsu, the Kamui humming thoughtfully in her mind, she cocked her head to the side and sarcastically asked, "How do you know that?"

"I've been around the block, working for both Ragyo and as an army ranger. Let's just say I'm speaking from experience," Batou

answered vaguely, his eyes drifting towards the weapon in his hands as he turned away from the window. Skilled fingers expertly checking over every facet of the Anti-Life Fiber weapon, the needle clip not snapping into place until the end, the nudist frowned as he mulled over old memories, "For the last seventeen years Ragyo's conducted business one of two ways. Her first and favorite method is using extremely subtle Mental Refitting to take control of a company's board of directors. Your dad spent years in his lab trying to devise a counter to her Marionette Threads."

Ichigo, quickly noticing Ryuko tensing at the mention of her father, stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder before turning to Batou, "And the second?"

Batou groaned as he sat down on a crate, the M-15 propped carefully against his leg, "She sends either the Grand Couturier or a member of Xcution to do a little 'tough negotiating.'"

A tense silence momentarily filled the room at the nudist's answer before Ryuko took a deep breath and smashed her foot against the coffee table. The piece of furniture visibly straining under the forceful impact, the constant abuse over the last few minutes causing several minute cracks to spread along its surface, the teenager glared daggers at the older man as her irritation at the situation was replaced with mild annoyance, "If these Quincy are planning something, why the hell are we just standing here waiting?"

"Taking down Millennium won't be as simple as you think."

Shaking his head when Ryuko's piercing glare didn't abate in the slightest Batou sighed deeply and grimly added, "Unlike Ragyo Kiryuin what we know about Millennium basically amounts to shit. They're an organization capable of instantly fielding Quincy strong enough to fight against Xcution. For all we know, sending you two could be -"

The nudist commander abruptly paused when he heard a series of dull thumps in the distance, the walls of the safe house shaking with

each impact. As dozens of V2 rockets slammed into London, most of the famous landmarks obliterating in only a few seconds, Batou barely had time to cover his eyes before the windows shattered into thousands of deadly projectiles. Violently knocked off his feet when a shockwave exploded through the room, the force from the rocket impacting just over a block away tearing the reinforced door off its hinges, Batou briefly lost consciousness as his head made contact with the wall.

"Ugh... I'm going to feel that in the morning."

A pained groan left Batou's mouth as he slowly stood up, wincing when his fingers touched the growing lump on the back of his head. Ignoring the familiar sensation of blood oozing down from his forehead, one hand propped against the wall for support, he stared at the flames in the street before asking, "Hey, are you two alright?"

Her body littered with minute cuts from the flying shrapnel, the wounds existing for only a few seconds before regenerating, Ryuko scowled before reaching into the pouch on her waist. Pulling out the miniaturized red Scissor Blade, the weapon snapping back to full size with a simple flick of her wrist, a relieved expression crossed her face when she saw Ichigo was all right. When she heard a second series of explosions in the distance Ryuko gritted her teeth and angrily asked, "What the hell's going on?"

Grunting as he picked up the fallen M-15, the roaring flames casting the entire room in disturbing shades of yellow and orange, Batou quickly checked over the weapon before focusing his attention on the inferno mere meters away. It was hard to believe how fucked the situation became in less than ten minutes. Holding up a hand before Ichigo could speak, Richards and the other nudists marching into the room, Batou spit on the ground and answered, "Aerial bombing meant to take out any heavily fortified positions around the city... I think it's safe to say Millennium's here."

There was a sharp glint of blue light as Ichigo removed Tournesol from its scabbard, the sapphire Life Fiber blade shining darkly in



contrast to the flames just outside the safe house. His orange hair waving alongside Ryuko's in the wind kicked up by the intense heat, his brown eyes narrowed into a furious scowl as penetrating screams of pain and terror reached his ears, Ichigo raced towards the front door only for Batou to hold out his arm.

"I know you want to help, Ichigo..." Batou gruffly began, his face pulled into a tense scowl. Haphazardly pulling off his jacket when one of the nudists handed him a ballistic vest, the Anti-Life Fiber technology woven into the armor powerful enough to tank a few hits from a Three-Star Goku Uniform, the commander motioned with his head towards Richards before finishing, "... trust me, I want to kill these Nazi bastards myself. But this isn't the time to rush headfirst into battle."

"People are dying!" Ichigo retorted loudly, one hand clenching Batou's shirt, "And you want us to do nothing?"

"Isshin told us all about your little trip to the Soul Society." A flash of surprise crossed Ichigo's face at the revelation, his grip slackening enough for the nudist commander to pull himself free. One hand fixing his shirt while the other slung the M-15 over his shoulder, the crackling flames causing shadows to dance around the room, Batou finished putting on the rest of his armor before continuing, "These aren't some shinigami you managed to catch off guard. We're facing an organization with unknown resources and manpower. Going out there without a plan won't help anyone."

A tense silence filled the room as Ichigo mulled over Batou's answer, the only sounds for several seconds coming from the flames crackling outside. Even though he hated to admit it the nudist had a good point. He couldn't afford to just charge headfirst against the Quincy and hope to emerge victorious, not when they were so willing to callously murder millions of people for no good reason. Softly clenching his right hand into a fist, a look of determination evident in his eyes, Ichigo scowled at the nudist before admitting, "You're right... but we can't just stand around talking."

"Exactly..."

Batou didn't flinch as two nudists brought a metal table in from the adjoining room, the accompanying high-pitched screech causing Ryuko to cover her ears in pain. Shouldering his weapon as Richards unfurled a large map of the city, the nudist tacking down the edges before stepping away, Batou scratched his chin before pointing towards a particular spot, "We need to leave the city and meet up with Anderson and the Wild Geese at the Hellsing Manor. Last I heard Pip wired the entire property with anti-vampire traps, so it should still be safe. The only problem is Millennium."

"We can handle those bastards," Ryuko replied confidently. Readjusting her grip on the red Scissor Blade, the weapon resting lazily on her shoulder, the crimson highlight in her hair brightened momentarily as she turned to Ichigo and smirked, "These Quincy are weak against Life Fibers, right? That means Senketsu should be able to kick their ass!"

The nudist commander grumbled before shaking his head, an idea already coming to mind. Although Quincy possessed a weakness to Life Fibers, their best attacks having little to no effect against raiment and hybrids, he didn't think they would be stupid enough to willingly fight either teenager. That fat bastard of a Major wouldn't send his best fighters to the front lines only to die, which meant dealing with the Sternritter would be exponentially more difficult. Tensing when an explosion roared through the city, the main gas line several blocks away catching fire, he trailed his finger down the map before gruffly speculating, "That only leaves the vampires. We don't know how strong they are but I doubt they're anything like -"

"Sir!" One of the nudists stationed near the door, his body propped behind several heavy crates, turned around and shouted, "Several of our remaining sensors detected multiple combatants heading towards this location. ETA sixty seconds!"

"Damn it, that was faster than I thought," Batou's footsteps echoed heavily on the floor as he took position next to Richards, his fellow

nudist tightly gripping a heavily modified ML-77 Missile Launcher. Carefully removing several pincushion grenades from his belt, the Anti-Life Fiber explosives clacking dangerously in his hand, the nudist commander spat on the ground before finishing, "Alright, you two go out there and activate your Kamui at the same time. The resulting light show should draw any unwanted attention away from us. Try and keep Millennium distracted for at least ten minutes, fifteen if you feel like pushing it, but meet up at the Hellsing Manor when you're done. Got it?"

As she took a few steps forwards, the Scissor Blade clenched tightly in her right hand, Ryuko shared a glance with Ichigo and asked, "What if we run into a Quincy?"

"Then you're free to kick their sanctimonious asses all the way to hell," Batou replied, his tone rapidly shifting midsentence when several figures became apparent in the distance. The M-15 in his hands immediately snapping upwards, grey eyes narrowing upon recognizing the white uniforms visible through the flames, he looked over his shoulder at Ichigo and shouted, "What the hell you waiting for? Go!"

Ryuko was already halfway out the door by the time Batou raised his voice, her body a blue blur to the nudists crouched behind their makeshift barricades. Leaping out into the ruined streets with the Scissor Blade held firmly in her grasp the first thing she noticed were the bodies. Men and women, their mangled faces forever frozen in agony, covered the burning city as far as she could see. Forcibly doing her best to not breath in the stench permeating the air, a constant sense of nausea lingering on the edges of her senses, Ryuko's face shifted into an expression of pure rage as she sensed dozens of vampires rapidly running towards her.

"So these undead fuckers think they can get away with this, huh?"

As the red highlight permanently visible in her hair shone brilliantly, a sign of the anger coursing through her veins, Ryuko took a step forward but paused when Senketsu's worried voice echoed through

her mind. Relieved slightly when instead of chastising her emotional outburst the Kamui instead wholeheartedly supported her decision, albeit with a cautionary word or two about controlling her anger, she pointed the Scissor Blade down the street and passionately shouted, "You bastards think you're so tough? How about you fight someone that can actually kick your ass!"

Grinning maliciously when the vampirized soldiers slid to a simultaneous halt, their hidden red eyes widening upon recognizing the teenager from the collected Daten, Ryuko chuckled when she heard Ichigo land to her right. His brown eyes narrowed in tranquil fury as he beheld the death and destruction permeating London, the multitude of corpses piled in the streets causing his face to contort into a scowl, he held a hand over the pauldron strapped to his left shoulder and cautioned, "Try not to get separated, Ryuko."

"What?" Ryuko exclaimed while turning towards Ichigo with an incredulous look etched on her face, the seriousness of the situation momentarily forgotten, "You think these bastards stand a chance against us?"

"No," Ichigo responded while rolling his eyes, uncaring that the vampires were able to hear his answer. Raising Tournesol in his left hand when dozens of blue spiritual energy blades shimmered into existence alongside modern weaponry, Mugetsu humming in response to the sudden increase in spiritual energy, Ichigo shook his head and finished, "It's just that you have no idea how to get to the Hellsing Manor."

Ryuko opened her mouth to argue before quickly realizing that Ichigo was right - she didn't have the slightest idea of how to get there. Hanging her head forward while sighing in resignation and annoyance, the light from her red highlight fading once more, she took a deep breath before punching Ichigo in his arm. A pleased smirk reappearing on her face when the orange haired teenager complained about the unprovoked attack Ryuko's expression hardened as she brought up her left hand. Fingers tightly gripping the Seki Tekko's pin, her sneakers sliding along the ground as she

shifted her stance, Ryuko narrowed her eyes and declared, "Fine... but this doesn't change anything, got it? Now let's show these undead freaks what happens when they piss us off!"

"Life Fiber Synchronization: Kamui Senketsu!"

"Life Fiber Initial Release: Kamui Mugetsu!"

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A sharp echo rang across the London skyline as the vampirized soldier lurched violently backwards, shattered goggles clattering to the ground as his head dissolved into a bloody mist. Her long cassock fluttering around her body as she stepped over the fresh corpse, thin wisps of smoke rising from her pistol, Heinkel Wolfe glanced towards the other paladins and grimaced. When Maxwell sanctioned the creation of an expeditionary force to Great Britain, using the chaos perpetrated by Ragyo Kiryuin during the embargo vote to slip her into the city, he had given a single order - covertly observe Nudist Beach and the Hellsing Organization. Getting caught in Millennium's invasion of the city, which already claimed the lives of several paladins, had come as a complete surprise.

Grey-green eyes staring across the burning city as she walked towards the edge of the roof, her footsteps heavy and purposeful, Heinkel let out an annoyed huff before gruffly asking, "Have you found them yet?"

No."

The wet sound of metal piercing flesh accompanied Yumiko Tagai's blunt response, a result of her katana piercing completely through the newly created corpse's heart and into the roof. Rivers of tainted blood running down the blessed silver blade's surface as she harshly pulled it out, the uniformed body at her feet momentarily twitching before bursting into ash, Yumiko adjusted the tattered remains of the

hooded cowl around her neck and growled, "I spent three days tracking the nudists but they must've seen me."

Heinkel scoffed while biting down on the cigarette hanging limply from between her lips, the burning tobacco helping to mask the smell of burning flesh permeating the city, "And Anderson?"

"I saw him heading towards the Hellsing Manor," Yumiko's long black hair waved freely in the updrafts from the roaring flames as she answered, the tenseness in her voice wiping the pleased smirk off Heinkel's face before it could even form. Turning towards her friend, a question already on the tip of her tongue, she was abruptly cut off when Yumiko quickly added, "He also ran into Yuu."

That was not a name Iscariot's secret weapon was expecting to hear. It had been several years since she last heard from Yuu, which had been a birthday card he somehow sent directly to her room at the Vatican, so hearing his name spoken about in such context nearly left her speechless. Grey-green eyes widening in shock behind transparent glasses, the lit cigarette nearly falling from her lips, Heinkel spun around and asked, "What did you say, Yumie?"

Yumiko raised a hand to her mouth before coughing awkwardly, a nervous grumbling threatening to make its way out of her throat, "This morning, when I was tracking Anderson's movements, I saw him heading towards Heathrow London Airport. It took me a few minutes but when I caught up I heard Anderson shouting at Yuu about working for Ragyo Kiryuin."

A soft snapping sound was barely audible over the screams from the city once Yumiko finished speaking, the cigarette in Heinkel's mouth breaking apart before falling to her feet. For several seconds the paladin didn't utter a single word, straw blonde hair shifting in the breeze while her lips pulled back into a snarl, before she turned around and stalked across the rooftop. Ignoring the confusion and puzzlement crossing the faces of her fellow paladins as she reached into her cassock, blood-stained fingers momentarily slipping inside her pocket, Heinkel stomped a foot against the ground before pulling

out her cell phone and noticed to her surprise that she actually had service.

"A miracle of God, I suppose," Heinkel shrugged her shoulders at her luck, not willing to let such a miraculous event go to waste. Pressing the phone against her ear after dialing the number, a wistful sigh escaping her lips, she didn't wait for the priest on the other end to give the standard greeting before growling, "Shut up and put Maxwell on the damn phone."

On the opposite side of the Straight of Dover near the town of Calais, sitting in a chair with his hands folded across his chest, Enrico Maxwell's lips were curled into the barest of smiles as he witnessed the conflagration currently enveloping the capital of Protestantism. Usually such a sight would bring a more manic smile to his face, the simple thought of Integra Hellsing wallowing in despair as her country burns enough to make his day, but Maxwell's good mood was permanently tempered by the knowledge of the enemy the Church was about to face. Holy Crusade or not, capturing the Father of the Quincy would not be so easy. The Vatican's initial attempts at bringing the being known as Yhwach to heel more than a millennium ago had ended disastrously for both sides. Thousands of devout Catholics had perished during those terrible years, sacrificing life and soul to halt and then reverse the Quincy's ever expanding power.

"Bishop Maxwell..." The familiar voice of the one of the priests accompanying him managed to break Maxwell's train of thought. Sitting up in the chair as the man stepped forward, a phone held in his extended hand, the newly promoted bishop quirked an eyebrow when he noticed the priest's smug grin faltering, "Paladin Wolfe is currently on the line. She wishes to speak with you promptly. It sounds... urgent."

"I thought our communications within London were down? Ah, it doesn't matter," Maxwell shrugged before sighing and taking the phone. Leaning back in the chair, one hand placed against the back of his neck, the new bishop stared with amused violet eyes at the orange light permeating the northern horizon before quipping, "This

is unexpected. I strictly remember ordering you not to call me unless it was an emergency. Wait... *what* happened?"

Heinkel gave a derisive scoff before snapping her left arm out the side and firing off a single shot from her pistol. As the vampirized soldier nearly two hundred feet away eavesdropping on her conversation fell towards the ground, a gaping hole in his chest courtesy of a blessed bullet, she pressed the phone firmly against her ear before answering, "Yuu Akiyama is working for Ragyo Kiryuin."

The leader of Iscariot nearly choked at Heinkel's answer, the sudden attack causing the surrounding priests and paladins no small amount of worry for their leader. Accepting the offered bottle of water from one of the priests, the cool liquid helping to suppress the series of wracking coughs, a tight grimace spread across Maxwell's face as he slowly walked across the grassy field towards the cliffs, "That is most... disconcerting. Dealing with a monster like Ragyo Kiryuin will be exponentially more difficult with Yuu on her payroll. Still... I suppose it's better to fight the demons you know."

An annoyed grunt left Heinkel's mouth as she stared into the smoke-filled night sky, "It's almost like a fucking reunion, Maxwell."

"Quite..." Maxwell quietly concurred, the nightly breeze blowing inland from the Strait of Dover causing his silver hair to rustle softly. Folding one arm across his body, a gloved hand tightly clenching the opposite arm, he narrowed his violet eyes before continuing, "It is safe to say that if Yuu truly is working for that abomination our plans will need to be... *thoroughly* adjusted. But let's not worry about that for the moment. Do you have any new information on that Protestant bitch?"

Heinkel took a moment to gather her thoughts while she watched Yumiko harshly order the other paladins to promptly dispose of the remaining vampire corpses. Stoically watching as one of the paladins tried to argue with Yumiko, only for the shorter Japanese woman to snap back a response that quickly cowered him into



submission, she held the phone to her mouth and answered, "Still no sign of Integra Hellsing."

"There's no need to rush such a delicate matter. Integra Hellsing shall receive judgment for her heretical beliefs," Maxwell's voice trailed off as the bishop paced down the cliff away from the recently established base of operations for the Vatican. Out of all the contingencies accounted for during the crusade's preparation, including Ragyo Kiryuin deciding to become personally involved, he never even bothered to consider that Yuu would be involved. As he sighed and stared at the full moon rising over the waters, violet eyes narrowing suspicious at the faint redness permeating the pale orb, Maxwell finished in an excited tone, "You should also know that due to Ragyo Kiryuin's little... outburst... in London I am ordering you to leave Anderson and Nudist Beach alone until such time as that woman has been thoroughly dealt with."

"I see..." The corners of Heinkel's lips twisted into a smug smirk, "Why sacrifice our own troops when Nudist Beach is more than willing to throw themselves at that monster of a woman?"

"Exactly," Maxwell's previous excitement slowly bled away as he stared at the fiery conflagration in the distance, his breath coming out in faint wisps due to the late autumn weather. Despite his reasonable belief that every Protestant should either be forced to covert to Catholicism or burn forever in the deepest pits of hell, which to be perfectly honest are the only logical choices, Maxwell viewed himself as a man of priorities. Stopping that monster in the guise of Ragyo Kiryuin, a known threat actively working to destroy humanity, should be paramount over defeating one of the Church's most hated enemies at least for the time being.

His face pulling into a grimace while he reached into his vest and pulled out an unsealed letter, the broken wax Papal insignia easily visible, Maxwell paused to collect his thoughts before speaking in a low tone, "I also have new orders from His Holiness. Due to the ongoing altercations involving the Hellsing Organization both Ryuko

Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki are to be captured and brought to the Vatican for containment and interrogation."

The cell phone in her hand audibly crackled as Heinkel tightened her grip, minute cracks appearing across the plastic casing. Grey-green eyes narrowing while her shoulders slouched forward, which were the only signs of her increasing displeasure at the worsening situation, she gritted her teeth before sighing loudly, "Understood."

An awkward silence existed for several seconds before Maxwell felt a hand politely clamping his shoulder. His silver eyebrows quirked when the priest standing just behind him leaned forward and whispered into his ear, the contents of the message causing the bishop to tense, he momentarily frowned before nodding in turning. As he followed the priest back to the Church's base of operations, men and women of God rushing around in preparation for the crusade, Maxwell rubbed a tired eye before speaking into the phone, "Apprehending Ryuko will require time, effort and the strength necessary to overcome the inhuman power contained within their Kamui. Not to mention their inherent regenerative capabilities. No... this is not something we can simply rush, which is why I shall leave everything in your capable hands. Do what must be done, Wolfe."

For nearly half a minute after Maxwell hung up the steady dial tone of the phone continued to drone relentlessly in the paladin's ear, her mind rapidly preoccupied with processing everything she just heard. Her glasses shifting opaquely due to the flames encompassing the city as she turned towards Yumiko and the other paladins, her phone already safely placed back into her cassock's deep pockets, Heinkel opened her mouth to relay their newest orders when an explosion of raw power pulsed across the city.

"This power!" Yumiko's mouth was slightly agape as she stared at the twin bursts of red and blue light momentarily erupting into the night sky from the south, her body tensing when a wave of alien power swept over the paladins. Biting her lip while easily shaking off the sensation permeating every muscle of her body, hidden eyes

watching the multicolored stars briefly twinkling into existence, she gripped her katana and exclaimed, "Heinkel, it's exactly like -"

"Maxwell's orders were to observe Integra Hellsing's movements and *not* to engage."

Heinkel remained completely unfazed by the outburst of power as she cut off Yumiko, a freshly lit cigarette already placed firmly between her lips. Taking a moment to savor the taste of tobacco before swinging her arms outwards, twin pistols sliding deftly into place, she slowly marched past her fellow paladins before adding, "We're moving out. It's obvious that Integra Hellsing is not hiding in this neighborhood. Let's check the one to the north."

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"Damn it..."

As he hovered effortlessly in the glowing skies over London, the constant propulsion from Mugetsu Gufū easily allowing him to counterbalance the pull of gravity, Ichigo looked around the burning landscape for any sign of Ryuko. Barely a second after activating their Kamui she had rushed towards the horde of undead soldiers with the red Scissor blade held proudly in her hands, which was a stark contrast to the way the vampires had attempted to flee upon witnessing her display of power. His brow creasing into an annoyed frowned when a burst of ruby light erupted in the distance, the familiar spiritual energy of Ryuko and Senketsu washing over him, Ichigo couldn't help but wonder why they would use Senketsu Senkou. It wasn't as if the vampirized soldiers in the streets were strong. On the contrary they were roughly the same strength as a tenth seat shinigami. Ryuko was more than capable of defeating them without even using the Scissor blade, which could only mean one thing.

"She's going out all from the start," Ichigo muttered, more to himself than anyone else, before glaring at the unconscious vampire hanging limply from his left hand, "But I really can't blame her."

The half-dead vampire, blood spewing from his nose and mouth, was one of the many reasons he was finding it increasingly difficult to blame Ryuko for wanting to use Senketsu's full power to defeat Millennium. Before Ichigo appeared in front of the soldier and caught the Seele Schneider in his bare hand, the rapidly rotating spiritual particles failing to scratch Mugetsu's armor, the vampire had been preparing to murder an entire family. Several longs had passed before the vampirized soldier finally noticed something was wrong but by then it was too late. As he tried to free his blade from the teen's supernatural grip, red eyes widening in recognition, Ichigo had simply punched the vampire's face with enough force to shatter both his nose and goggles.

Briefly looking around before landing on a nearby roof, a small shower of blue stars accompanying Mugetsu's rapid transition back to her base configuration, Ichigo didn't spare the unconscious vampire a second glance before allowing the soldier to collapse onto the surface. As he focused upon where he last sensed Ryuko, the Life Fibers in his body locking onto the familiar sensation of Senketsu's power, Ichigo paused and looked upwards in surprise when two large zeppelins slowly emerged from the smoke and ash enveloping the city.

**" Are those... blimps?"**

Mugetsu couldn't hide the sarcastic tone in her voice as she stared in disbelief at the two aircraft floating lazily over the city. A feminine growl echoing through Ichigo's mind when her multicolored eyes shifted towards the ruby light in the distance, the Kamui appreciative of Senketsu constantly showing off his power, she hummed thoughtfully and looked up at her wearer when something came to mind, **"Do you think Millennium would be stupid enough to be waiting on those things?"**

"Yeah..." Ichigo muttered absentmindedly while staring at the larger of the two zeppelins, the black and red checkerboard-pattern standing out more than anything else. His face twisting into a scowl as he expanded his senses outwards, the heavily concealed spiritual energy similar to Uryu's, Ichigo tightened his grip around Tournesol and added, "There are several Quincy on that ship and I'm willing to bet the Major is one of them. We need to stop him!"

Silence fell across the rooftop once Ichigo finished, Mugetsu continuing to give her wearer a long look before turning her attention towards the aircraft floating innocently in the sky. Multicolored eyes narrowing in deep thought as she pondered what to do, several ideas passing through her mind in quick succession before being summarily discarded, her entire form rippled angrily when she finally replied, ***"You're right. Millennium needs to be stopped but we should meet up with Ryuko and Senketsu first. It frays my Life Fibers even thinking about asking that smug Kamui for help but this isn't an enemy where my power will be enough. We're going to need - "***

The sound of nearby gunfire and screaming cut the Kamui off midsentence, her wearer quickly rushing across the rooftop and leaping into the air despite her calls for him to take a moment to think. His brown eyes narrowing when he found the source of the fighting, several vampires rapidly overtaking and massacring dozens of surviving citizens, Ichigo tightened his grip on Tournesol while blue energy continuously erupted from the vent on the back of Mugetsu's armor. As he smashed into the ground with enough force to buckle the pavement, the previously ecstatic vampires sliding to a halt upon sensing the spiritual energy emanating from the Life Fibers in his body, Ichigo wasn't given a moment's rest before the undead soldiers raised their weapons and opened fire.

"Sorry..." Tournesol blurred into motion while Ichigo's voice remained completely steady, the sapphire hardened Life Fiber blade easily deflecting or stopping the metallic projectiles with laughable ease. Chancing a look even as the gunfire doubled in intensity, a sense of

relief washing over his features upon seeing the people were still safe, the orange haired teenager's eyes were cast in shadow as a blue aura surrounded his body, "But I can't waste any time. Mugetsu Zangetsu."

An ephemeral black and white blur was the most any of the vampirized soldiers saw before they were cut down with impunity, crimson soaking their formerly white uniform while blood arced through the air. When he reappeared standing behind the fallen soldiers a moment later, Tournesol held limply in his grip while the blue energy erupting from Mugetsu quieted down to nothing, Ichigo forced himself to ignore the bodies now littering the streets. Barely paying attention to Mugetsu's childish grumbling about nearly being hit by bullets, the Kamui staring accusingly up at her wearer when he ignored her, the former substitute shinigami frowned as he focused on the distinctive signature of Ryuko's Life Fibers.

"Come on, Mugetsu," Ichigo let out a tired sigh, the events of the night beginning to catch up to him, and turned away from the newly deceased vampires, "We should get moving - "

It was the slight change in the pervading spiritual energy that caused Ichigo to instinctively lean out of the way moments before a thin column of superheated flames tore through the air, the highly compressed elemental attack barely missing his shoulder before slamming into a building. As the concussive force from the explosive detonation of power buffeted his body, Mugetsu muttering veiled threats under her breath at whoever dared to singe her Life Fiber, Ichigo couldn't help but frown at how familiar the spiritual energy felt. His expression twisting into a scowl when a shadowy figure emerged from the writhing flames, licks of fire harmlessly clinging to his white uniform, there was a slight pause before Ichigo tightened his grip on Tournesol and growled, "Bazz-B..."

The aforementioned Sternritzer slowly lowered his smoking index finger as he fully emerged from the flames, the minor grin on his face slowly vanished upon noticing Mugetsu's altered appearance. Hands tucked into the pockets of his uniform as he stomped to a halt down

the street from Ichigo, his face illuminated by the surrounding conflagration, Bazz-B leaned back on one foot and scoffed, "That's quite the fancy transformation, Ichigo. Your Kamui must be pretty fast if you can dodge my Burner Finger One without even fucking looking."

Bazz-B's face scrunched at the nauseating feeling of both Ichigo and Mugetsu's Life Fibers. It was concerning to the Sternritter that despite being surrounded by hundreds of burning and mutilated corpses the stench of Life Fiber still managed to nearly overwhelm his senses. As he considered himself fortunate Ichigo wasn't anywhere near the level of his old man or Ragyo Kiryuin, both of whom could kill him in a heartbeat, Bazz-B finally took notice of the teenager's continued silence and smugly smirked. But before the Sternritter could say anything he felt a trembling hand weakly grasping at his uniform.

"S-Sir..." The heavily injured vampire coughed up a large amount of blood as his fingers fumbled to hold onto Bazz-B's pants, "Y-You have to - "

Without even waiting for the undead soldier to finish Bazz-B pulled his foot backwards before slamming it against the man's bloody face, waves of immense flames surging forth from his sneaker upon making contact. As the vampire screamed in pain before falling silent, his body rapidly consumed by the intense blaze until nothing remained but ash and charred bones, Bazz-B spat on the ground, "Who the hell gave you permission to touch me, you undead bastard?"

Ichigo's anger rose at the Quincy's callous treatment of the wounded vampire, "Why the hell did you do that? Wasn't he your ally?"

"Are you talking about these undead freaks?" Bazz-B didn't give the smoldering corpse a second glance before stomping his foot against the ground, the brittle bones shattering into dust underneath his sneaker, "Nah, I couldn't care less about them. As far as I'm

concerned they're just weak assholes that couldn't cut it as real Quincy."

Sweeping an arm across his body before his opponent had a chance to respond, wisps of spiritual flames clinging to his gloved fingers, Bazz-B grinned at the tense look on Ichigo's face before he forced the flames covering the street to taper away until nothing remained but faint glowing embers. His head cocked slightly to the side while the previously trapped civilians took the opportunity to leave, only to freeze when several vampires leapt from the adjoining rooftops with their fangs bared menacingly, the Sternritter didn't take his eyes off Ichigo as he pointed a finger over his shoulder and fired off a series of Burner Finger One that pierced the skulls of each soldier.

"Like I said... I don't give two shits about these fake vampire punks," Bazz-B ignored the perplexed look on Ichigo's face as he flicked his wrist, a spiritual crossbow forming into existence in his left hand, "And besides, murdering people for shits and giggles just doesn't sit well with me."

Ichigo slightly lowered Tournesol at the Sternritter's remark, his face emotionless as he glanced over Bazz-B's shoulder at the safely retreating civilians before looking at the newly deceased vampires. Once he was sure they were safe, at least for the time being, he scowled and asked, "So why are you helping the Major?"

The flames that previously enveloped the street returned in full force the moment Ichigo finished his question. As the fleeing humans screamed in fear at barely avoiding being burnt alive, the intensity of the inferno enough that the pavement began melting, Bazz-B folded his hands back into the pockets of his uniform and scoffed, "Don't think for a second it's that simple. I normally don't get within fifty feet of that smug, fat bastard, but I have my orders."

A light aura surrounded Tournesol as Ichigo tightened his grip around the hardened Life Fiber blade, Mugetsu growling protectively upon understanding the hidden meaning behind the Sternritter's words. His attention momentarily shattered when a building



spontaneously collapsed, the constantly increasing temperature beginning to melt the nearby structures, Ichigo slid one foot along the pavement and scowled at Bazz-B, "Do you think I'll just let you win?"

"Hell no," Bazz-B frowned as he took a single step towards Ichigo, flames rushing up around his body. One hand rubbing his left shoulder, a mild wince of pain escaping his lips, the Quincy paused before continuing, "His Majesty ordered me to take you down... but I don't feel like having you kick my ass. And my shoulder is still killing me from fighting that sadistic ice bitch back at Honnouji Academy. So I'm going to ask you this just once - go find somewhere to hide for the next hour or two. Fuck, I don't care if you leave the city. Just don't come back until dawn."

"Like hell I'm going to run away!"

The power behind Ichigo's exclamation not only took Bazz-B by complete surprise, if the widening of his eyes was any indication, but also managed to repulse the intense flames creeping along the ground. As his body was enveloped with an aura the same color as his Life Fibers, sapphire light shining from within Mugetsu's armor, Ichigo felt his Kamui share his anger at the Quincy as he tranquilly added, "Thousands of people are dying because of the Major. I'm going to stop him... even if that means going through you. So I'm going to just ask you once - step aside and let me pass."

Bazz-B stared at Ichigo for several seconds, the expression on his face unreadable, before the corners of his mouth slowly began twisting into a smirk. Deftly unbuttoning his cloak and tossing it over his shoulder, the surrounding flames rapidly consuming the garment, the Sternritter held his arms outwards and chuckled, "Well, I can't argue with that logic! But don't think for a moment that ugly Kamui of yours is going to be enough to defeat me!"

***" Did he just call me ugly?"***

Stomping a foot against the ground as his spiritual crossbow dissolved back into its constituent particles, the pavement beneath his feet almost completely melted, Bazz-B curled all but two fingers on both of his hands and grinned, "Let's see what you're made of, Ichigo Kurosaki! Twin Burner Finger Two!"

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## **Kamui Tales #29 - How to Train a Kamui (Part Two)**

*July 15th, 1984*

Isshin Kurosaki, formerly known as Shiba, could tell something was wrong the instant he entered the high-security laboratory underneath Revocs. After several rather invasive tests, one of which required a sample of his Life Fibers for verification, the former shinigami captain wasn't at all surprised when he walked through the previously sealed doors and found Rei Hououmaru desperately trying to keep the constantly curious Junketsu from touching and breaking any of the expensive equipment. Newly maroon eyes watching as the dark skinned secretary tried to hold onto the Kamui's sleeve, which failed when Junketsu easily pulled herself free, he turned towards a thoroughly exasperated Ragyo and asked, "Junketsu trouble?"

"I see you're as tact as always, Isshin."

Ragyo Kiryuin's world-famous silver hair dimmed slightly as she sat down in a chair, perfectly manicured fingers rubbing at her temple to stave off the oncoming headache, "Junketsu is supposed to be the epitome of clothing, a marvelous uniform woven from the joining of our Life Fibers. Her existence as a Kamui is unique, nothing on this planet can even begin to compare to Junketsu's innate majesty, yet..."

**" Oh... what's this?"**

A loud crash, which was punctuated by the sound of glass shattering and Hououmaru's panicked shouting, caused the Kiryuin matriarch to pause midsentence. Her maroon eyes watched as Junketsu hopped onto a table and examined several delicate pieces of equipment, white sleeves fumbling to hold onto the sophisticated objects, Ragyo let out a small sigh before raising her right hand into the air. Curling her index finger inwards as a single rainbow Life Fiber materialized from her body, the thread gently wrapping around the distracted Junketsu's uniform, there was a moment's pause before the excited Kamui found herself flying across the room and into Ragyo's waiting grasp.

"As you can see Junketsu is quite... precocious," Ragyo's white heels clicked softly against the ground as she slowly stood back up, Junketsu's eyes widening excitedly before throwing herself upon the woman. Quickly enveloped in a shower of radiating blue light, a massive blush adorning Isshin's face as he forced himself to stare at the infinitely boring and non-sexual data scrolling across a nearby monitor, Ragyo was already clad in Junketsu's active configuration when she reemerged.

"I've already conducted several tests," Ragyo continued scientifically as she rubbed her wrist, maroon eyes examining the rainbow light permanently shining from Junketsu's white and blue armor, "Despite thoroughly examining Junketsu's Life Fibers and Banshi for any abnormalities, including any chances in her underlying weave patterns that might have developed in the last six months, I still don't know why the Kamui is so... *revealing*... in Life Fiber Override."

Coughing awkwardly in a desperate attempt to distract himself from Ragyo's obvious... attractiveness... Isshin looked at Hououmaru for spiritual support only to feel betrayed when he noticed the shorter woman already leaving the room, As the metal doors resealed with a pressurized hiss of air, the dark skinned secretary waving at him before escaping to freedom, he took a moment to gather his thoughts before turning to face Ragyo. Steeling his mind upon seeing her barely concealed breasts, Junketsu innocently accentuating rather

than hiding her sizable bosom, Isshin folded his arms and asked, "Hang up just a second. I thought we agreed to call it Life Fiber Empowerment?"

"Do you know how ridiculous that sounds, Isshin?" Ragyo rolled her eyes at the only man she would ever truly love before folding one arm under her bosom, "You know exactly why we decided to call it Life Fiber Override."

Someone without a shred of real intelligence would instantly assume Life Fiber Override was draconian and barbaric, meant to subsume Junketsu's free will and sentience beneath that of her chosen wearer. That could not be further from the truth and Ragyo was both willing, and very able, to beat that notion into the heads of her detractors. The only reason she, and eventually Isshin, had chosen it was very simple - the Kamui was much too excitable and curious to pay attention. If they couldn't override Junketsu's natural inclination to barrage the wearer with questions about everything in sight nothing would ever be accomplished. While Life Fiber Override was incredibly useful it did not stop Junketsu from immediately resuming her line of questioning once the transformation was finished.

***" I want to see what that does, Mother! Look! It's spinning!"***

Junketsu's multicolored eyes focused on one of the Life Fiber centrifuges on the opposite side of the laboratory, her tone full of excitement at the prospects of examining it.

The permanent rainbow light from Isshin's hair brightened as he chuckled slyly at Ragyo's predicament, which earned him a love tap to the side of his head. As the force from the blow caused to take a stumbling step backwards, Junketsu worriedly asking if her father was alright, Isshin rubbed his chin and sagely commented, "Override is good and all but I still think Empowerment works better... or maybe Synchronization. That actually sounds way cooler."

Ragyo shook her head and wistfully sighed at Isshin's childish playfulness. Although she would never dare admit it to anyone, least of all to Isshin, he did have a valid point. In the grand scheme of

things, once Junketsu continued maturing and moved out of her precocious phase, Synchronization sounded and felt better than Override. Closing her eyes as she leaned back against a nearby desk with her legs crossed, Junketsu's bikini-like armor barely covering her modesty, the Kiryuin matriarch smirked at the large blush adorning Isshin's face before reaching into her exposed bosom and pulling out a photograph, "I understand you've been quite busy with your work in Karakura Town. It's quite the shame my dearest Satsuki hasn't been able to see her godfather, now it is?"

With practiced flair Ragyo pulled the photograph backwards at the exact moment Isshin appeared to teleport the short distance between them, his fingers reaching for the image of her daughter. As she dangled the picture just out of his reach, Junketsu's laughter echoing in her mind, Ragyo smirked maliciously and taunted, "I'll let you have it under one condition, Isshin."

Isshin felt cold dread seep into every Life Fiber of his being at Ragyo's tone. Slowly backing away from the Kiryuin matriarch, his maroon eyes glancing towards every available exit, he cleared his throat and muttered, "I don't know. Maybe I'll just visit another day."

"Don't be absurd," Ragyo chuckled at Isshin's nonsensical excuse before blurring forward and wrapping her arm around the former captain's neck. Her fingers lightly caressing his clothing, Junketsu's curious questions about what she was doing blatantly ignored, Ragyo leaned forward and whispered seductively into his ear, "The only thing you need to do, Isshin, is take a single photograph with me. Right here and now."

It was at this particular moment in time, as he stood in the laboratory underneath Revocs with Ragyo pressing her body against him, that Isshin Kurosaki decided on a course of action that would forever change the fate of the world. Taking a deep breath while clearing his mind of all distractions, the mental image of his lovely wife cheering him on, he waited a moment before reaching out and tearing the photograph from Ragyo's fingers. In the split second before Ragyo noticed what happened, her maroon eyes glancing at her currently

empty hand, Isshin vanished in a burst of speed and ran towards the only exit.

"Even if our friendship is purely platonic I shall never betray my lovely Masaki!"

Shouting triumphantly as he slid to a stop and ducked downwards, Ragyo's extended fingers missing his neck by mere inches, Isshin sprinted out in the hallway with a large smile on his face. His shoes rapidly echoing against the floor as he raced towards the emergency stairwell, the picture of a sleeping Satsuki tucked firmly in the pocket of his coat, Isshin frowned when he heard Junketsu's laughter getting louder. Grimacing as he pushed his body to go faster, beads of sweat dripping down his face, the former shinigami captain didn't need to look over his shoulder to know Ragyo was catching up.

"Platonic?!"

The rainbow light from Ragyo's hair permeated the entire hallway as she ran past Souichiro, who was calmly drinking a cup of coffee with a newspaper tucked underneath his arm. Ignoring the slightly puzzled look from her husband, who simply shrugged his shoulders before continuing on his way, Ragyo's lips curled into an angry scowl as she nearly descended on Isshin with armored fingers reaching to throttle him, "It's one simple picture, IIISSSSSSHHHHIINN!"

# Police and Thieves

*Here is Chapter 47 and I must say things are starting to get interesting. I mean, this chapter basically covers most of OVA VI and VII without going too far into rehashing the content. There's Nudist Beach, Ichigo and Ryuko fighting against the Jahrtausendarmee (or Millennium if you will) and of course Iscariot's around but they are staying low for the moment. Anyway... I hope you enjoy the chapter and leave a review if you can.*

*Oh, there's still the whole pureberry (Satsuki) versus freshberry (Ryuko) debate going on. Personally I would rather Ichigo end up with... hang on, why am I tell you? You should all go to my profile and vote on who you would want Ichigo to end up with. This story is always changing so who knows? Perhaps I'll take your advice and pick the best girl based on that poll.*

*Also, as I say before almost every chapter, I have a tvtropes page for this story. You should go check it out when you have a chance. There's a lot of stuff there that you might have missed while reading almost 700,000 words (a new record, I might add).*

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## Chapter 47 - Police and Thieves

"Boy, do I hate being right all the time."

Pip Bernadotte stared at the dozens of monitors lining the wall of the Hellsing Manor's main security room with a light smirk spreading across his face, the object taking up most of one particular screen drawing his undivided attention. Propping his feet on the desk in front of him as he leaned backwards in the chair, one hand holding onto his slouch hat, the mercenary turned to the man next to him and

chuckled, "It looks like we have some unexpected guests, Monsieur Anderson."

Standing at full height next to the relaxed leader of the Wild Geese, his glasses gleaming opaquely due to the artificial light filling the room, Alexander Anderson's tone was dangerously calm as he asked, "How long until they get here?"

"Given the current wind speed and distance to downtown London... ten minutes," Pip replied offhandedly with a small shrug, one hand reaching into his coat pocket for the half-empty carton of Lucky Strike. Expertly placing the cigarette between his lips, the smoke and tobacco helping to steady his nerves, he scratched his chin and commented, "But I have to say, these Quincy are rather boring. With the information provided by your boss I expected something more... dramatic... like pillars of blue fire or some other supernatural bullshit."

Anderson ignored the flamboyant wave of Pip's arm as he continued staring at the screens, the large zeppelin currently hovering over the edge of London clear as day, "It just makes killing them all the easier. Now, is yer pet vampire in position?"

Crouched down on the highest roof of the Hellsing Manor with the Harkonnen Mark II unbuckled and sitting at her side, blonde hair rustling in the cool breeze, Seras Victoria let out a tired sigh as she continued prepping the massive weapon. It irked the fledgling vampire greatly that nobody even tried to use her actual name. There was her Master's 'Police Girl,' Mr. Bernadotte's demeaning 'ma chere,' and now Alexander Anderson's gruff insults. If she had the time and inclination she would march right down to the security room and give both men a piece of her mind. But as she stared into the glowing horizon at the shadowy object floating in the sky, flecks of red bleeding into sapphire irises, she knew things were about to get rather bad.

"I happen to have a name, Mr. Anderson," Seras grumbled before hefting the massive weapon off the ground, wincing slightly at the



sound of metal scrapping against concrete, "It would be nice if you actually used it."

"Don't mind him, ma chere. He's just a little on edge," Pip chuckled at the light groan that came through the radio. Pulling his feet off the desk while removing the cigarette from his mouth, the mercenary smirked at the screen displaying Seras and added, "Besides, thanks to your new toy we have enough firepower to make the military blush like a little girl. These Quincy and vampires won't even make it to the front door."

"The undead do not concern me," Anderson roughly tore the receiver from Pip's hand, earning a mild protest from the mercenary in the process, and gruffly asked, "Integra Hellsing claims ye were able to track Ichigo and Ryuko from their Life Fibers. Is that correct, vampire?"

"Yes," Seras replied, shoulders sagging in annoyance as she adjusted the strapped for the Harkonnen Mark II, "And my name is -"

"If ye can sense Life Fiber than ye can sense the unholy energy of the Quincy," Anderson leaned over the desk while cutting Seras off midsentence. Green eyes vehemently locked on the zeppelin in the distance, his ears picking up the slightly hurried voices of the Wild Geese mercenaries over the radio, the former priest's lips curled into a snarl as he continued, "And trust me, vampire, Millennium will send at least one of their so-called Sternritter to deal with the likes of ye. So tell me, can ye sense anything on that airship?"

Seras opened her mouth to dismiss Anderson's strange question when she felt something prickling at the corners of her mind. While the large distance to the zeppelin made it somewhat hard to pinpoint exactly what she was sensing, pure crimson eyes narrowing at the slightly off-putting sensation, she swallowed the small lump building up in her throat before answering after a moment of hesitation, "It's hard to describe but there's someone strong on that thing."

The tension melted from Anderson's shoulders at that particular piece of information. It would be difficult, but not impossible, for them to take down a single Sternritter given the vampire's supernatural strength and abilities. Two of them, on the other hand, would have been quite troublesome. As the former priest took a step back from the desk in order to think, the light shining from the wall of monitors reflecting ominously off his glasses, Pip leaned forward and took a large drag from his cigarette, "Millennium must believe we're pushovers if they only sent a single Sternritter. Heh... I have to admit I was a bit worried there. Perhaps we might all live through this hellish night in one piece."

Casually stubbing the nearly spent cigarette in the ashtray on the desk before stealing the microphone back from Anderson, the former priest giving him a mildly annoyed glare but remaining mute, Pip's smirk slowly vanished as he leaned forward and flipped a switch on the control panel. His teal eye narrowing slightly when two lights on the screen shifted from red to vibrant green, a faint burst of static coming across the headset dangling from one ear, Pip waited a moment before depressing the button on the microphone and announcing, "All right, Wild Geese, this is the moment where we finally earn our paycheck. We're about to encounter some unwanted company a few colors shy of the illustrious Ragyo Kiryuin. So buckle down and get into position. It's time to show these Quincy a proper English welcome."

As he removed his finger from the microphone and sat back in the chair, the sounds of his men rushing into place coming through the radio, Pip had a sneaking suspicion that some of his men weren't going to make it through the night. The plan, which he thought was quite brilliant for such short notice, relied on preventing the vampires from breaching the manor, where they would be all but unstoppable in close quarters. The only two people currently available that could fight in such cramped conditions were Anderson and Seras but he didn't like leaving all his eggs in one basket. While he didn't doubt Anderson could singlehandedly defeat most normal vampires it

would be much better, not to mention safer, to keep Millennium away from the manor for as long as possible.

"You know..." Scratching his cheek while standing up with a grunt, another cigarette already between his lips, Pip paused before lighting it and muttered, "In Brazil I managed to catch a glimpse of Alucard's fight against that well-dressed Sternritter right before that strange barrier went up. While nothing will compare to watching a seventeen-year-old girl regenerate her head after it's been blown clean off her body I'm curious, Monsieur Anderson. Will this Sternritter be anything like Nui Harime?"

"These Quincy are nothing like that monster in the guise of a woman."

The underlying venom in Anderson's guttural reply caused the mercenary to quirk an eyebrow as the former priest turned away and slowly walked towards the exit, his footsteps echoing heavily within the enclosed space. His cigarette nearly falling onto his lap when two tailor bayonets flashed out of the nudist commander's sleeves, the black and green blades shining ominously in the ambient light, Pip didn't say a word as Anderson continued, "I've witnessed firsthand the limits of their unholy power, watched as they fell victim to an even greater monster. Beneath their blasphemous arrogance they are just as mortal as the two of us. If ye can tear through their defenses they bleed just like a pig... it just takes a little more effort to pierce the skin."

A mildly disturbed expression adorned Pip's face as he stared at the former priest before eventually shaking his head and turning back to the monitors. Sighing wearily while folding one hand against the back of his neck, a thin trail of smoke drifting upwards from the cigarette perched between his lips, the mercenary gave a soft chuckle before commenting, "It's funny... I'm sure Millennium wouldn't be charging to their deaths if that woman from Brazil was around. Watching her fight Alucard was very amusing... not to mention how that Kamui accentuated -"

Pip nearly fell out of his chair when a bayonet flew through the air, the sharp blade severing his cigarette in two before embedding itself several inches in the far wall. Standing in the doorway with his left arm extended backwards, lips twisted into a snarl, Anderson huffed and looked over his shoulder at the nervous mercenary, "I put in a request for assistance the moment yer stupid Protestant boss decided to let yer other pet vampire out of the country. He should be here soon."

"That must be one hell of a man."

Furtively glancing at the bayonet sticking out of the wall, a small trickle of sweat trailing down from his forehead at how easily the blade pierced the reinforced steel, Pip narrowed his one good eye at the zeppelin approaching the outer limits of the Harkonnen's range, "So does this man intend to show up before the fireworks? It would be quite anticlimactic if he happened to be caught in the crossfire."

Halfway out the door, one hand clenched around the frame, Anderson's tone contained just a hint of annoyance as he answered, "Trust me, ye'll know exactly when you see him."

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The ruby undertone permeating Ryuko's hair intensified as her armored fingers flexed around the Scissor Blade's curved handle, the jagged red and black lines covering the hardened Life Fiber weapon glowing in the conflagration enveloping London. Lips twisting into a nearly imperceptible frown when the already heavily injured vampire she was fighting pulled a hand away from his bloody shoulder and sprinted across the rooftop, his broken gasmask exposing glistening fangs, Ryuko mentally counted to three before taking a single step forward and swinging the Scissor Blade vertically through the air, "Ichiban Genkai!"

A shockwave through the night as the invisible blade slammed into the vampire's body with enough force to not only pulverize the surrounding rooftop into dust but also nearly split the entire building in half. While she would normally not consider using her full power against undead freaks of nature roughly as strong as most of the club captains back at Honnouji Academy, maybe even stronger, after seeing what happened to the people Millennium murdered Ryuko just didn't have it in her heart to give a shit. Turning around even before the dust kicked up by her attack settled, a burst of steam shooting out of Senketsu's vents, Ryuko's heels clicked ominously against the roof as she stared at the last of the dozen soldiers that had the smart idea to ambush her after she saved nearly one hundred people from their clutches.

"What's the matter, jackass?"

Ryuko's sarcastic question was punctuated by the metallic sound of the Scissor Blade cutting through the air, her uniquely shaped blue eyes narrowing when she heard a wet squelching sound. Glaring daggers at the increasing unnerved vampire while forcibly ignoring the urge to look over her shoulder, the fact there were two impacts not lost to her, Ryuko pointed the Scissor Blade at the soldier and scoffed, "You and your undead pals were so confident when you fucking ambushed me! Not so high and mighty when fighting someone that can kick your ass, are you?"

The vampire muttered a string of choice German curses under his breath when Ryuko took a single step forward, his crimson eyes shifting across the rooftop at his most likely dead fellow soldiers. His entire body tensing as he pulled a Seele Schneider from his belt before vanishing in a bastardized version of Hirenkyaku, the blue spiritual blade pulsing with energy when he reappeared standing behind the teenager, the vampirized soldier involuntarily gasped when he saw the Scissor blade somehow already interposed in front of Ryuko's neck. As the spiritual particles composing the Seele Schneider continued to grind harmlessly against the crimson blade he failed to notice the sly smirk slowly stretching across the

teenager's face. Smashing her elbow into the vampire's exposed stomach with an audible crunch, most of his ribs breaking on impact, Ryuko spat on the ground as he flew across the roof and crashed into the building across the street.

"These bastards are really starting to piss me off," Ryuko propped the Scissor Blade on her shoulder, wisps of red-tinted energy courtesy of Senketsu Senkou clinging to the weapon, and glanced around the burning landscape, "But at least their fancy weapons are completely useless!"

Senketsu gave the Kamui equivalent of a frown as something prickled at the corner of his mind, his transfigured armor rippling minutely around Ryuko's body while he tried to understand the strange feeling coursing through his threads. It was only after realizing how quiet it was, as well as the lack of a certain voice, that it hit him. His multicolored eye widening as he quickly looked around the vicinity, the strange action not lost to his wearer, Senketsu hummed thoughtfully before turning his attention to Ryuko, **"Where's Ichigo?"**

"Huh?"

Quirking an eyebrow at the strange question, which earned her an annoyed growl in response, Ryuko rolled her eyes before irritably pointing a finger over her shoulder towards the spot where she knew Ichigo was standing. When she didn't hear anything, not even one of Mugetsu's irritated comments, she turned around and emitted a strangled gasp upon noticing that she was completely and utterly alone. The Scissor Blade scrapping against the roof as she sagged her shoulders, the red highlights permeating her hair dimming slightly alongside her emotions, Ryuko smacked her forehead and grumbled, "God damn it..."

**" Calm down, Ryuko,"** Senketsu cut his wearer off when he suddenly detected a rapid increase in energy, the sensation washing off his stitching quite familiar to the Kamui. Pointing in the general direction as best he could, which involved shifting his pauldrons

around, he looked at Ryuko and announced, ***"I can definitely sense Mugetsu. She is most certainly that way."***

For nearly twenty seconds Ryuko's hopeful blue eyes scanned the horizon for any sign of her friend, Senketsu doing his best in assisting her efforts by helpfully trying to narrow down the exact location of his fellow Kamui. When she couldn't see anything besides the conflagration engulfing London, the burning flames a constant reminder of the thousands of people already dead or worse, she scoffed skeptically and asked, "Are you sure about that?"

Almost as if fate were simply waiting for the proper moment an explosion of blue light suddenly overwhelmed the darkness of the night. While her twin toned hair tingled at the energy washing over the city, her Life Fibers instantly recognizing the source of the attack, Senketsu quietly readjusted his pauldrons back into proper place and bluntly replied, ***"Yes."***

Ryuko's eye twitched at the smugness in Senketsu's tone before she shook her head and grumbled. There were far more important matters to deal with at the moment - like working together with Ichigo to kick Quincy ass. Holding the Scissor Blade horizontally in front of her chest, the red and black lines covering the weapon glowing with the same level of brightness as her hair, Ryuko bent her knees to shift into Senketsu Shippu only to pause when a massive gust of wind tore across the city. Her hair whipping chaotically around her head as the massive checkerboard-patterned airship slowly descended out of the smoky skies, blue eyes reflexively squinting when one of the brilliant searchlights passed across the partially destroyed rooftop, Ryuko couldn't help but smirk at her phenomenally good luck.

"Well, would you look at that, Senketsu?"

A wide grin stretched across her face as she stared at the illuminated gondola attached to the underside of the airship, the strange sensation pulling at the edge of her mind cementing what she already knew. The Scissor Blade pulsing with power as she

imagined how many Quincy were aboard the zeppelin, wisps of red energy evaporating into the night, Ryuko chuckled smugly and added, "It looks like Millennium is just begging us to come up there and kick their ass!"

As much as he wished to share Ryuko's enthusiasm in putting an end to Millennium's plans, a small jet of steam blasting out of his armor, Senketsu growled apprehensively when a strange shiver rippled through his Life Fibers, ***"I have a bad feeling in my stitching about this."***

Ryuko pursed her lips when Senketsu's suspicion bled across the connection, their synchronization allowing her to fully understand the Kamui's distrust of the situation. Walking towards the edge of the shattered rooftop with the Scissor Blade resting on her shoulder, one foot accidentally kicking a vampire's corpse, she watched the zeppelin floating over a particular neighborhood before asking, "Hey, you think something's going on over there?"

" ***Maybe,***" Senketsu gave his best imitation of a frown while staring at the airship, ***"But be careful, Ryuko. We can't just go rushing into fights anymore. This isn't anything like Honnouji Academy."***

Flashes of her fight against Alucard, the ancient vampire easily shrugging off her best attacks with contemptuous ease before overpowering her, passed through Ryuko's mind before she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Giving her Kamui a confident smirk before leaping into the air with enough force to shatter whatever remained of the rooftop, twin trails of dust clinging to her heels while red energy trailed behind the Scissor Blade, Ryuko's expression tensed when she heard the nightmarish cacophony of groans coming from the hundreds of ghouls shambling in the streets below. Her face twisting into a scowl as she forced herself to not look at the innocent people caught up in Millennium's insanity, Senketsu doing his best to comfort her, Ryuko nodded at her Kamui but didn't utter a single word until she nearly reached the zeppelin's location.



"You hear that, Senketsu?"

Ryuko's voice was little more than a whisper as she skidded to a stop, her heels digging into the concrete with ease. Ducking behind a ventilation duct, the aluminum outcropping helping to conceal her presence in shadow, she carefully peered out from behind her cover and nearly gasped at who she heard talking, "Hey, is that..."

"Walter..." Integra Hellsing's tone was resigned, a mixture of apprehension and foreboding permeating her voice. One gloved hand tightly clenching the open door of her car, several strands of platinum blonde hair falling over her face, the leader of the Hellsing Organization was ignorant of Ryuko's presence as she gave her butler and half-hearted glare, "Live through this. Consider that a direct order. Understand?"

The sound of leather crinkling filled the air as Walter C. Dornez adjusted his fingerless gloves, the burning flames reflecting menacingly off his monocle, "If you insist, Ma'am."

His hands clasped firmly against the small of his back as Integra quickly restarted the car, rubber squealing against pavement when the wheels momentarily failed to find purchase, a bead of sweat dripped down Walter's face at the man slowly stalking away from the pile of burning corpses blocking the far end of the street. As the shadows surrounding the grey haired Sternritter seemed to contort and writhe, most of the grey haired man's face hidden between the high white collar and the officer's cap emblazoned with the Quincy Zeichen, the aged butler didn't hesitate before springing into action. One foot sliding outwards across the road as he swung his left arm around, dozens of reflective carbon nanotube wires emerging from his sleeves, Walter's hopes of defeating the Quincy in a single strike were dashed when the Captain simply leaned to the side and caught all his wires with a single hand.

"Just my luck, it had to be you," Walter grumbled warily as his grey eyes took notice of the miniscule amount of blood dripping from the

Sternritter's fingers, "This must be the blut vene I've heard so much about."

Squinting when the Deus Ex Machina's searchlights focused exclusively on him, the bright lights nearly blinding him, Walter scowled when the Major's familiar smug voice echoed throughout the area, "That is indeed correct. It's heartening to know that even after nearly sixty years you still manage to find new and exciting ways to interrupt me during my dinner. Speaking of interruptions... it seems we have quite the unexpected guest."

Walter perked up when two of the airship's searchlights shifted positions until they were focused on a nearby rooftop. Craning his head upward alongside the Captain when the lights illuminated a single figure, her body clad in familiar revealing but powerful armor, the former vampire hunter's eyes widened in surprise, "Miss Matoi?"

The aged butler's confused question would go unanswered as Ryuko glared daggers at the silver haired man standing in the street, her annoyance and anger growing when the Quincy tilted his head slightly to the side and stared right back with a passive expression. Scowling at the emblem stitched onto the man's hat and coat, her fingers tightly clenching the Scissor Blade as she realized he was a Sternritter, Ryuko spat on the ground as a burst of steam shot out of Senketsu. She should have known something was off about the cameraman from the embargo vote the moment he handed her a folder containing information about Xcution. If Ragyo Kiryuin hadn't attacked a few moments later, requiring her to not only tear through an Anti-Life Fiber barrier but also carry a bomb out of Parliament, she would have hunted the bastard down.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies, Ryuko Matoi."

The Major's lips twisted into a caricature of a smile as he watched Ryuko through the dozens of monitor lining the command center, the scathing glare adorning her face nearly enough to give the experienced Quincy goose bumps. Leaning back comfortably in his chair, the remains of the well-prepared dinner long forgotten, the

blond haired man couldn't help but chuckle at the major wrench in the Schatten Ausrufung that was Ragyo Kiryuin's second daughter. It was as the old saying went - no battle plan survives contact with the enemy. Knowing that one of the two Life Fiber Hybrids currently positioned in London was standing in front of him, her every muscle promising to cut off his head, caused the Major to excitedly clap his hands together, "I had hoped the information we so painstakingly gathered could have been used against Xcution. But it seems fate has conspired against us. Speaking of which... I'm sorry to say, my dear child, that you aren't supposed to be here just yet."

"Shut the hell up already!"

Ryuko didn't know what pissed her off more, the Major's condescending voice or his stupid laughter, but both of them made her want to beat the crap out of him. Clenching the Scissor Blade in both hands while the ruby undertone in her feathery hair intensified, Senketsu's multicolored eye widening at the unspoken command, Ryuko's face twisted into a determined scowl as the hardened Life Fiber weapon transformed accompanied by a metallic echo. She knew better than anyone else how dangerous it was to use Decapitation Mode while wearing Senketsu Senkou. Sparring against Ichigo's childish dad in Karakura Town, and getting her ass handed to her, had beaten that fact into her skull.

Pointing her greatsword at the zeppelin, her sour disposition worsening when she heard the Major's amused chuckling, Ryuko spat on the ground and shouted, "Keep laughing, because I'm going to come up there and beat the shit out of you!"

"How very rude. Didn't your mother ever teach you proper manners?" The Major continued smirking when Ryuko's snarled at his casual mentioning of her mother, which seemed to still be quite the sore point for the teenager. Gazing at the connected monitors lining the inner wall of the command center, his yellow eyes gleaming at the image of Ryuko, he crossed his legs while pleasantly adding, "But putting aside such matters for the moment, are you familiar with the proverbial butterfly? With but a simple flap of its

wings, order is thrown into complete chaos! What was once a foregone conclusion becomes nothing more than motes of dust in the vanishing wind! That is what you are, my dear child!"

"What the hell are you talking -"

Ryuko was cut off when the Captain appeared in front of her using Hirenkyaku, his speed and proficiency with the technique enough to put the four Sternritter that helped at Honnouji Academy to shame. Raising the Scissor Blade as the Sternritter's leg arced through the air, an armored forearm braced against the side of the greatsword for support, she was caught completely by surprise when the physical force behind the blow actually sent her tumbling backwards along the rooftop. A series of rather choice curses leaving her mouth as she stabbed the Scissor Blade into the concrete for support, which managed to bring her body stop a couple of feet from the edge of the roof, Ryuko spat to the side before glaring daggers at the silent man.

"That was a lucky shot," she reluctantly growled before raising the Scissor Blade over her shoulder, the jagged lines covering the weapon glowing with an eerie crimson light. Flexing her fingers while carefully synchronizing with the Life Fibers composing the weapon, Senketsu's words of encouragement bringing a smug grin to her face, Ryuko's blue eyes were firmly locked on the Captain as she exclaimed, "But let's see how you handle this! Ichiban Genkai!"

An explosion of pressurized wind tore across the rooftop as Ryuko swung the Scissor Blade horizontally in front of her body. His shadowed crimson eyes stoically following Ryuko's weapon as the invisible blade curved through the air, the amount of energy even in the weakened Ichiban Genkai pulverizing the concrete between them, the Captain waited until the last second before bending his knees and leaping over the attack with inches to spare. Quietly landing back on the rooftop with his white overcoat billowing behind his body, the Captain didn't utter a single word to the shocked Ryuko as the buildings across the street slowly began falling apart.

Calmly unbuttoning his collar while dozens of tons of concrete and metal crashed loudly into the street, exposing the rest of his nearly emotionless face, the Captain continued to remain mute as he shifted his body into a fighting stance. It was only when Ryuko growled angrily and raised the Scissor Blade to fire off another Ichiban Genkai that he tilted his head to the side and sprinted across the rooftop. Pivoting counterclockwise around his right foot when Ryuko managed to react faster than expected, his crimson eyes carefully tracking the hardened Life Fiber weapon as it passed precariously close to his body, the Captain hardly emitted a grunt before rearing his right arm back and smashing his palm against the teenager's exposed stomach.

"Gah!"

A strangled gasp, more from surprise than actual pain, tore its way out of Ryuko's throat as the Captain hit her hard enough to not only create a localized sonic blast but send her soaring a quarter of the way across London. Calmly standing back up to his full height while watching the trail of destruction created by Ryuko's impromptu landing, one hand holding onto his officer's cap when a gust of wind threatened to knock it off, the Sternritzer stared up at the zeppelin and the Major before vanishing in a burst of Hirenkyaku.

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"You saw through my illusions, eh?"

Zorin Blitz scoffed angrily when the last of her illusionary body faded away into nothingness, destroyed by that vampire bitch's infuriating interference. She knew weaving an illusion against such a foul creature wouldn't be easy, especially from more than a kilometer away. Her attempts to peer into Seras Victoria's soul and dredge up the most painful memories she could find, shattering her mind and leaving her a vegetable, had been easily rebuffed. The vampire's twisted spiritual energy was nearly equal to her own, which meant

her illusions wouldn't work unless she was standing right next to the bitch. But as long as the Daten was accurate, and the bitch had yet to drink the blood of a human, she still had a shot of killing her.

Growling under her breath, the small cut oozing blood down her tattooed cheek ignored for the moment, Zorin smirked sadistically when the Hellsing Manor's second floor erupted in gunfire. In the brief moment of time it took the mercenaries to recover from the illusion, their minds nearly broken by the power of her epitaph, several vampires leapt through the windows and proceeded to slaughter as many defenders as possible until the vampire bitch killed them. It was too bad that she never expected the undead soldiers to actually succeed in their mission. They were merely a diversion to keep the bitch occupied.

"That was quite clever of you, not that it matters," she continued, irritated at how easily her blut had been torn, "But you'll still die screaming!"

It didn't take long for the Wild Geese to resume firing, but by then it was already too late. Leapfrogging across the deadly minefield that was the Hellsing Manor's front yard by using Seele Schneiders as footholds, the spiritual energy within the blades short-circuiting any nearby claymores, the vampires at the front of the charge avoided the hailstorm of bullets before taking aim at the front doors and destroying them with a few well-placed rockets. As the resulting explosions tore through the fiery night Zorin Blitz chuckled before taking a single step forward and vanishing using Hirenkyaku. Easily catching up with the undead soldiers after only a few seconds, the expression on her face quickly shifted when a veritable deluge of bayonets burst forth from the destroyed entrance.

"What the hell is going on?"

Spiritual energy coalesced into invisible platforms beneath the Sternritter's feet as she stomped to a halt in midair. Her heterochromatic green eyes widening from a mixture of surprise and disbelief when the barrage of bayonets managed to skewer almost a

dozen vampires, the undead creatures too close to dodge out of the way, Zorin cursed before spitting on the ground. Nothing in the Daten said anything about the Hellsing Organization having someone able to overwhelm the supernatural reflexes of vampires using bayonets, which meant she was dealing with a potentially dangerous adversary.

*" Verdammt! I forgot about the bitch!"*

Berating herself for forgetting about the vampire bitch, Zorin quickly placed her scythe in front of her body moments before Seras fired the Harkonnen. An irritated grimace twisting across her face as the depleted uranium rounds slammed into the bladed weapon, muscular arms quivering under the strain while discharges of spiritual energy sparked in the night, the Sternritter couldn't believe her stupidity. Getting distracted in battle was expected from someone like Candice or Liltotto, not one of the Sternritter recruited by His Majesty prior to his initial campaign against the Soul Society. It was infuriating that the only reason the mercenaries were still alive was because of the bitch taking potshots at her head.

Seras Victoria's presence meant it was virtually impossible for the Jahrtausendarmee to bypass this stupid tactical nonsense and simply travel through the shadows into the manor. Even if she was but a weak and pathetic mockery of Alucard, the undead bitch would still instinctively sense the technique. The vampirized soldiers would be slaughtered down to the last man before they even knew what hit them. But as she strafed across the front yard using Hirenkyaku, avoiding the rounds from the Harkonnen trailing just behind her body, Zorin realized the biggest threat was the person throwing those stupid bayonets. The entire operation was in jeopardy of falling apart unless she took them down.

"I've had enough of this shit..."

Wisps of spiritual energy clung to Zorin's fingers as her scythe began glowing with a fierce sapphire light, a sound reminiscent of a chainsaw echoing in the chilly autumn night. Tensing her knees

before vaulting straight into the air moments before the Harkonnen tore through the surrounding landscape, the Sternritter's body was silhouetted against the full moon as she twisted her upper body and sneered, "Let's see you deal with this! Täuschung -"

A single bayonet shot out of the manor before she could finish charging her attack. Scowling in mild annoyance at the interruption, her head leaning to the side and easily avoiding the blade, Zorin barely noticed the thin metal wire connected to the bayonet. Quickly raising her left arm in front of her face when the cluster of pincushion grenades tied to the other end of the wire exploded several feet from her body, the Hellsing Manor was temporarily illuminated in a cacophony of colors as the Sternritter was hit with enough Anti-Life Fiber munitions to damage a Three-Star Goku Uniform.

Breathing heavily as she slammed into the ground, light burns covering part of her left arm from the explosion, Zorin cursed profusely when she heard heavy footsteps coming from the manor, "That does it! I'm through playing the fuck around with you!"

Tightly clasping a new pair of bayonets hands as he stalked forth, Alexander Anderson paid no heed to the impaled corpses lining the front yard of the manor. Boots stomping to a halt in the middle of the driveway, his glasses gleaming opaquely in the moonlight, the former priest scoffed at the barely injured Sternritter, "Did ye think I would fall for yer pitiful illusions? I have stared down the beast in the guise of the woman, fought against her followers intent on sacrificing humanity to Life Fibers. Compared to such beasts ye are nothing, Quincy."

"You!" Zorin spat on the ground, the hatred for her previous humiliation momentarily forgotten, "Why is Nudist Beach still in London?"

"I'm here to clean up England's mess," Anderson answered, nodding offhandedly towards the manor behind him, before crossing his arms across his body and growling, "By the time dawn breaks yer body is going to be rotting in the ground."



The Sternritter narrowed her eyes at the nudist's comment. Even if he possessed enough spiritual energy to function within her more dispersed illusions, it would be simple dealing with Alexander Anderson now that the bastard wasn't hiding in the shadows. The only issue would be killing him without the undead bitch blowing her fucking head off, which made the surrounding silence all the more unnerving. As she scanned the shattered windows of the manor for any sign of the mercenaries, her vampirized troops quickly surrounding the former priest with their fangs glistening in the dark, Zorin chuckled mockingly and asked, "Is that right? Well, let's see how you feel after I torture you, cutting you apart one limb at a time."

"That's quite the threat coming from an unholy creature like yerself," Anderson gutturally replied, his shoulders tensing when he noticed a speckle of light in the sky, "But ye made one mistake, Quincy. Ye assumed I came here alone."

Looking upwards as a faint whistling noise steadily growing louder, the Sternritter barely had enough time to curse and leap away before a massive object crashed into the Hellsing Manor's front lawn. As she flew backwards through the air, bolstered not only by her speed but also the shockwave slamming chunks of dirt and rocks against her body, Zorin gritted her teeth while her mind tried to fathom what the hell just happened. There was no way that was an airstrike or a bomb - not even the Hellsing Organization was insane enough to try something like that so close to their own headquarters. And she couldn't detect a trace of nausea-inducing spiritual energy, which meant this wasn't Ichigo Kurosaki or Ryuko Matoi.

As the cloud of dust dispersed and allowed her to see what had nearly crushed her, Zorin Blitz's mismatched eyes widened in shock, "What the scheiße?!"

Standing ominously on the lawn in front of the Hellsing Manor was a massive dark grey bipedal tank, metallic servos whining as its nearly forty-foot frame loomed menacingly over both the stunned invaders and surprised mercenaries. As multitudes of interlocking armor panels experimentally opened and shifted, the digital lights

composing the machine's face blinking into existence, the Sternritter noticed the kanji for Nudist Beach painted on both of its multi-jointed legs and growled out of sheer frustration.

A tank. A fucking bipedal tank almost certainly armed to the teeth. And as the undead soldiers retreated away from the manor, their gunfire covering the machine in hundreds of dancing sparks, she had the sinking feeling it was heavily armored as well. How the bloody hell had Nudist Beach hidden something like this from His Majesty? That was when it hit Zorin. This had been Anderson's goal all along - delay her offensive long enough for this machine to arrive. Snarling angrily at being played so easily, fingers tightly gripping her scythe, the Sternritter prepared to deal with this minor obstacle only to freeze when bursts of purple light sparkled into existence from three very specific places on the tank.

"It seems I arrived not a moment too late!"

Completely naked apart from a pair of gloves, boots and a well-placed belt, Aikuro Mikisugi smirked from within the tank's heavily armored cockpit while the mysterious purple light shining from his nipples and crotch continued intensifying. Tightening his grip on the curved controls before twisting them in opposite directions, the machine instantly reacting by leaning forward and splaying its arms outwards, the bright purple light became overwhelming as he flamboyantly continued, "Introducing the fabulous Nudist Beach Commander Aikuro Mikisugi and his DTR Model Ray!"

There was an awkward silence as both the Jahrtausendarmee and Wild Geese stared in confusion at the posing DTR. More than one person, mercenary and vampire alike, had their mouths agape when their minds proved temporarily unable to correlate the menacing and highly dangerous bipedal tank with its extremely enthusiastic and bombastic pilot. Although the vampirized soldiers quickly recovered their senses and retreated from the bipedal tank, the mercenaries hiding inside the heavily fortified Hellsing Manor wondered if they had somehow been caught in another illusion.

Standing next to a shattered window with a single teal eye staring out from under his slouch hat, Pip Bernadotte propped the AK-47 against his shoulder and chuckled, "Gentlemen, I take back my doubts about Monsieur Anderson. This truly is one hell of a man."

"It looks like the bastards are falling back, Captain," one mercenary commented, a pair of military binoculars held against his face as he zoomed on the Sternritter in the distance. He didn't need supernatural senses to see the pissed off look on the Quincy's face. When his comrades began cheering, victory all but assured in his minds, he turned to Pip and added, "I gotta say, when Nudist Beach promises reinforcements they fucking deliver. That DTR looks like something out of a movie. I bet it has enough firepower to take down Ragyo Kiryuin."

Another member of the Wild Geese rubbed the back of his neck, "Shit, how screwed up is Japan if they have something like this?"

"Don't break out the wine just yet. This battle is far from over," Pip cautioned faint wisps of smoke rising from the cigarette newly placed between his lips. Five of his comrades were already dead, slaughtered when the vampirized soldiers briefly penetrated the manor's defenses. And while he was appreciative of Nudist Beach's assistance, which likely stopped Millennium from breaching the perimeter and killing more of his men, they were the ones hired and paid by the Hellsing Organization to guard the manor. Letting another group clean up their mess left a bad taste in his mouth.

"Alright people, that's enough sitting around!" Pip declared while tossing the cigarette on the floor before crushing it underneath his boot, "That tank might have scared them away but those vampire bastards will be back soon enough. So let's make sure Millennium's next visit to the lovely Hellsing Manor will be something they remember all the way to Hell."

As the Wild Geese nodded at their captain before moving into action, several members shouting orders while others quickly carried crates of spare ammunition and explosives out from storage, Pip pressed a

finger to his ear and gave the DTR another glance, "So ma chere, what do you think of our nudist reinforcements?"

Standing on the fourth floor of the manor with spent shell casings littering the ground around her feet, Seras Victoria ignored the nickname as her crimson eyes narrowed. Even though the DTR Model Ray was blocking her line of sight she could still sense Zorin Blitz out in the yard, the Quincy's presence nearly impossible to miss. Grimacing as she stepped away from the window while her eyes returned to their normal sapphire color, the Harkonnen Mark II held vertically towards the ceiling, Seras gazed at the enormous bipedal tank before answering, "It's amazing. I've never seen anything like it in my entire life."

Pip briefly smirked at the response before his expression hardened, "That tank might make mincemeat of the soldiers but that Sternritter and her illusions will require a little more effort. Do you remember that interesting form the Quincy in Brazil took when he fought Alucard?"

"Yes," Seras frowned as she recalled the fight between Tubalcain Alhambra and her master before gasping in realization, "Wait, are you saying..."

The mercenary looked outside when Aikuro's loud and bombastic voice blared through the DTR's intercoms, his single eyebrow rising in curiosity when the nudist's tone quickly shifted towards frustration. As the seconds passed it became obvious not only to him but also the rest of the Wild Geese, most of whom momentarily stopped what they were doing, that Anderson must have said something about the DTR to piss off his fellow commander. This really was one hell of a man. Shaking his head before turning his attention toward the front yard, his teal eye narrowing when he noticed the vampires regrouping, Pip adjusted his slouch hat and slyly smirked, "Do not fret, ma chere, for this technique has a weakness. That other Quincy had to remove a rather special black glove to activate it. Can you see anything on that bitch out there?"

Running past several windows with the Harkonnen Mark II held deftly in her hands as she moved towards a more advantageous position, hopefully one that would allow her to shoot the Sternritter, Seras focused on the darkened form of Zorin Blitz before stating, "She's wearing a glove on her left hand."

"These Quincy are making it far too easy," Pip replied with a subtle grin, one hand carefully jamming a fresh clip into his assault rifle, "Now get into position. The first chance you get I want you to blow that smug bitch's hand clean off her body."

Back down in front of the manor Alexander Anderson coughed while calmly brushing clumps of dirt off his cassock. Grumbling in mild irritation as he was forced to walk around one of the DTR's armored legs, heavy boots softly sinking into the freshly overturned soil, the former priest had to begrudgingly give Olivier credit where it was due - the Model Ray was a spectacular work of art.

Sneering as he stomped to a halt directly in front of the DTR, bayonets shimmering into existence with a quick flick of his wrists, Anderson cocked his head upwards and scoffed, "Yer two minutes late, Aikuro."

The blinding purple light shining from the DTR brightened when Aikuro's voice blared across the tank's intercoms at a volume far louder than was necessary, "Getting the Model Ray through customs wasn't exactly easy. And it's quite annoying dodging COVERS while the General's constantly yelling in your EAR."

Anderson blatantly ignored his fellow commander's abrupt change in volume when he noticed movement further out in the field. Apparently the vampires had gotten over Aikuro's dramatic entry and were preparing to regroup. They were probably thirsting for his blood, enraged at being utterly humiliated by a simple human, but he had better things to do than slaughter the lot of them. Spitting to the side when shifting his attention towards the Sternritter patiently waiting in the darkness, the former priest tightly gripped the tailor

bayonets before slowly stalking away from the DTR, "Use yer Dotonbori Robo to clean up this undead filth. I'll handle the Quincy."

Four circular turrets erupted from the DTR's legs and shoulders, each containing computer-assisted dual sewing machine guns, as the massive bipedal tank comically leaned forward until what functioned as its head was only several feet from the former priest and Aikuro's irritated voice passionately shouted, "DEEEE TEEEE AAAARRRR!"

"Like I said, use yer Dotonbori Robo to take care of these pathetic excuses for vampires," Anderson stoically repeated without bothering to turn around, a slight hint of annoyance in his tone, "This isn't the time or place for yer stupidity, Aikuro. Now, is the Model Ray fully operational?"

Inside the DTR's cockpit with one of his eyebrows sporadically twitching, Aikuro angrily stewed about his fellow nudist's continued usage of such a disrespectful name. He would be the first to admit that his initial designs for a manned Anti-Life Fiber bipedal tank might have been a little too... risqué for most people to appreciate. But that was completely beside the point! Physical appearances shouldn't matter in the grand scheme of things when the DTR's only purpose was fighting against Ragyo Kiryuin and Revocs. What was a little nudity in front of your enemies if it meant Life Fibers wouldn't devour humanity?

As he prepared to remind Anderson once more of the DTR's proper name Aikuro paused and narrowed his eyes when the cockpit shifted to an alarming red. When he looked at the three-dimensional radar displayed in front of him and saw dozens of undead rapidly moving towards the manor, most likely armed with supernatural weapons and powers, Aikuro couldn't help but grin. Judging from both their speed and the patented Kamui Equivalency Software installed within the DTR's IFF system the soldiers were roughly around a Two-Star Goku Uniforms in terms of strength, which meant the Model Ray wouldn't even break a sweat dealing with them.

"The coffee machine still doesn't work and the seat isn't the most comfortable... and don't even get me started on that awful name painted below the cockpit..."

Twisting the controls in opposite directions before pushing them forward, the purple light shining from his bare nipples intensifying with each passing second, Aikuro quickly shifted the Model Ray into combat mode. As the various weapons systems registered in the green, the sewing machine gun turrets rotating before independently locking onto individual targets, the DTR crouched down as the nudist bombastically declared, "But don't worry about me, Anderson. Dealing with a few vampires will be easy compared to teaching at Miss Satsuki's school!"

The DTR gave a loud metallic whine before *jumping* straight into the air, drawing the terrified and undivided attention of the vampires sprinting through the front yard. Landing nearly three hundred feet away with a resounding crash, the impact large enough to set off the remaining claymores buried in the ground, the Model Ray ignored the hailstorm of bullets and rockets bouncing harmlessly off its reinforced carapace before quickly returning fire. Panicked shouts echoed through the night as the undead soldiers attempted to avoid the concentrated bursts of needles, the abnormal ammunition easily skewering through the undead too slow to react in time.

"Well, it seems things are going better than expected," Aikuro quipped when he picked up gunfire originating from the Hellsing Manor. Apparently the Wild Geese weren't too happy on letting Nudist Beach have all the fun, which was perfectly fine with the nudist commander.

Aikuro was brought out of his thoughts when the DTR's proximity sensors detected something rapidly falling through the air in his general direction. Tightly gripping the controls before pulling backwards and twisting them counterclockwise, the Model Ray leaping back towards the Hellsing Manor while its four sewing machine gun turrets continued firing on the vampirized soldiers, the nudist commander felt a bead of sweat trickle down his face when

Zorin's scythe came precariously close to vertically bisecting the tank. As the DTR slammed into the ground before skidding to a stop, metallic servos and custom shock absorbers helping to reduce the impact, Aikuro blinked and leaned forward when the augmented interface brought up a damage report.

"Damn... so much for the vaulted Anti-Life Fibers armor. The General is going to have my head for this," Aikuro rubbed the back of his neck as he examined the holographic image of the DTR Model Ray, the large gash visible on the tank's right leg concerning but not problematic. Scratching his chin when he noticed Zorin smirking sadistically, wisps of blue spiritual energy rising from her glowing scythe, Aikuro hummed thoughtfully before the corners of his mouth curled into a grin.

"Now... there's no reason to be greedy, Miss Quincy," he announced flamboyantly over the intercom as the DTR stomped its legs into the ground for support. Raising the Model Ray's left arm into the air, the interlocking panels covering the extremity sliding open and revealing previously hidden missile launchers, Aikuro took a moment to memorize the stunned look on Zorin's face before smashing his gloved hand against a button and shouting, "Because I brought enough for the whole class!"

As soon as Aikuro pressed the button a salvo of High Explosive Anti-Life Fiber rockets burst forth from the Model Ray's spread left arm, the DTR barely staggering from the kickback. With each projectile measuring nearly four feet in length and containing an experimental starch and fabric softener warhead wrapped around a standard shaped charge, there was very little the Jahrtausendarmee could do against the missiles racing through the air at just below the speed of sound. Slamming into the ground in front of the soldiers with enough force to crumple the outer casings, there was a millisecond delay before the missiles exploded in a cacophony of fire and destruction.

Even before the nudist commander began raining death upon the vampirized soldiers Alexander Anderson was already on the move. Rapidly sprinting across the front yard towards the only target that



truly mattered, he kept his green eyes firmly locked on the DTR Model Ray when it crouched and leapt backwards to avoid the Sternritter's surprise attack. Ignoring the impact tremor originating from the bipedal tank to focus on Aikuro's voice blaring through the intercoms, his lips pulled into a snarl in anticipation of what was coming, Anderson mentally counted down from four before leaning backwards and sliding along the ground.

Anderson's head had barely touched the ground before the swarm of Anti-Life Fiber rockets passed overhead, the deadly projectiles passing close enough that he could almost make out the red Nudist Beach kanji stenciled on the side. Dragging a bayonet through the dirt for balance as he leapt back onto his feet, one arm held in front of his eyes to protect them from the subsequent series of explosions, he peered through the flames while ignoring the uncomfortable warmth on his skin. Boots stomping onto the charred remains of vampires as he rushed forward with his arms crossed in front of his body, the former priest leapt through the smoke-filled inferno with his tailor bayonets aimed at Zorin's throat only for the Sternritter to block the attack with her scythe.

"Nice try," Zorin laughed at the infuriated expression adorning the nudist's face when she easily stopped his surprise attack. Sparks dancing from her scythe as she leaned forward until she was inches away from Anderson, the tattoos covering the right side of her face writhing in the shadows, she grinned sadistically and added, "But I know a diversion when I fucking see one. You verdammt nudists aren't as clever as you think!"

"Ye may have a point," Anderson conceded, venom tinting his words before the corners of his lips twisted into a mocking smile, "But what makes ye think Aikuro was the diversion?"

Zorin's heterochromatic eyes barely had time to widen in surprise at the nudist's cryptic words before he smashed his foot into her stomach. Grunting slightly as she staggered back several feet, more from the force behind the blow than actual physical injury, the Sternritter growled in frustration. Her part of the Schatten Ausrufung

was supposed to be simple! Assault the Hellsing Manor and kill the vampire bitch before Alucard returned to the city. Nudist Beach and their insane tank were never supposed to be here! Scoffing when she attempted to kill the fleeing nudist only to find herself immobilized, courtesy of several bayonets pierced through her pants and into the ground, Zorin froze when she heard an increasingly familiar sound in the distance. Looking over her shoulder just as the DTR Model Ray fired a second salvo directly at her position, she angrily shouted, "You fucking son of a -"

Standing at a safe distance as the volley of missiles exploded around the Quincy, turning the surrounding area into even more of a fiery landscape, Anderson scoffed while calmly fixing the collar of his cassock. He had known from the very beginning that his normal methods of execution probably wouldn't work, rendered almost ineffective due to the unholy defense otherwise known as blut vene. But even if that was true, the nudist commander was sure it couldn't fully protect the Sternritter from the concussive force of several dozen High Explosive Anti-Life Fiber rockets going off simultaneously.

As he stared into the roaring flames with the light reflecting ominously off his glasses, Anderson cocked his head to the side when Pip Bernadotte's voice came across the radio, "That was quite the performance, Monsieur Anderson. I wish I could have seen the look on that bitch's face. It's too bad though... we didn't even get a chance to break out some of the heavier artillery thanks to that DTR hogging all the glory. Speaking of which, do you think -"

"No, ye cannot borrow the Dotonbori Robo," Anderson cut the mercenary off before he could finish asking the question, a barely perceptible frown crossing his face when he heard Aikuro loudly scream DTR in the background. Green eyes narrowing when he sensed movements within the flames, a single bayonet sliding into his free hand, the former priest growled, "Don't let yer guard down. She's not dead yet."

"Congratulations, Father Anderson."

The Sternritter's cold voice penetrated through the roaring inferno as a pulse of spiritual energy pushed back the encroaching flames. Slightly favoring her right leg as she slowly marched through the burning embers, blood trailing down her face and soaking her white uniform, Zorin pointed her glowing scythe at the former priest and sneered, "You succeeded in pissing me the fuck off!"

Pain blossomed through the nudist commander's body as Zorin closed the fifty-foot gap using Hirenkyaku and cut through his left shoulder using her scythe. Gnashing his teeth angrily while forcing the pain into the back of his mind, Anderson stomped a foot against the ground and flicked his wrists. With his breath coming out in slightly labored gasps he raised his tailor bayonets and barely managed to stop her second attack inches away from his body. As multicolored sparks jettisoned through the night from the point of contact, his arms quivering under the immense strain of holding out against the Quincy's supernatural strength, Anderson was caught off guard when she easily shattered his defenses and slammed her knee into his stomach.

"Your little toys might be useful against Life Fibers but did you think they could do anything to His Majesty?" Zorin mocked in a deranged tone, wisps of spiritual energy trailing through the air as she swung her scythe towards the recovering former priest's neck.

The corners of her lips twisting into a snarl when Anderson managed to duck beneath the deathblow and launch a futile counterattack, tearing a large gash in her already damaged uniform, Zorin grimaced before reaching forward and tightly clasping her free hand around his neck. It was becoming apparent that dealing with these nudists was more troublesome than she initially thought. She was already behind schedule in killing the vampire bitch, which the Major would undoubtedly report to His Majesty as her fault. Digging her boots into the ground for traction as she spun around and violently threw the nudist across the field, Zorin watched Anderson roll to a stop and laughed, "So what if you killed all the undead fodder. I already have

reinforcements on the way. But you'll be dead long before then, crushed like a bug under my boot!"

Blood dripped from Anderson's left hand as he pushed himself off the ground, every muscle in his body audibly screaming in protest. Glaring at the Sternritter standing several feet away, the former priest tightened his grip on the tailor bayonets and gutturally asked, "Do ye expect me to beg for my life, Quincy?"

"So you don't fear death, eh?" Zorin scoffed at the defiant expression on the injured nudist's face, the massive scythe held in her left hand glowing with spiritual energy as she raised it above her head. "Let's fix that one limb at a time, shall we? First, we'll start with your -"

The Sternritter was forcibly cut off when Seras Victoria, crouched on the Hellsing Manor's roof nearly half a kilometer away, fired a single depleted uranium round from the Harkonnen Mark II. Spiraling inches away above the DTR Model Ray as it shot through the air and slammed into Zorin's raised left hand, the supersonic projectile was momentarily stalled by her blut vene before simply tearing through the spiritual defense like wet paper. Faster than she could register the pain radiating up the nerves in her arm, two of Zorin's fingers had disintegrated in a shower of blood and visceral while a third was left hanging onto the tattered remains of her hand by only a few scraps of flesh. Involuntarily letting go of her scythe as she gripped her wrist and cursed profusely, Zorin grunted when Anderson rushed forward and drove a bayonet into her already mangled hand.

"Verdammt!"

Fury laced Zorin's pain-filled voice as she reared her head back and slammed it into Anderson's face, causing him to reflexively release the bayonet currently stabbed through what used to be her left hand. Pulling the blade out of her hand with barely a grimace before tossing it away, she glared at the nudist with as much hatred as she could muster. If it weren't for that cowardly undead bitch constantly taking potshots from within the relative safety of the manor she

would have already killed the former priest and dealt with the DTR Model Ray piloted by that stupid nudist.

Mismatched green eyes widened when realization dawned on the Quincy - the bipedal tank wouldn't attack as long as she remained relatively close to the nudist commander. The corners of her mouth curling into a sadistic grin as an aura of purple-blue spiritual energy surrounded her body, Zorin's left arm swung limply at her side as she vehemently exclaimed, "I've grown sick and tired of your stupid games, nudist! Täuschung Kaskade!"

The purple eye in the middle of the Sternritter's right palm opened with a wet squelch as she leaned forward and slammed her open hand against the ground. Almost immediately the entire field dissolved into an encompassing darkness, the tattoos and symbols on her skin writhing as they oozed off her body and surged relentlessly towards the former priest. Fingers curling into the dirt as the Quincy Zeichen etched into her forehead shone with a familiar purple light, Zorin's taunting voice echoed throughout Anderson's head, "Now let's take a look at what's buried in your twisted little mind. Try not to scream too much..."

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*"... greatly appreciated the hospitality, Father Anderson, but our orders come directly from Bishop Renaldo - you are to return with us to the Vatican."*

*Anderson didn't show any reaction when the young paladin mentioned his orders for the fifth time since he arrived. It was abundantly obvious to the older priest that the young man, whose complexion suggested he was barely out of puberty, had yet to be in the field. The way he held himself, the lack of seriousness both in his stance as well as tone and the annoying smug grin plastered on his face were all signs of someone that never once risked their lives in the name of God. Scowling softly as a flock of seagulls cawed out*

*from over the harbor, the breeze causing his cassock to billow around his body, Anderson adjusted his glasses and sighed, "Sending two paladins halfway across the world just to deliver a simple message?"*

*The other paladin, his face obscured by the afternoon shadows, took the comment as a sign to hand the older priest an envelope emblazoned with the papal seal. Stepping back as Anderson read the confidential missive, his green eyes fervently scanning the contents, he turned to his compatriot before speaking, "A Vatican jet is currently idling at Osaka International Airport. It's set to depart in two hours."*

*"I suppose I shouldn't keep Renaldo waiting," Anderson muttered while tucking the letter inside his cassock, "Very well, shall we -"*

*"Father Anderson?"*

*Standing in the shadowed open doorway of the orphanage with his violet eyes narrowed slightly, the sixteen years old Enrico Maxwell gave the two paladins a brief but respectful nod before shifting his attention back to Anderson. A barely noticeable twitch in his left eye upon receiving a condescending look from one of the paladins in return, the teenager absentmindedly played with the cuff of his sleeve as he walked into the afternoon sunlight and added, "Yumiko has nearly finished preparing supper. Will you be joining us?"*

*Anderson momentarily frowned at the barely noticeable frustration in Maxwell's voice. It was incredibly obvious the lad had overheard every single word of the conversation, most likely from just inside the door. His shoulders relaxing as he turned away from the two paladins, the former paladin gave the teenager a disarming smile, "Unfortunately I won't be able to join ye tonight, Maxwell. I need to return to the Vatican for some rather important business. It shouldn't take more than a few days but I'm putting ye in charge of keeping the younger children in line."*

*" On such short notice?" Maxwell asked in mild curiosity, one hand curling into a fist when the same paladin sneered at him.*

*" Ye don't need to worry about me." Shooting a harsh glare out of the corner of his eye at the rude paladin, the young man nearly biting his tongue as he quickly shut his mouth and stepped away, Anderson walked up to Maxwell and placed a comforting hand on the teenager's shoulder, "If ye make sure the children say their prayers every night and keep Yuu out of my office I'll put in a good word for ye with Renaldo."*

*For a brief instant excitement was visible in Maxwell's eyes before he grimaced and turned to head back inside, "Very well..."*

*" Yer not still upset, are ye?" From the way the teenager paused in the doorway, his hand tightly gripping the wooden frame, Anderson knew he had hit the nail on the head, "We've talked about this, Maxwell. I know it may not feel right but Isshin Matoi is Ryuko's father. He had every right to take her back."*

*" You're hiding something, Father Anderson," Maxwell's voice was little more than a harsh whisper as he glared at the former paladin, "Ryuko's father shouldn't have been able to take her back! What do you -"*

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Zorin Blitz's heterochromatic eyes widened when she was summarily ejected from the memory, illusionary fragments of Anderson's thoughts and recollections drifting briefly through the encompassing darkness before vanishing back into nothingness, before asking in a slightly pained voice, "What the hell is going on? How could he..."

The Sternritter stopped herself when she noticed that the nudist was still trapped within her illusions. It should have been impossible for anyone with his level of spiritual energy, human or otherwise, to

partially break free of Täuschung Kaskade. His mind should have snapped like a twig, broken from the mental backlash, yet Anderson was still standing and conscious, which meant he must have thrown off her technique using nothing more than sheer willpower. While that would normally be a problem, especially with the vampire bitch waiting like a coward to shoot her other hand off, Zorin couldn't help but smirk.

Memories were rather fickle things. One could intimately remember every single moment of a favorite day or a conversation and yet mere seconds would pass in the real world. Thanks to the power bestowed upon her by His Majesty she could conjure up a target's worst memories, force them to witness the most tragic events of their lives until they broke, all within a span of a few seconds. And from what she already learned in Anderson's mind before getting kicked out, there was a lot of mental baggage she could use to break the former priest's mind before the undead bitch could fire off another shot.

"So you think you're tough, eh?" Zorin mocked while the surrounding shadows writhed angrily, the myriad of symbols flowing from her left arm expanding through the darkness, "It's too bad... I'll just have to go a little deeper into your pathetic mind!"

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*"... uncharacteristic of you, Anderson," Bishop Renaldo gave a disapproving sigh as he walked through Saint Peter's Square, a light crackle of thunder echoing through the increasingly overcast skies, "I did not think you were one to promote nepotism."*

*Anderson chuckled at the familiar scolding tone from the older bishop, his short blond hair shifting as a bitter wind tore across the city, "I promised the lad I would put in a good word for him. Whether he qualifies, on the other hand, is something I'll leave to ye."*



*The older man frowned slightly at the response from his compatriot as droplets of rain began falling around them. It had been so long since his last conversation with Anderson that he'd forgotten about the man's propensity to disregard specific orders when it came to accomplishing missions. The unofficially retired paladin knew fully well that he was the only person with the capacity and authority to approve candidates for Iscariot, which was a lengthy and secretive process unknown but to the highest levels of the Church. Adjusting his glasses with two fingers while careful not to smudge the lenses, Renaldo coughed to clear his throat before responding, "You should be aware that I've already disciplined the paladins sent to retrieve you from Kobe. Such inappropriate behavior shall not be tolerated for agents of God."*

*"Ye should just give them a slap on the wrist," the former paladin suggested with a hint of mirth, "I was young and foolish once myself, ye know. Or do ye not remember what happened in Germany?"*

*"That's beside the point, Anderson. Their lack of manners reflects poorly on both Iscariot and the Church." There was a short pause following Renaldo's reply, the thinly veiled anger in the man's words apparent to his younger colleague, before he clasped his hands against the small of his back and continued in a more contemplative tone, "If my memory is correct your mission in Germany was a resounding success despite your exuberance. Anderson... you have killed more abominations against the Lord than any other paladin in the last century. I must implore that you reconsider your position."*

*"Reconsider, ye say? It's like ye said ten years ago - I didn't officially retire. I mere took an extended leave of absence," Anderson retorted calmly while a clap of thunder loudly tore across the heavens, "Speaking of which, the quality of yer newest paladins isn't quite up to par, Renaldo. They have potential but lack any true experience in the field, which spits in the face of Iscariot's true purpose."*

*"Things have quieted down somewhat over the last decade," the bishop admitted with a slight frown. As the scattered rain turned into a light drizzle, the previously chilled wind growing fiercer, Renaldo*

*turned to the priest and added, "But some interesting news has leaked out of England. Arthur Hellsing has fallen gravely ill..."*

*" That Protestant bastard's still alive, huh?" Anderson mulled over the news with a mixture of elation and amusement. The prolonged suffering and death of the Hellsing Organization's leader would undoubtedly throw the heathens into complete disarray. There might even be a power struggle between the heirs if they're lucky, a vicious civil war that the Church could easily exploit to once more take its rightful place in England. Staring up into the grey skies with raindrops falling onto his face, Anderson rubbed the back of his neck, "I'm tempted by yer offer, Renaldo, but I have to decline... at least for the moment. The children back at the orphanage still require my services. Heinkel and Yumiko both have the potential to become great paladins, if they would stop fighting each other. Even young Yuu, the little troublemaker, has quite the mind for a six year old child."*

*" And what of young Maxwell?"*

*" The lad is ambitious and with a good head on his shoulders," Anderson answered with a touch of respect as they ascended the steps towards the basilica, the rain now coming down in sheets around the men, "If yer not careful he might just steal yer spot as leader of Iscariot."*

*" I'm not getting any younger, Anderson," Renaldo quipped back with just a touch of amusement, the cross hanging from his neck swinging slightly, before sighing, "Perhaps I should start looking for a successor, someone to make sure the heretics in England don't get too full of themselves. Do you remember the larvatum diabolus we fought in Russia nearly fifteen years ago?"*

*Anderson's chuckling echoed throughout the mostly empty basilica, drawing the confused attention of the group of American tourists nearby, "Weren't ye punched through a wall by the creature?"*

*The leader of Iscariot murmured in disapproval at the old memory. Turning away from Anderson with his glasses shining brightly in the ambient light, Renaldo's footsteps echoed on the marble tiles as he shook his head and spoke, "Only because the young and foolish paladin accompanying me was far too headstrong to prevent his soul from nearly being devoured. It's a miracle of God that I can still walk normally after all these years."*

*For several tense seconds Anderson didn't move as he watched the older bishop slowly walk away. Being reminded of his greatest failure always left a bad taste in his mouth, especially when it was Renaldo that brought it up. He had assumed the demon was weak, easily dispatched by his blessed bayonets without much effort. Finding out that not only was the beast smarter than it looked, but also possessed regenerative capabilities, nearly cost him his very soul. Still, if there was one positive thing he learned from Russia it was that every larvatum diabolus had the same critical weakness. Destroying that caricature of a mask adorning their face was guaranteed to kill the beast, even if it wielded sacrilegious powers that spat in the face of God.*

*Scowling in mild annoyance, Anderson shook his head before following Renaldo out of the main basilica and into an adjacent corridor. Briefly nodding at the Swiss Guard members when they snapped off a respectful salute, he pursed his lips into a grimace while mulling over his next choice of words very carefully. It wouldn't be wise to rush into the ensuing conversation unprepared. Folding a hand into the pocket of his cassock as lightning flashed through the windows lining the hallway, Anderson cleared his throat and growled in a low tone, "Renaldo, there's something I think ye should know about -"*

*" The Cardinals have already informed me of your rather... descriptive phrases about the CEO of Revocs."*

*Renaldo cut off Anderson before he could finish speaking. One hand scratching his chin in thought as he came to a stop and turned towards the nearby windows, rain harshly pelting the surface while*

*thunder crackled in the distance, a flicker of annoyance crossed the bishop's face before he asked, "Why did you spread such nonsense about someone willing to create most of the Church's attire for a mere pittance of the normal cost?"*

*" I heard a few rumors," the evasive tone in the priest's nonsensical response caused Renaldo's frown to deepen. Aware of the reaction as he stood next to the bishop, Anderson silently watched the storm rage over the Vatican before explaining, "Apparently Ragyo Kiryuin is not nearly as magnanimous behind closed doors. If ye believe the more insane theories than she's a ruthless monster that can turn her most ardent opponents into zealots that praise her like a damned goddess. But it's more likely she's just a powerful woman lacking both morals and decency, which isn't good for the Church's reputation."*

*" Perhaps..." There was a momentary lapse in the conversation when Renaldo trailed off, his eyes narrowing upon hearing faint voices coming from further down the hallway. Turning back towards Anderson the bishop lowered his voices and added, "Rest assured that Iscariot is currently investigating Ragyo Kiryuin's past actions. There is something about that woman that bothers me, Anderson. An instinctual feeling in the very depths of my soul cried out when she arrived yesterday. All the standard tests suggest she's completely human but may my soul burn eternally in Hell if she's not a monster."*

*Anderson opened his mouth to reply, a question on the tip of his tongue, but stopped when a dull burst of rainbow light suddenly permeated the corridor. Calmly turning around with the barest of sneers crossing his face, the priest watched in hidden disgust as the CEO of Revocs and one of the most prominent clothing designers in the world walked towards them without a single care in the world. Adorned in a pure white business suit that greatly accentuated her figure, which helped draw attention away from the multicolored light emanating from her silver hair, Ragyo Kiryuin swept an arm through the air as she turned towards the Cardinal walking at her side.*

*" I can have tailored uniforms, cassocks and robes for roughly ten thousand people shipped and delivered in two months", the woman's heels clicked softly against the floor as she strutted past the two men, her maroon eyes momentarily shifting from the bishop to the younger priest, before motioning to the dark skinned woman next to her, "Thanks to the measurements you so helpfully handed to Hououmaru each and every article of clothing will be absolutely perfect. I assure you, my dear Cardinal, that -"*

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"What the hell was that?"

Angrily growling in annoyance when she was forcibly ejected from Anderson's mind for the second time, Zorin Blitz narrowed her mismatched eyes as she ran through everything she just witnessed. When she decided to delve deeper into the former priest's twisted subconscious, pulling strands of nightmares and terrifying memories to the surface with contemptible ease, it had been with the sole intention of completely shattering his mind. That the nudist had personally met Ragyo Kiryuin came at a complete surprise. Daten on the Life Fiber bitch was sorely lacking, which meant if she could tear the information from Anderson's mind than His Majesty would most likely forgive her mistakes in dealing with the undead bitch.

"So you're acquainted with Ragyo Kiryuin, eh?"

Zorin ignored the sensation of glass shattering as she pulled her fingers out of the darkness oozing across the ground. It was hard to comprehend but the former priest's resistance to her illusions was destabilizing the Täuschung Kaskade, which was slightly concerning. At the current rate it would take just one more failure for the mental backlash to utterly destroy the technique, granting Seras Victoria enough time to shoot another round through her momentarily stunned body.

Seething as she pointed her palm directly at the still frozen nudist, the large purple eye dilating as a tempest of spiritual energy pulsed from her body, the Sternritter laughed sadistically while the Quincy Zeichen emblazoned on her forehead burst into radiance, "Did you enjoy the trip down memory lane, Father Anderson? Because I'm going to fucking shatter your mind until you're nothing more than a drooling vegetable!"

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*" I'm impressed that you're still alive, Mr. Anderson."*

*Ragyo Kiryuin's regal smirk didn't falter in the slightest as blood stained her white business suit a deep crimson, courtesy of the blessed bayonet piercing her heart. Sighing sensually as she slowly curled her perfectly manicured fingers around the blade before removing it with a wet and nauseating squelch, the Kiryuin matriarch ignored the accompanying spray of visceral in order to focus on the man standing across the rain-soaked rooftop. Tossing the weapon away as the wound on her chest rapidly regenerated, the rainbow light disappearing as both skin and cloth knitted back together, Ragyo's maroon eyes flickered to the side when the distinctive sound of police sirens reached her ears, "It would seem the authorities responded to Hououmaru's anonymous call a little faster than expected. But then again, you ARE the man guilty of murdering dozens of innocent men of the Church."*

*" I saw what ye did to the Holy Conclave!" Anderson bit back while blood dripped from the coattails of his cassock, none of which belonged to him. Pointing his remaining bayonet at the monster of a woman, blood from his fellow paladins staining the holy blade a deep vermillion, he painfully bit his lip and exclaimed, "Those red threads woven in their minds were controlling them! Bending them to yer will like puppets! What sort of abomination against God are ye?"*

*" Oh?"*

*The rainbow light radiating from Ragyo's silver hair momentarily dimmed at the contemptuous response, a look of genuine surprise crossing her face at his answer, "I can honestly say you have piqued my interest. The ability to discern Marionette Threads already woven inside minds suggests you have quite the tolerance to Life Fibers. It's such a shame I won't be able to convince a man like you to work for me. La vie est drôle..."*

*Lightning forked through the heavens as Anderson stalked towards the amused woman, a single bayonet deftly sliding into his empty hand to replace the one previously lost, "Bite yer tongue, foul creature! Monsters like ye don't have the right to speak. So laugh... but ye will die on this rooftop for what ye have done!"*

*"What I have done?" Ragyo quirked a silver eyebrow at that threat before sighing and shaking her head, "Oh, you sound just like my former husband's organization. And honestly, they've been trying a lot harder to kill me."*

*Folding her arms underneath her bosom, the tight-fitting business suit accentuating her figure, Ragyo chuckled at the look of utter hatred adorning Anderson's face. His shoulders tensing when the sound of tires screeching to a stop came from the streets below, several familiar voices barking orders to the local police, Anderson glowered when the rainbow light from the Kiryuin matriarch's hair flared back to its normal brilliance, "Quite frankly, Mr. Anderson, I cannot understand where you are coming up with these dreadful accusations. You were the one that rushed through the Vatican spreading awful rumors about me. You were the priest that barged into my meeting with the Holy Conclave, a secure business meeting I might add. And you were the one that killed all those poor, innocent men who had the misfortune of coming across a deluded maniac who saw monsters everywhere he went."*

*Anderson didn't bother listening to anything else Ragyo had to say before rushing forward in a burst of speed. Stomping through puddles of water as he sprinted at the bemused CEO of Revocs with his blessed bayonets glistening in the rain, he was caught*

*completely off guard when she vanished into thin air moments before his blades could pierce her unholy flesh. An angrily snarl leaving his throat as he quickly skidded to a stop and looked around the rooftop for any sign of the woman, Anderson's entire body tensed when he felt Ragyo standing behind him.*

*" Don't take this personally," Ragyo whispered, her voice fading away into the storm as Anderson spun around in an attempt to behead her, "This was simply business."*

*There was barely a five second pause before the door to the stairwell was blasted open and an Iscariot paladin, both older and far more experienced than the two sent to Kobe, rushed onto the rooftop. Aiming a heavily modified pistol at the fugitive priest, the barrel pointed directly at Anderson's heart, the grizzled man narrowed his eyes and shouted over the pouring rain, "Alexander Anderson! For your crimes against both God and the Church you have been sentenced to death! Drop your bayonets and get on -"*

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Excruciating pain was all Zorin Blitz felt when she was ejected from the Täuschung Kaskade without a hint of warning. As the mental backlash coursed through her mind, briefly turning her every waking thought into lances of white-hot agony, she involuntarily screamed when a tailor bayonet was thrust clean through her right hand in a shower of blood and visceral. Her breath coming out in short, panting gasps as she stumbled away from the enraged nudist commander, the destroyed purple eye embedded in her palm leaking a clear fluid, Zorin bit her lower lip before shouting with as much venom as she could muster, "You... fucking... verdammt! How did... you...?"

Her question was answered when Anderson silently threw a bayonet, the blade easily penetrating through the flesh and bone of her shoulder. Barely able to comprehend how the weapon bypassed her blut vene through the fresh pain, Zorin tried to flow spiritual



energy through her veins only to come to a startling realization - she couldn't. All of the injuries she acquired during the assault were taking its toll, reducing her strength to the point where the damned mercenaries could actually hurt her. Harshly gagging as Anderson took advantage of her momentary distraction to drive his knee into her solar plexus, spittle and blood leaving her mouth as the air was driven from her lungs, Zorin staggered backwards in pain as the nudist flicked his wrist and summoned another bayonet.

"So what now, Quincy?"

Cursing loudly when Anderson reached out and callously tore the bayonet out of her hand, the blinding pain forcing her down to one knee, beads of sweat dripped down Zorin's face as the former priest scoffed derisively, "Yer hands are all but useless and yer abominable defenses are shattered, cast away like dust in the wind. Ye cannot win but go ahead and try to run... the vampire perched on the rooftop will be more than happy to blow yer head clean off yer shoulders."

"Scheiße! I... would... rather..." Zorin trailed off, blood leaking from her mouth as she glared at the nudist commander, "... be fucking killed... by you... than that vampire bitch!"

Anderson's glasses gleamed menacingly in the pale moonlight as he gripped the front of Zorin's uniform, eliciting a pain-filled cough from the woman. Pressing a bayonet firmly against the underside of her chin, the weapon drawing a faint trail of blood, he leaned forward and growled, "While I would like nothing more than to end yer unholy life... I have special orders from the General. I'm supposed to capture one of ye Sternritter for questioning, to see what yer hiding from us, but since yer in no position to argue I think we can start now. The monster ye blindly follow, the demon ye call 'Yer Majesty,' what is his true name?"

Barking laughter, starting as little more than a whisper before escalating in volume, filled the air as the Sternritter's mouth twisted into a sadistic mockery of a smile. Trails of blood leaking from her

mouth as the Quincy Zeichen etched onto her forehead began shining brightly, Zorin smirked at the nudist before leaning forward and muttering, "Vollständig: Wahnien."

In the few seconds it took the Sternritter to convey her intentions Anderson had already leapt backwards, his feet barely touching the ground as he moved to put as much distance between the two of them as possible. His arms crossed protectively in front of his body when a deafening explosion of spiritual energy erupted from Zorin's injured form, green eyes briefly taking note of the five-pointed star adorning the column of light, the former priest grimaced at the hidden vileness lurking just beneath the veneer of false humanity. Much like the unholy powers of Ragyo Kiryuin and Alucard, who were both walking plagues of death and misery upon the earth, the energy permeating the Quincy's body was something that shouldn't exist.

"I'm almost out of range," Anderson growled, one finger pressed firmly against his ear as he continued sprinting away from the Sternritter. Ignoring the pain running rampant through his body, he looked over his shoulder and snorted, "Ye know what to do, Aikuro."

"Understood!"

Aikuro's lips curled into a conniving grin as his fingers expertly danced across the DTR's controls. Briefly quirked an eyebrow when an annoying red warning flashed on the holographic interface, his thumb perched over the last button needed to initiate the sequence, he couldn't help but appreciate the irony of the situation. The General had been complaining to everyone back at headquarters that they needed to test the DTR in order to, in her words, 'vaporize those bastards in Xcution until not a single Life Fiber remained.' Knowing that he was going to be the first one in Nudist Beach to test the Model Ray's final weapon, which Olivier had vowed to never allow, brought a wide smile to his face.

"Mr. Bernadotte! I highly recommend your men button their shirts and zip up their flies! Things! ARE! ABOUT! TO! GET!

LOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUD!"

Stars of brilliant purple light once more burst into existence around the bipedal tank's frame as Aikuro forcibly smashed his finger onto the button. Laughing bombastically as the DTR's mouth pulled apart, exposing the humming weapon of mass destruction hidden inside, the nudist braced himself before shouting in an even louder volume, "BECAUSE THIS QUINCY IS ABOUT TO FACE DOWN NUDIST BEACH'S UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUULTIMATE TRUMP CARD!"

"BLEAAAAAAAAAACH!"

"STAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARCH!"

"CAAANNOOOOOOOOOOOON!"

"FIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIRE!"

There was a brief but audible crescendo as energy gathered in front of the DTR before everything simply *exploded*, the air itself appearing to catch on fire as a purple beam of superheated bleach and starch erupted from the Model Ray's mouth. Roaring across the front lawn faster than the speed of sound, shattering every window in the Hellsing Manor while simultaneously destroying Integra's prized rose garden, the beam slammed into the pillar of spiritual energy in a display of light that could be seen from London. As the supersonic attack fought to penetrate the seemingly impenetrable shell, minute glowing cracks slowly appearing on the surface, Aikuro leaned forward and blinked when he noticed something emerging from the point of contact.

"Well now... that's completely unexpected."

Hovering several dozen feet above the ground with wings of spiritual energy spreading out from her shoulders, each of which contained a large unblinking purple eye, Zorin Blitz gave the nudist an unnerving sadistic smirk as she effortlessly held off the Bleach Starch Cannon using her newly regenerated left hand. Startled out of his

bewilderment at the situation when the beam suddenly flickered before vanishing and various warnings began blaring throughout the cockpit, Aikuro kept one eye carefully locked on the transformed Sternritter as he quickly shifted the controls, "Alright... Life Fiber sensors are offline, the long-range radar isn't functioning and power output is down nearly thirty percent. But this bargain sale isn't quite over!"

Purple energy crackled around the DTR Model Ray as the armor on its right arm folded away, exposing an enormous tailor blade. Grinning cockily as the light shining from his nipples and crotch intensified, Aikuro blew a strand of hair out of his eyes before twisting the controls clockwise. Immediately large jets of steam blasted out of the bipedal tank's feet as it darted across the front lawn towards the hovering Quincy, servos mechanically protesting as the DTR's remaining energy was diverted to its right arm. His eyes narrowing in concentration as he twisted the DTR's controls, Aikuro tensed when Zorin vanished moments before the blade cut through her body.

"Damn it!" Aikuro grumbled as the tailor blade sliced into the ground, the sudden shift in momentum causing him to lurch wildly inside the DTR's cockpit. Gritting his teeth as the Model Ray skidded to a stop before twisting around, he had just enough time to register something rapidly approaching on the sensors before a Heilig Pfeil slammed into the bipedal tank and split it neatly down the middle.

"Armselig..."

Zorin spat derisively as she appeared in front of the Hellsing Manor using Hirenkyaku, one hand wrapped around the glowing scythe propped on her shoulder. A sadistic grin stretching across her face when she heard the beautiful sound of the DTR crashing to the ground, the massive tank exploding in a torrent of heat and flames, the Sternritter rolled her mismatched eyes as the mercenaries within the building opened fired. Ignoring the bullets bouncing harmlessly off her blut vene as she swung her free arm upwards and deflected the depleted uranium round from the Harkonnen, Zorin glanced at

her most likely fractured forearm before smirking at a stunned Seras, "You seem surprised. Did you expect your rounds to kill me? Sorry, but all that's left for you maggots to do is die. The only question is... where do I fucking start?"

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"Oh?" Quilge Opie muttered thoughtfully as he lowered the binoculars from his eyes, the burning plumes of smoke rising from the city a mere afterthought, "I didn't know Nudist Beach possessed such advanced technology."

Placing the binoculars he had been using to observe the events transpiring at the Hellsing Manor on the table next to him, the Sternritter leaned back in his chair and frowned when several bursts of spiritual energy assaulted his senses. From the latest reports the Schatten Ausrufung was proceeding nearly on schedule, the only issue being the presence of two Kamui instead of only one as His Majesty predicted. But such surprises were to be expected when it came to such delicate matters. Even Nudist Beach's continued interference, despite claiming they would leave the country once the embargo vote passed, had been planned to some small extent.

"This is most disappointing," he mused silently to himself, one hand scratching his chin as the other reached for the steaming cup of tea on the table. Unperturbed when an explosion erupted in the distance, courtesy of Ichigo's escalating fight against an increasingly frustrated Bazz-B, Quilge sampled the hot beverage before shaking his head in mocking disappointment, "Using Vollständig when your opponent is not even wearing a Kamui? You may be facing Alucard's heir but that does not excuse your actions. Therefore I think it's most fair to assume you are going to die quite soon, Zorin."

"That's the understatement of the night."

A mischievous grin plastered on his face as he materialized from behind a nearby wall, his body forming out of nothingness and shadows, Schrodinger visibly sagged when Quilge didn't take the bait. After waiting several seconds for his fellow Quincy to ask for an explanation, one eye twitching when the Sternritter continued drinking his tea without acknowledging his presence, the cat-like teenager grumbled under his breath before cheerfully continuing right where he left off, "It was quite the interesting sight. Both of Zorin's hands were nearly gone and to top it all off Alexander Anderson managed to break out of her Täuschung Kaskade through sheer willpower!"

Quilge's eyes briefly widened at that particular piece of information, the cup of tea hovering inches from his mouth. It was common knowledge amongst the Sternritter that Zorin's technique was inescapable to anyone weaker than her, which said wonders about the true extent of the former priest turned nudist's talents. Smirking as he sat forward while using a single finger to adjust his glasses, he turned to Schrodinger and commented, "The orders His Majesty gave the Major were quite clear - destroy the undead abomination known as Seras Victoria before she awaken her full powers. As long as Zorin accomplishes that objective, whether she lives or dies does not matter."

"One would think you would be more supportive of your fellow Sternritter, Quilge," Schrodinger huffed as he walked towards the edge of the roof and sat down, hands clasped together against the back of his neck. Staring at the raging conflagration while his feet swung lazily in the air, the screams echoing throughout London bringing a smile to his face, he yawned loudly before looking over his shoulder, "Anyway, while you were drinking that disgusting tea I've been busy getting everything ready for the Schatten Ausrufung. I was nearly caught a few times but nobody can stop me. I can go anywhere I want, after all."

Frowning softly as he placed the cup back on the small table, the liquid nearly gone, Quilge arched an eyebrow at the peculiar

phrasing, "Copying the Grand Couturier's mannerisms now, are we?"

"She copied me!" Schrodinger whined indignantly, his cat-like ears twitching as he growled, "I was saying that *decades* before that Life Fiber monster was even created!"

"You shouldn't get upset over something so trivial. After all, the Grand Couturier is one of the few people capable of actually killing you," Quilge sarcastically chastised, a condescending smile slowly stretching across his face when his fellow Sternritter stiffened at the blunt reminder of his mortality. Scowling when Schrodinger decided to respond to his answer with a rather rude gesture, Quilge carefully removed his glasses and held them between two fingers before continuing, "His Majesty was quite insistent that you never engage Nui Harime for that very reason. To her, life is but a game and we are nothing more than toys for her enjoyment. However, there is a certain method to her madness."

Schrodinger stared blankly at the older man, a confused expression evident on his face, "Huh?"

"Consider what she said in Brazil... or rather the fact that she said anything at all," Quilge offhandedly remarked while holding a single finger in front of his mouth, the gloved digit doing little to conceal the smug tone in his voice, "Precedent implies that the Grand Couturier never speaks more than is necessary, especially when confronting those most likely to survive encountering her. So we must ask ourselves why her clone so readily divulged her purpose in seeking Kinue Kinagase, a woman determined to kill her, in the presence of Alucard."

"Wow, it's almost like you're saying Nui Harime isn't an insane Life Fiber monster," Schrodinger sarcastically quipped while turning his attention back to the burning city.

Perking up when he felt a shift in the ambient spiritual energy, his cat-like ears twitching excitedly at the only thing it could mean, the teenage Sternritter leapt to his feet and gave Quilge a mischievous

grin, "Oh my, Seras Victoria is nearly dead but our dear comrade seems more interested in torturing her little boyfriend. Normally I would go remind Zorin of His Majesty's orders... but she was quite insistent that I not interfere. Well, it isn't like stalling will give Seras Victoria the opportunity to drink someone's blood, right? Auf wiedersehen!"

As Schrodinger stepped backwards and fell off the roof, his body vanishing into the fires raging below, Quilge raised a hand to his face and frowned. It would be quite detrimental to the Schatten Ausrufung if Seras Victoria became a full-fledged vampire. Her increased strength and speed, not to mention regeneration, would most likely overwhelm the average Sternritter before they had a chance to fight back. However Zorin was already in Vollständig, which could be used to her advantage. Vampires, until Life Fiber Hybrids, possessed no known resistance to Quincy spiritual energy. If she hoped to avoid His Majesty's displeasure Zorin would move quickly to kill Seras Victoria before she became acclimated to her newly evolved power.

All of this was predicated, of course, on Zorin being utterly blind to her surroundings.

"You know this is entirely your fault," Quilge sighed melodramatically when a vile burst of spiritual energy pulsed outwards from the Hellsing Manor, his hand already reaching for the pair of glasses folded neatly on the table next to him, "It's considered bad manners to give your enemy time to reach their full power. But I wish you the best of luck. For the unholy creature you've just unleashed upon the world will surely show you no mercy."

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## **Kamui Tales #30 - The Temporary Guest**

"You're late, Ichigo!"



Casually leaning to the side when his father came barreling out the front door, the older man's outstretched arms missing him by only a few inches, Ichigo Kurosaki rolled his eyes and scoffed, "Late for what? It's five in the afternoon."

"That's not the point!" Isshin passionately exclaimed as he rebounded to his feet. Smirking as he sprinted past a completely bewildered Orihime, the teenage girl having only the faintest of clues as to what was going on, he managed to avoid his son's obvious punch before counterattacking with a headlock, "I just got a message from an old friend! She's going away on business for a few weeks and asked if I could watch her daughter."

It took Ichigo's mind less than a second to process what his old man was trying to say. Angrily smashing an elbow directly into Isshin's stomach, eliciting a painful moan from the doctor when he was forced to let go of his son, Ichigo turned around and shouted, "Who the hell would trust you with their child? Wait... you have friends?"

For a brief instant a look of shock and disappointment crossed Isshin's face, the biting words from his son momentarily paralyzing him, before he quickly recovered. Smugly chuckling while stroking his chin in a failed attempt to appear smart, he stared off into the distance and sighed, "We were more than just friends. It all started one mysterious day twenty two years ago -"

"I don't care," Ichigo interrupted, cutting his dad off before he could start the flashback. Slinging his school bag over his shoulder as he walked towards the front door, Ichigo looked over his shoulder at Orihime, "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"R-Right," Orihime gave Isshin a mildly concerned look before perking up and tilting her head to the side, "So what project do you want to do? I was thinking about making a diorama on the history of Revocs. They make the cutest clothes, you know. It's just really strange that nobody in town sells the brand..."

One last thing, Ichigo!"

Sliding in front of his son just before he could reach the front door, Isshin glanced dramatically over his shoulder before leaning forward and whispering, "My friend's daughter is a little... strange... but don't let her behavior fool you! She's quite nice once you get to know her."

"Don't drag me into your delusions," Ichigo grunted, physically pushing his father out of the way before walking through the front door and looking around. Nothing had changed since that morning. Even the crack in the wall, courtesy of the old goat's morning routine, was still visible on the stairs. In fact, the only difference he could find was the pink suitcases stacked neatly in the living room.

"Gosh, it's really nice to finally meet you, Ichigo!"

Sitting on the edge of the couch with her legs swinging through the air, Nui Harime's sapphire eyes widened happily as she clapped her hands together, "Mr. Kurosaki said a lot of nice things about you! I wonder if half of them are true?"

Ichigo couldn't help but stare at the newest addition to the household. He could have sworn the living room had been empty when he walked inside, which meant this girl managed to get there in the same amount of time it took him to blink. That was a speed he would be hard-pressed to match with such precision even in his bankai. Pushing such thoughts aside as he turned around and harshly grabbed the front of his dad's shirt, Ichigo pointed towards the waving Grand Couturier and growled, "Alright, start explaining. Who the hell is this girl and why does she sound like Orihime?"

"That's an easy question!" Nui's cheerful voice exclaimed as she vanished from the couch only to reappear standing next to Orihime, who immediately looked back and forth in order to understand how the girl teleported several meters in the blink of an eye. Folding her hands behind her back as she leaned forward, Nui shook her head before continuing, "Maman left on business so she asked your dear old dad to watch me for a few weeks. They're old friends, you know, and who better to watch me than maman's dearest friend in the whole world?"

"Ichigo, this is Nui Harime," Isshin explained while carefully stepping around the Grand Couturier, "She'll be staying in the spare bedroom down the hallway. I trust you'll be able to keep your male urges in check. Her mother isn't exactly the most forgiving woman in the world."

"This is perfect!" Orihime exclaimed as a strange idea came to mind, completely oblivious to Ichigo scowling before punching his dad in the face, "Now that Nui's staying with you, we can have three versus three on game nights. Tatsuki, Nui and me versus you, Chad and Uryu! We finally have balanced teams."

Nui's blonde pigtails bounced slightly as she tilted her head to the side, a blank expression crossing her face as she drowned out the stupid dribble from the orange haired teenager. The fact that Orihime's voice possessed similar inflections, not to mention pauses between certain words, was rather insulting. She was the only one allowed to sound so cute and friendly, not this pathetic human, but Lady Ragyo's orders to be on her best behavior were quite clear. And that's forgetting about the way Mr. Kurosaki was subtly watching her every move. It was almost like he didn't trust her!

"Wow, Ichigo has more friends?" Tapping her foot against the ground as she spun around, Nui's blue eyes widened in false mirth as she exclaimed, "I can't wait to see them!"

# The City of the Dead

*So here is the next chapter of **To My Death I Fight** . I had to watch OVA VIII quite a few times in order to make sure everything here was canon... except that since this is a universe where Hellsing, Bleach, and Kill la Kill exist together, canonical events must happen a little differently. Just look at Anderson. Anyway, I hope you enjoy all the hard work I put into this chapter. There were some parts that were just so frustrating to write (mostly due to my incessant need for perfection) but in the end everything worked out pretty good. There are also a few call backs to various scenes, pieces of information and other things scattered throughout the Hellsing Arc (which started technically at the very end of Chapter 40).*

*\*The Freshberry/Pureberry poll is still going strong on my profile. Both Satsuki and Ryuko are nearly tied in terms of votes (14 vote difference as of this posting).*

*\*A big thanks to my beta reader for slapping some sense into me whenever I try and do anything stupid. And catching all the grammatical mistakes I inevitably make when writing 15,000 to 20,000 word chapters.*

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## Chapter 48 - The City of the Dead

"... latest satellite imagery shows the full extent of Millennium's attack," a middle-aged priest, his graying hair partially receded, respectfully explained as he handed several laminated photographs to Enrico Maxwell. Stepping away as the bishop silently shuffled through the images, the priest waited half a minute before smugly adding, "We have all but confirmed the presence of no less than five

Sternritter scattered throughout the city and surrounding countryside."

"Only five?"

Maxwell frowned at the disappointingly small number. Sighing while handing the pictures back to the priest, the leader of Iscariot scoffed and ran a hand through his silver hair, "The arrogance of their heretical king knows no bounds..."

"London has been humbled, your Excellency," a second priest, short blonde hair waving in the breeze, announced haughtily while his compatriots chuckled, "Not since the last world war has their capital known such fear and despair. The number of dead is already beyond estimation. Even as we speak the ranks of the undead are only increasing. It is but a matter of time until their last defenses crumble."

"God has banished them for their heresy. It serves them right. And yet..." Maxwell's smirk slowly vanished as something troubling came to mind, "What of their American allies?"

"Our agents in Washington reported that the President was unaware of the developing situation," the second priest's attention momentarily wavered as he scanned through the thick missive in his hand. After flipping to a particular section, highlighted a deep red, he coughed lightly and continued grimly, "When they attempted to mention the Revocs embargo, or more specifically the actions of their CEO, they were met with extreme and unwarranted hostility and disbelief by the cabinet."

"No doubt due to Ragyo Kiryuin's Mental Refitting," Maxwell growled, his eyes tightening in anger.

"Furthermore..." a harsh autumn wind blew through the Strait of Dover at the priest's response, carrying with it the stench of burning ash, "Fourteen minutes later a single powerful blast destroyed the White House, killing the President and most of his cabinet. The investigation is still ongoing. However, no evidence of any type of

incendiary device or blasting agent has been found. The American government is on high alert as we speak. They are claiming it an act of terrorism but one of our agents managed to obtain this..."

Stepping forward and handing Maxwell a single glossy photograph, the priest waited until the initial shock wore off before continuing, "This photograph was taken by one of the local news networks. As you can see, it depicts a single woman in her late teens to early twenties with long black hair standing across the street from the White House approximately three minutes before the explosion. What drew our attention was the symbol on the sleeve of her jacket - the Quincy Zeichen."

Maxwell clenched his fingers around the photograph and scowled, "This explains the lack of Quincy in London. Their king might be more cunning than we initially thought. But there is something about all this that troubles me..."

The priests looked at each other in confusion when the leader of Iscariot trailed off, "What are you talking about, your Excellency?"

"According to the information provided to us by Nudist Beach, at least ninety percent of humanity must wear her disgusting clothing in order for Ragyo Kiryuin's plans to come to fruition," Maxwell clasped his hands against the small of his back as he slowly walked towards the edge of the cliffs. His brow furrowing at the burning conflagration on the horizon, the bishop narrowed his violet eyes and scoffed, "One would have expected a monster like her to find offence with the Quincy's actions. She should have interfered, or at the very least sent her lap dog. That she has decided to stand aside and allow this Babylon on the Thames to burn is most concerning."

The muttering between the priests grew at the bishop's explanation before one of them asked, "You're not suggesting..."

"No. No. No. The crusade shall proceed as planned," Maxwell shook his head while raising one hand in a placating gesture, cutting the concerned priest off. Turning around with one arm still tucked against

the small of his back, the bishop smirked before continuing, "We simply need to wait until Alucard returns. Why allow our brethren to fall against the Quincy when Integra Hellsing's pet vampire will be more than happy to slaughter them for us? Let the Protestants solve their own problems! And once Alucard has dealt with Millennium and their Major's blood runs through the streets of London, we shall make our move!"

"Can you imagine it?"

Gesturing passionately through the air, Maxwell clenched his hand into a fist as he answered, "The knights of the Ninth Crusade marching into London, the light of God shining down upon the blasphemers and faithful alike as we graciously assist the survivors against the leagues of undead! The Protestant scum will beg for His Holiness's guidance in their darkest hour! We shall defeat the Hellsing Organization without having to lift a single finger!"

The gathered priests chuckled at Maxwell's declaration before one of them stepped forward and held out an arm, "You are truly benevolent, your Excellency. However, His Holiness has made it abundantly clear that the Vatican shall not sit back and allow Great Britain to destroy our most ancient adversary."

"Let the faithless thin out the ranks of our enemies," Maxwell replied, mildly insulted by the shortsightedness of those around him.

After sharing a glance with his comrades, one of the priests adjusted his glasses before politely inquiring, "And what of Sir Integra Hellsing?"

"It sickens me, but we cannot afford to antagonize England or her allies at this crucial juncture," Maxwell's mouth pursed into a grimace. While it was still only a minor afterthought in the back of his mind, the bishop hoped to God that Wolfe successfully captured Integra Hellsing both alive and unharmed. He was no fool. If anything were to befall that arrogant sow, accidental or otherwise,

there was nothing they could do to stop Alucard from carving a bloody path all the way to the Vatican.

"And what better way to defeat a monster than another monster?" Taking a deep breath as he momentarily paused, Maxwell spared one final glance at the burning city on the horizon before scoffing, "If acting courteous to that arrogant bitch means she'll send her pet vampire after Ragyo Kiryuin, so be it. But I shall make sure she understands *who* will be leading humanity to victory!"

"We can only hope the creatures end up killing each other, your Excellency," one of the priests smugly remarked.

"Yes, indeed we can," Maxwell smirked as his violent eyes swept across the columns of heavily armored papal knights kneeling on the frost-covered grass. Over three thousand men from different orders and sects, each of whom wielded a customized anti-tank rifle, were waiting patiently for him to give the order to march into London and liberate the blasphemers from Millennium and their undead forces. The power he felt was almost intoxicating, yet Maxwell would not allow it to affect his judgment. Arms clasped behind his back once more as he calmly walked between the priests, his gaze falling upon the four men standing at attention in front of the other knights, Maxwell watched proudly when they bowed and knelt on the ground.

"The Holy Father has ordered us here. He has promoted you, in absentia, to the rank of Archbishop as befits your task. Congratulations, your grace."

His armor bearing the ancient markings of the Knights of the Sagely Brethren, the cross stitched to his hood shimmering in the moonlight, the papal knight's thick accent was readily apparent as he humbly addressed the leader of Iscariot. Reaching into the satchel on his waist once Maxwell drew to a stop several feet away, the knight carefully removed a red and gold embroidered stole. Armored fingers delicately holding the garment as he respectfully held out his hands, he leaned forward and continued, "We the faithful assembled this



night form the knights of the Ninth Crusade. We are yours to command, Archbishop Maxwell. Employ us as you command."

A wide grin stretched across Maxwell's face as he reached for the stole signifying his new station of authority. But when the autumn wind momentarily picked up, causing part of the silk-like clothing to brush against his skin before settling back down, his elation quickly dissipated. There was something *off* about the sash, a feeling of strangeness that his mind couldn't quite piece together. In that brief moment of contact it had felt like some part of the garment had tried to latch onto his skin, it was almost like...

The new archbishop mentally cursed while keeping an outward façade of smug contemplation. He should have recognized this feeling of otherworldliness from the very start. It was nearly identical to the repulsion and disgust he had felt when that man from Nudist Beach brought out that Life Fiber. If the sash gifted to him by His Holiness contained these... these things, than that meant only one thing - the Church had fallen into Ragyo Kiryuin's demonic clutches.

If the Life Fibers have truly enthralled the Vatican, it was more than likely the Ninth Crusade was severely compromised. He needed to find a way to inform Wolfe of the situation, to let her know *not* to bring Integra Hellsing out of London. And as much as he wished to simply refuse the sash, under the pretense of keeping it safe during the battle against Millennium, he knew he could not. It would not only be highly suspicious, drawing the unwanted attention of those already corrupted, but cause doubts amongst the rest of the crusaders. As his fingers brushed once more against the stole, revulsion causing goose bumps to course up his arm, he narrowed his eyes and scowled.

*" Nudist Beach claimed those with sufficiently strong willpower can overcome the eldritch control of Life Fibers. I am Enrico Maxwell, Leader of Vatican Section XIII and one of the most powerful men on the planet. I have stared death itself in the eye and spat on the undead! I shall NOT let alien fabric take control of my mind!"*

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Blood and visceral freely dripped down the Hellsing Manor's wall as Seras Victoria callously let go of her opponent's battered corpse. Uncaring of the wet squelch when the remainder of Zorin Blitz's face slumped to the ground, the full-fledged vampire turned to walk away only to pause and look back over her shoulder. To her surprise the spiritual energy composing the fallen Sternritter's Vollständig was being drawn into the writhing mass of shadows emanating from her left shoulder, the darkness quickly devouring the energy. Angrily clenching her right hand into a fist at the notion of absorbing anything from the Quincy, Seras gazed upon the still body of Pip Bernadotte in complete silence.

It had been naïve of her to believe they would all make it through the night. When Nudist Beach's DTR Model Ray arrived, the bipedal tank's firepower overwhelming Millennium's undead soldiers, she had breathed a sigh of relief at the prospect of the fight being over. Then Zorin Blitz unveiled her Vollständig and everything went to hell. The illusions conjured without making eye contact, combined with the Quincy's sadism as she brought her nightmares and insecurities to life, had nearly shattered her mind. By the time she blearily managed to regain consciousness Seras had screamed from the excruciating pain when her left arm was severed in a shower of blood, Zorin's manic smile the last thing she saw before her eyes quickly followed.

And then Pip...

Seras pulled her attention away from the captain's body when the last seven members of the Wild Geese slowly approached her. As the battered and injured mercenaries solemnly gazed upon their fallen captain, she turned around and declared in a slightly echoing tone, "I'm heading out."

"Heading out?" One of the mercenaries half-asked, looking at his fellow compatriots in confusion, "But where's there to go?"

"He told me to drink him in so that we could win this fight. That it was the only way to defeat the Quincy," Seras answered as she recalled Pip's last words, the writhing shadows twisting angrily around her body, "But right now, I think the captain and I are only getting started."

"Captain..." another mercenary muttered, running one hand through his shaggy blond hair as stared at Pip's body. Perking up when Seras began walking away, the full-fledged vampire's footsteps echoing hollowing in the corridor, he shouldered his weapon before calling out, "One last thing!"

Blinking curiously when she heard several pairs of boots stomping on the ground, Seras looked over her shoulder and saw the remaining members of the Wild Geese respectively saluting her, "Give them hell for us, sir!"

"Make those Quincy bastards pay!" Another mercenary added as he saluted the vampire, blood staining the bandages wrapped around his forehead, "Send every fucking Sternritter to Hell, sir!"

Seras nodded appreciatively at the mercenaries, the corners of her mouth curling into a light smile at the gesture, before turning around and breaking into a sprint. Her feet barely touching the floor while the glowing shadows replacing her left arm rapidly transformed into the nearest facsimile of a pair of wings, she twisted her body counterclockwise before leaping through the nearly broken frame of a window. As she hovered over the burning wreckage of the DTR, her crimson eyes scanning the burning horizon in the distance with a mixture of anger and vengeance, Seras froze upon spotting several military jeeps racing across the manor's front lawn. Shifting course when she recognized the gray haired man sitting in the lead vehicle, the vampire slammed into the ground just as the convoy screeched to a halt.

"Damn it..."

Grunting as he leapt over the side of the jeep and looked around, the needle-ridden corpses strewn throughout the yard painting a rather clear picture of what happened, Batou tensed when the members of Echo November One and Two aimed their weapons at Seras. He knew something like this would happen. Seras was the servant of the undead bastard that murdered two of their comrades, sentencing them to a fate far worse than being devoured by COVERS. But as much as he hated Alucard, there were more important things to worry about at the moment. Frowning when the shadows composing the vampire's left arm morphed into a nightmarish rendering of a four-fingered claw, Batou growled, "Stand down! She's on our side."

As the nudists hesitantly lowered their weapons, some more reluctantly than others, Batou ordered, "Begin sweeping the manor for survivors. I don't want to hear any complaints from that French bastard."

Batou missed the crestfallen expression spread across Seras' face as he watched his men hurry toward the Hellsing Manor, several of them carrying medical supplies illegally appropriated from the London Metropolitan Police. Rubbing the bridge to stave off the oncoming headache while ignoring the glowing shadows twisting through the air, the nudist commander turned around to focus on something of far more importance - the destroyed wreckage of the DTR Model Ray. As the remains of the bipedal tank burned brightly in the night, the two halves of the Anti-Life Fiber weapon creaking loudly as several minor explosions rocked the frame, Batou groaned loudly before shouting, "That son of a... Aikuro! Where the hell are you?"

"Keep your pants on. I'm right here."

Seras gasped in embarrassment when Aikuro Mikisugi strutted out from behind the DTR's destroyed wreckage naked as the day he was born. Covering her eyes when the nudist stopped directly in front of them, purple light shining brightly from his nipples and crotch, she asked in a strangled tone, "Why are you naked?"

"Nudist Beach is an organization with one goal - stopping Ragyo Kiryuin and Life Fibers!" Aikuro answered passionately, one hand running through his blue hair, "Thus it makes perfect sense that to defeat clothing one must abandon -"

A hand slapping harshly against the back of his head, courtesy of Batou finally getting sick of his nonsense, cut Aikuro off midsentence and caused him to stumble forward, "Don't start with that naked crap. You know damn well why we chose the name. Which reminds me... just how did you escape?"

"Sharp reflexes," Aikuro recovered fairly quickly while turning towards the DTR's flaming wreckage, earning a relieved sigh from the nearby vampire, "I managed to lean out of the way right before the Quincy's arrow cut the Model Ray in half. Incidentally, that was a little trick I picked up at Honnouji Academy. You wouldn't believe what some of the students did to beat the first period bell."

Batou couldn't suppress an annoyed grumble at his fellow nudist's answer. There were only four DTR Model Rays in existence, including the wreckage currently burning on the Hellsing Manor's front yard, and each was needed in the fight against Ragyo Kiryuin. And somehow, despite having nothing to do with it, he had the notion that Olivier was going to blame him for the loss of the DTR. Making a mental note to kick Anderson's ass whenever the bastard showed up, Batou turned to Seras, "Do you mind filling me in on what happened?"

"Millennium sent a Sternritter," Seras quietly explained, her crimson eyes turning away as she continued, "Mr. Anderson tried to stop her but she was too strong. And after she used that technique nothing we did could hurt her. I lost my arm and the captain..."

It took less than a second for the nudist commander to understand what Seras was implying, "Damn it... What about the Sternritter?"

Seras clenched her right hand tightly as she answered with conviction, "Dead."

"Well, that's one less thing to worry about," Aikuro helpfully interjected, his hands folded into the pockets of a lab coat he somehow managed to procure. Staring at the city burning on the horizon, his gaze turned thoughtful as he added, "But it's likely there are more of these Sternritter in London. I just hope Ichigo and Ryuko are strong enough to stop them."

Batou's brow creased into a worried frown as Aikuro's comment caused him to think back to the Great Culture and Sports Festival. The four Sternritter that accompanied Ichigo and the others to Honnouji Academy ahead of the main Nudist Beach offensive had claimed their objective was taking out Ragyo Kiryuin. Yet evidence suggested Quincy had a natural weakness to Life Fibers. So why would Millennium, an organization essentially run by Quincy, launch an attack when both Ichigo and Ryuko were still in London? That fat bastard of a Major was far too cunning to not know they were still in the city, which begged the question of Millennium's true intentions.

Flinching when Seras suddenly leapt into the sky, the living shadows wrapping around her body before transforming into a set of wings, Batou watched her disappear over the horizon before turning to Aikuro, "Where's Anderson?"

"Last time I saw him he was running to escape the Bleach Starch Cannon's blast radius," Aikuro answered nonchalantly with a small shrug before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a standard issue Nudist Beach phone. Frowning when he tried calling headquarters only to receive nothing but static, he rubbed his chin and sighed, "Be honest with me, Batou. How bad is London?"

"It's too early to tell," Batou shook his head before answering, "Conservatively? We're easily looking at casualties in the hundreds of thousands, maybe even two million in a couple of hours. And that's not including the thousands of undead ghouls shambling in the streets. This is turning into a real - "

"It's about time ye arrived."

Alexander Anderson ignored the surprised expressions on the two men's faces as he stalked out of the shadows, one hand held against his bleeding shoulder. Effortlessly pushing Aikuro away when the nudist tried to dress his wounds, the former priest stomped to a halt in front of Batou and growled, "I need ye to take me back to London."

For several seconds Batou's mouth opened and closed as his mind attempted to formulate an effective answer to one of the stupidest questions he'd heard in years. It had taken all the skills he acquired over decades of service to the military, Revocs and Nudist Beach just to escape the hellhole that was now London. Realizing that his fellow commander was still waiting for an answer, he rubbed the back of his neck and bluntly asked, "Are you insane?"

"That Quincy possessed a rather nasty ability. She could peer into yer mind. Dredge yer deepest and darkest memories from the depths of yer soul," Anderson's green eyes narrowed as he stared at the burning conflagration in the distance, the dense smoke rising into the night nearly blotting out the moon. Momentarily pausing when the surviving members of the Wild Geese emerged from the Hellsing Manor, the more injured mercenaries helped by his fellow nudists, the former priest spat on the ground and sneered, "But when I kicked her out of my mind I got a glimpse into her own. All of this murder... sacrilege and blasphemy... destruction and chaos... it's all part of a greater plan involving Alucard."

"According to Kisuke Urahara's information Alucard is one of the most dangerous creatures in existence," Aikuro muttered contemplatively while subtly adjusting his lab coat until both of his nipples were exposed, "If these Quincy are planning something, it cannot be good for humanity."

It took Batou all of five seconds to come to a decision that he would most likely soon regret. Cursing under his breath as he ran towards the nearest jeep and vaulted over the vehicle's door with barely any effort, the nudist commander waited until he heard Anderson land in the passenger's seat before turning on the engine and shifting into

rear. As the military jeep spun around, kicking up dirt and grass, he leaned over the door and shouted at Aikuro, "Keep trying to contact headquarters! Olivier needs to know what's happening! I also expect you to take full responsibility for what happened to the DTR Model Ray!"

Hands tucked neatly into his coat as he watched the jeep race off into the night, Aikuro slowly but surely became aware that he had an audience. Quirking an eyebrow as he turned around and saw the surviving members of Wild Geese staring at his attire, or rather lack of, he frowned when one of them asked, "Do you mind putting on a pair of goddamn pants?"

Without missing a beat he replied, "As a matter of fact I do."

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"Damn it... your Kamui is a real piece of work," Bazz-B grunted as he slowly picked himself off the ground, beads of sweat dripping freely down his face.

After more than ten minutes of fighting Ichigo Kurosaki using the extensive Daten collected from the battle of Honnouji Academy, the only thing Bazz-B knew with any degree of certainty was that Life Fibers were bullshit. Nothing else could explain how the teenager blocked or dodged both Burner Finger One and Two, attacks with enough power to kill captain-level shinigami, with contemptible ease. And then there was that hardened Life Fiber weapon - Tournesol. It was one thing knowing it could simply ignore Blut Vene no matter how much spiritual energy you put into the technique. But it was another thing entirely to feel the blade cutting into your flesh. All in all, it absolutely sucked having to be the one forced to stall one of the few people in the world capable of easily kicking his ass.

Waves of flames erupted from Bazz-B's body as he staggered back onto his feet, a grin stretching across his face when the intense heat



began melting the surrounding asphalt, "Did you seriously name that form Zangetsu? Goddamn, you really don't have any imagination."

Ichigo felt Mugetsu bristle angrily around his body, the Kamui incensed at the Quincy for daring to insult her beautiful form, as he ignored Bazz-B's comment. Tightening his grip on Tournesol while sliding one foot outwards, the roiling waves of molten rock flowing through the nearby street a mere afterthought, he had the nagged sensation in the back of his mind that something wasn't right. All of the Sternritter's attacks had been ineffective, the Life Fibers woven throughout his body and Mugetsu easily shrugging off the normally lethal bursts of fire. Yet Bazz-B continued fighting with everything he had. It was almost like...

"You're stalling me..." Ichigo announced in realization, Bazz-B's brief look of subdued surprise proof enough he was correct. His brown eyes narrowing when he searched for Ryuko's and Senketsu's spiritual energy, only to mentally curse when they were both further away than he originally thought, Ichigo scowled before continuing, "You've been slowly pushing me away from her. Why? Are you afraid of fighting both of us at the same time?"

"Heh... well, you figured it out."

There was a soft tearing sound as Bazz-B gripped the tattered remains of his right sleeve, the fabric soaked crimson with his blood, before tearing it away. Scoffing before sliding one foot backwards and pointing his hand at Ichigo, every finger but his thumb fully extended, he glared at the teenager as the ambient temperature suddenly skyrocketed, "But it's too late! I bet you're thinking 'If I defeat this guy, I can go help my girlfriend!' Well, that's not going to happen! Burner Finger Four!"

Almost instantaneously a broadsword constructed purely from blue flames emerged from the Sternritter's extended hand. Even though the corners of his mouth twisted into a smirk at seeing Ichigo's entire posture stiffen, the multicolored eyes of his Kamui narrowing at the power behind the attack, Bazz-B couldn't ignore the feeling of

apprehension buried deep in his chest. He already knew there was not a chance in hell could actually defeat Ichigo, even if he used Vollständig. All he needed to do was keep the teenager occupied long enough for the Major's signal that the last pieces of the Schatten Ausrufung were in position.

Once that was done he planned on getting the hell out of London.

Lazily swinging his right arm outwards, every building on that side of the street immediately falling apart when large chunks of masonry and steel disintegrated into ash, Bazz-B didn't give Ichigo any time to prepare before sprinting forward. Forming a spiritual crossbow in his left hand before firing several Heilig Pfeil in rapid succession, each containing enough power to level a building, he waited until the teenager was already dedicated to deflecting the arrows before vanishing in a burst of Hirenkyaku. Reappearing in the air with his arm arcing towards Ichigo's head, his eyes narrowing when he saw the hybrid already raising Tournesol, Bazz-B shouted as he slammed his attack against the hardened Life Fiber blade.

A massive explosion erupted across London as Bazz-B's technique smashed into Tournesol, the burst of blue flames rising into the smoke-filled skies drawing the undivided attention of nearly every remaining soul within the city limits. Gritting his teeth in frustration when Ichigo managed to block his attack, the fact the teenager was using both hands barely counting as a consolation prize, Bazz-B grunted before shifting the flow of his spiritual energy purely into Blut Arterie. Grinning maliciously when the sudden increase in power caused Ichigo to slide backwards along the ground, the teenager's feet digging twin trenches the asphalt for purchase, the Sternritzer's elation quickly vanished when his momentum abruptly stopped.

*"What the hell? I put enough spiritual energy into Burner Finger Four to burn down half of fucking London and he's not even budging?"*

Bazz-B's mouth pulled into a grimace as he ignored his growing trepidation and attempted to overwhelm Ichigo's naturally superior

defenses. Beads of sweat evaporating off his skin as the ambient temperature pushed past one thousand degrees, the heat enough to melt everything and anyone unfortunate enough to be within one hundred feet of him, the Quincy noticed the strained look on Ichigo's face and stiffened. If the teenager was struggling to hold back Burner Finger Four, then that meant his Life Fibers were beginning to reach their limit. He might actually have a shot at winning.

Twisting his body sideways as he sought to press the advantage Bazz-B froze when he noticed phantasmal cracks rapidly spreading across his technique. Eyes widening as Tournesol carved relentlessly through the spiritual flames, the Sternritter grunted while desperately throwing his body away from his opponent, *"Damn it! He's gotten -"*

His thoughts were cut off when Tournesol suddenly cleaved through the rest of Burner Finger Four, the hardened Life Fiber blade barely missing cutting off his hand. Astonishment spreading across his face when the blade continued arcing forward and cut deeply into his body, crimson rapidly spreading from his waist up to his neck, Bazz-B painfully coughed up blood as the subsequent release of energy sent him flying away from Ichigo. Bouncing along the ground while the last traces of his techniques dissipated into wisps of fire, he crashed through several tones of half-melted debris before coming to a stop inside one of the few buildings still standing.

"Damn it, that was too close."

Ichigo relaxed his grip around Tournesol when he felt the ambient temperature starting to decrease, the supernatural blue flames throughout the area vanishing without the Sternritter's conscious control. Softly clenching his armored hand into a fist, Ichigo couldn't help but think that it was only thanks to the Life Fibers woven inside his body and Mugetsu that he managed to defeat Bazz-B so quickly. It still didn't make much sense to the teenager but the resistance of his Life Fibers to Quincy spiritual energy allowed him to counter the Sternritter's attacks, ending what should have been a difficult fight in only a few minutes and saving hundreds of innocent people.

Frowning as he glanced briefly in the direction he last sensed Ryuko's spiritual energy, her power detectable even halfway across London, Ichigo sighed before turning his attention towards the fallen Sternritter. His fingers tightening around Tournesol as he slowly approached the building where Bazz-B crashed, Ichigo stopped and looked into one of Mugetsu's multicolored eyes when she growled irritably, "What?"

" ***Where are you going?***" Mugetsu's eyes narrowed as she glared at her wearer, ***"Ryuko and Senketsu are that way!"***

Ichigo watched his Kamui helpfully point down the street with her pauldron, the fabric-like armor twisting and contorting, before replying, "I know, but there are a few things I want to ask this guy."

" ***That might be a problem, Ichigo,***" Mugetsu answered bluntly while staring into the damaged building. After several seconds passed without any movement from within the heavily obscuring dust and smoke, she swiveled her eyes back up to Ichigo and added, ***"You hit him pretty hard. And there was a lot of disgusting and tasteless blood. He might be dead."***

"Trust me, it takes a lot more than that to kill someone like Bazz-B," Ichigo argued, memories of his fights against Grimmjow and Kenpachi passing through his mind as he pointed over his shoulder at the devastated street. Grumbling in annoyance when Mugetsu rolled her eyes and looked away, a condescending huff echoing in his head, he grabbed part of the Kamui and harshly pulled on it, "I wasn't trying to kill him! If I wanted to kill him, I wouldn't have shifted my attack at the last second!"

Mugetsu bristled in annoyance at Ichigo's mistreatment of her uniform before giving him the Kamui equivalent of a scowl, ***"Just don't do anything like that again. Ragyo Kiryuin might have demonstrated that our Life Fibers can survive on the sun but I was the one getting hit by that Quincy's attacks. Look at my sleeves, Ichigo! They're actually scuffed!"***

Despite the fact his arms were covered in scratches and burns, obtained from blocking Bazz-B's Burner Finger Four at pointblank range, Ichigo stared into his Kamui's accusatory gaze and countered, "You took more damage when we fought Sanageyama! Besides, if I didn't stop that attack he would have - "

Snapping his head upwards when he felt a familiar buildup of spiritual energy, Ichigo instinctively leaned to the side moments before a beam of concentrated flames exploded from the building in front of him. As the flames sputtered momentarily before flickering away, the trail of devastation behind him continuing for several blocks, Ichigo raised Tournesol and scowled when he picked up the sound of unsteady footsteps. Stumbling as he walked out of the building with wisps of smoke rising from his extended finger and blood dripping from the large gash on his chest, Bazz-B panted heavily while glaring at the teenager, "Fuck... you're strong. But what's with... that stupid look... on your face? A pathetic attack like that... isn't enough to kill me!"

"I wasn't trying to kill you," Ichigo's voice remained perfectly calm as he repeated what he told Mugetsu to Bazz-B. His eyes shifting from the Sternritzer when he noticed the black and red checkerboard-patterned zeppelin passing relatively close to his position, the airship's floodlights sweeping widely over the destruction plaguing the city, Ichigo frowned contemplatively before adding, "But I'm curious about one thing. Who ordered you to attack me? Was it your boss or the Major?"

"Well, aren't you smart," Bazz-B chuckled dryly before spitting out a wad of blood. An unpleasant grin stretching across his face as he stepped backwards and raised his bloody right hand, every finger extended and pointing at Ichigo, the Sternritzer shouted, "But like hell I'm going to tell you anything! Burning Full - "

The massive buildup of spiritual energy around Bazz-B's hand was quickly severed when Ichigo abruptly vanished from view, Mugetsu's boosted speed while in Zangetsu enough to allow the teenager to swiftly close the distance between him and his opponent. Wrapping

his hand around the surprised Quincy's wrist before twisting it upwards, eliciting a wince of pain from the Sternritter, Ichigo tightened his grip and scowled, "Give up. It's over."

"I'm still standing, aren't I?"

Bazz-B ignored the pain coursing through his body as he wrenched his hand free from Ichigo's grip. Quickly leaping away from the teenager using Hirenkyaku, his breath coming out in heavily pants while sweat dripped down his face, the Sternritter didn't know how much longer he could keep Ichigo from leaving. Already his spiritual energy was starting to run low, a nasty side effect of needing to overcharge every attack just to have a shot at damaging that Kamui. Sneering in frustration when he noticed a familiar condescending look in Ichigo's eyes, Bazz-B's expression turned outright murderous as he passionately declared, "So unless you have the guts to kill me, this fight ain't over yet! Vollständig: Feuer -"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you..."

The sensation of Tournesol pressing against the underside of his chin, the hardened Life Fiber blade threatening to draw blood, caused Bazz-B to freeze. He couldn't understand what the hell happened. The Daten on Mugetsu gave a clear estimate of the Kamui's speed, which was part of the reason His Majesty ordered him to stall the teenager, yet he hadn't sensed Ichigo until it was already too late. Clenching his fingers tightly into a fist as he lowered his arm, Bazz-B glowered silently when Ichigo solemnly continued, "You told me you didn't like murdering innocent people. You even saved people from your comrades. So why the hell are you doing this?"

"It's like you said - I don't like taking out innocent people. It just doesn't sit right with me," Bazz-B scoffed as Ichigo pulled Tournesol away from his neck. Holding one hand against his bleeding chest, the Sternritter spat on the ground and turned around, "But you already know what Ragyo is planning, don't you? That monster is

trying to feed humanity to fucking Life Fibers. His Majesty is determined to prevent that - through any means necessary."

"What kind of answer is that?" Ichigo demanded, grabbing the front of Bazz-B's uniform before exclaiming, "Look around! How is this helping to stop Ragyo Kiryuin?"

Before Bazz-B could answer Ichigo's question a loud screeching noise reminiscent of a speaker echoed across the burning city. Turning up towards the sky, his eyes widening when he spotted dozens of helicopters and gunships flying in formation, Ichigo tightened his grip around Tournesol when an insane but familiar voice madly preached, "... offer you my pity, but forgiveness? NEVER! Now prepare to be purged from the earth! Mowed down like grass! Crushed like bugs!"

"The hell is wrong with this guy?" Bazz-B sarcastically commented, grimacing slightly when Ichigo let go of his uniform. His previous exhaustion beginning to abate as he listened to Maxwell's insane laughter, the newly promoted archbishop's every other word a declaration of death, the Sternritter silently watched Ichigo turn around before quickly raising his hand into the air. As he prepared to summon a shadow portal back to the Silbern, Ichigo's distraction the perfect opportunity to fall back and retreat, the Sternritter stopped when dozens of spotlights flashed into existence around them.

"And all Quincy shall perish beneath the might of God!"

Ichigo and Bazz-B silently watched as over one hundred armored soldiers, each clad in white robes bearing the markings of the Knights of Malta, descended from the helicopters onto the surrounding rooftops. Scowling when most of the religious knights aimed their heavily modified weapons directly at him, Ichigo quickly turned around and looked upwards when Maxwell addressed him by name, "And you - Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi! You Life Fiber creatures are abominations against God! Monsters destined for the deepest pits of Hell! His Holiness has ordered the complete and utter eradication of you creatures!"

"Damn your voice is fucking annoying."

Firing off a single Burner Finger One at the nearest helicopter, the concentrated beam of flames piercing through the armor like paper, Bazz-B smugly grinned at the suddenly nervous knights before stomping his foot against the ground. As the ambient temperature instantly increased to the boiling point of water, causing the knights nearest the Quincy to fall down and scream in pain, Bazz-B ignored their suffering and chuckled, "I'm guessing you're one of those coward types, hiding behind your men and their fancy weapons. Man, you are a sorry sack of crap."

"Your blasphemy knows no bounds, Quincy!" Maxwell furiously shouted in response, the receivers built into the armor of every papal knight allowing the archbishop to easily hear Bazz-B's scathing insult. His voice continuing to rise as the gunships aimed their weapons down into the street, Maxwell was nearly screaming when hundreds of missiles fired simultaneously at Ichigo and Bazz-B, "Did you think the Church did not learn from the last encounter with your heretical king? We have learned, Quincy, and we have PREPARED!"

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"Screw this silent bastard!"

Ryuko's fingers dug into the half-tone piece of debris as she easily shifted it off her legs. Blowing a strand of feathery hair out of her eyes while slowly standing back up, the minor wounds covering her body already regenerating, steam burst from Senketsu's vents as she growled angrily. The Quincy was really starting to piss her off. Every single time she tried hitting him with the Scissor Blade, he would wait until the very last second before moving out of the way and countering with a punch or kick that sent her flying hundreds of feet away. While the attacks didn't hurt, having to constantly hunt down the stoic bastard was wearing on her last nerve.



And then there was the Sternritter's complete and utter silence. Satsuki's condescending smirk and constant arrogance at Honnouji Academy had made Ryuko wish nothing more than to punch her sister repeatedly in the face. In fact, it still did. Gamagori and Sanageyama's stupidity at the hospital hadn't changed anything. But she was willing to let all of that go if it meant being able to beat the ever-living shit out of the silver haired Quincy.

"Heh, but I finally managed to hit him," Ryuko's lips curled into a pleased grin. While a small scratch would normally not be to something to celebrate, seeing the shocked expression on the Quincy's face when the Scissor Blade cut into his arm had been worth getting kicked in the stomach.

" ***Perhaps,***" Senketsu mused as his wearer's arm snapped out, armored fingers clasp around the handle of the Scissor Blade. Humming softly as Ryuko pulled the weapon free from the rubble, red and black jagged lines immediately appearing on the crimson blade, he narrowed his multicolored eye before adding, "***But be careful, Ryuko. Something tells me he was holding back.***"

"Is that right?" Ryuko muttered, the red undertone in her hair brightening as she reversed her grip on the Scissor Blade. Sparing a cursory glance at Senketsu's multicolored eye before sprinting forward, she leapt through the hole in the high-end apartment building while shouting, "Well he wasn't the only one!"

Ryuko's narrowed her eyes as she was immediately buffeted by the bitter autumn wind, the nauseating stench permeating the city causing her face to scrunch up in disgust. As she fell nearly thirty feet to the streets below, wisps of dust clinging futilely to Senketsu's armor, she tightened her grip on the Scissor Blade even before her high-heels slammed into the pavement. There was not a chance in hell she was going to let the Quincy ambush her for a third time. Staring in disbelief when she finally spotted the bastard, his overcoat the last thing she saw before he vanished into the distance, Ryuko raised a fist impotently into the air and seethed, "Hey! Get the hell back here!"

**"Ryuko..."**

"He's not getting away that easily!" Ryuko declared as she crouched against the ground, her Kamui returning to his original configuration in a burst of ruby light, "Senketsu Ship -"

" **Wait, Ryuko!**" Staring passively down the street while his wearer stumbled forward awkwardly due to his sudden exclamation, Senketsu ignored Ryuko's annoyed growling and continued, "**We have company.**"

Ryuko blinked owlishly at the Kamui before turning around, "Company?"

To her surprise, standing on the far end of the street with a slightly pleased smirk tearing at the corners of her mouth was Integra Hellsing. Chuckling in amusement as she gently bit down on the cigar in her mouth, which Wolfe had been polite enough to light, she didn't need to look over her shoulder to know that most of the paladins currently 'escorting' her were staring at Ryuko in complete bewilderment. They were supposedly Iscariot's finest soldiers. Instruments of God crafted to deliver righteous judgment upon the monsters across the earth. Yet the mere sight of a teenager girl in a rather revealing uniform, who just so happened to nearly instantly recover from getting kicked through a building, had rendered the entire lot of hardened warriors speechless.

"I see you're doing rather well, Ryuko," Integra commented as she sauntered towards the teenager, her cold eyes examining every inch of Senketsu.

The leader of the Hellsing Organization found it ironic that barely a month ago the concept of a Kamui would have been ludicrous. Sapient and semi-autonomous uniforms woven purely out of Life Fibers that granted their wearers enough power to fight on par with vampires and other supernatural creatures? She would have immediately deemed such nonsense laughable, even with the events surrounding the initial Revocs embargo. Yet personally witnessing

Ragyo Kiryuin's assault on Parliament, as well as the Grand Couturier's surprising appearance in Her Majesty's chambers, had put such childish notions to rest. Despite Senketsu's brazen and revealing form, which accentuated Ryuko's already gifted figure, the power dwelling within the Kamui was no laughing matter.

Then again, compared to her experience dealing with Alucard something like this really shouldn't have come as a surprise.

Slowly removing the cigar from her mouth as she stopped several feet away from Ryuko, Integra glanced in the direction the Captain fled, "That Quincy was the same man I entrusted Walter to defeat. I presume you intervened?"

"Yeah," Ryuko replied with a small nod, the Scissor Blade propped against her shoulder as she turned around and scowled, "This guy came out of nowhere right before I could kick his boss's ass. Damn it, these Quincy are really freaking annoying!"

Integra quirked an eyebrow at Ryuko's statement, her attention drawn to the barely noticeable scratches on the teenager's skin, before replying in an amused tone, "I take it there aren't any issues?"

"This guy is fast... but he underestimated Senketsu," Ryuko smugly boasted. Smirking as her Kamui beamed at the praise, she exclaimed, "It took a while but I finally managed to hit him. I just got to take a few more punches and he'll be down for the count."

"I see..." Integra lightly tapped the end of her cigar, burning ash falling onto the ground, before placing it back into her mouth and asking, "And where is Ichigo?"

"I don't know. We got separated a while ago," Ryuko answered dejectedly. It shouldn't have been that hard to keep track of Ichigo, especially since she could easily sense Mugetsu's power over large distances. Yet she hadn't even noticed he was gone until Senketsu pointed it out. Perking up when she remembered Batou's plan, but more specifically her role in it, she pointed over her shoulder and

announced, "Oh, that's right! I was supposed to meet Ichigo at your place. I can fly there and I'm sure Senketsu wouldn't mind carrying you."

" ***It shouldn't be a problem,***" Senketsu agreed, his sole eye narrowing in thought before adding, "***Besides, a woman of her size and weight shouldn't be that much of a burden.***"

"What the hell, Senketsu?" Ryuko growled in embarrassment at the Kamui's blunt answer, drawing a raised eyebrow from Integra and Iscariot's complete attention. Folding her arms over her chest as Senketsu apologized, she huffed angrily and asked, "Anyway, do you want a lift?"

"That all depends..." Tossing her cigar into the nearest pile of burning debris, Integra glanced over her shoulder at Heinkel Wolfe, "Do you have any problems with this arrangement, Wolfe?"

A tense moment of silence followed Integra's sarcastic question before the corners of Heinkel's lips curled into a nearly imperceptible smirk. Holstering the heavily modified blessed pistol inside her cassock before slowly marching towards Ryuko and Integra, the paladin's opaque glasses hid her narrowed grey-green eyes as she replied, "Dealing with Ryuko will be far more trouble than it's worth. Given all that we know about her, I'm certain there is nothing we could do to stop her if she chose to leave. However... we do have our orders."

Immediately after Heinkel finished speaking more than a dozen metallic clicks softly echoed throughout the area as nearly every paladin collectively aimed their blessed weapons at the two women standing down the street. When Ryuko responded to the threatening display of firepower by tightening her grip on the Scissor Blade and moving protectively in front of Integra faster than most of the paladins could follow, Yumiko growled faintly under her breath and swung her arm outwards.

"Stand down unless ordered to engage. Is that clear?" The Japanese paladin's voice carried a scathing undertone as she stopped her comrades from doing anything foolish. And as her hidden eyes noticed the reactions from the other paladins, which ranged from reluctant acceptance to near insubordination, it was abundantly clear they were underestimating Ryuko's power.

"You've made quite the powerful ally, Integra Hellsing."

Ignoring the actions of her fellow paladins, Heinkel calmly tucked her hands inside the pockets of her cassock while complimenting one of the Church's most hated enemies and, at the current time, allies. While she would shed no tears if something were to befall Integra Hellsing, the paladin knew her cooperation was necessary if they were to stop Ragyo Kiryuin and Millennium. If that meant taking the young leader of the Hellsing Organization into custody until she guaranteed full assistance with the Church's plans than so be it. She just hoped several hours of speaking to Maxwell weren't enough to set Alucard on a murderous rampage across Europe.

"Ryuko's power is far above that of a human's," Heinkel calmly stated as she stopped several feet away from Integra, "I doubt I could stop her even if I tried."

While Ryuko growled angrily and glared daggers at the paladin for the perceived insult against her humanity, Integra frowned when something from her meeting with Maxwell at the museum came to the forefront of her mind. At the time she had assumed it to be of no great importance. A random thought that could easily be attributed to heightened nerves brought about from meeting one of the most loathsome men in the world. And with a threat like Millennium lurking in the shadows she had quickly forgotten about some of the meeting's more trivial details. But upon looking back, she narrowed her eyes as she recalled both Maxwell and Wolfe reacting to Alucard when he mentioned Ryuko's name.

"Your tone around Ryuko implies familiarity, Wolfe," Integra's tone was curt as she stepped closer to the paladin, "What is your

connection to her?"

"Say what?" Ryuko's voice nearly caught in her throat when she heard Integra's out of the blue question. Twisting around until she was facing the older woman, she pointed the Scissor Blade at Heinkel and defensively exclaimed, "I don't even know her!"

"That's not a surprise."

Heinkel didn't react when Ryuko angrily turned around, her blue eyes narrowed dangerously at the comment. However, the paladin was not prepared to see the Kamui's multicolored eye narrow alongside his wearer's. Her attention luckily drawn away from the alien expression when several explosions tore through a nearby street, she calmly stepped around the Scissor Blade before gently adding, "To be honest, it would have been a surprise if you did remember. After all, you were only four years old the last time we met."

"Enough with the bullshit already!"

Ryuko gnashed her teeth in frustration before stomping over to Heinkel and gripping the front of her cassock. She was sick and tired of everyone in England claiming to already know her. First there was Anderson's little speech about raising her in an orphanage and now these people claiming to have grown up with her?! That made no goddamn sense! Even if he wasn't the best parent in the world, which she could understand in hindsight, her dad was the only person she remembered from her childhood.

Snorting angrily as she pulled Heinkel closer, Ryuko ignored the reactions from the other paladins and seethed, "When will you idiots give it a rest? There's no way any of that stupid crap Anderson said was true! I didn't grow up in a damn orphanage and I sure as hell don't know any of you!"

There was an outburst of muttering and whispers from the paladins upon the offhanded mention of Anderson's name. Although the

atrocities committed by Ragyo Kiryuin over the previous weeks and the revelations from Nudist Beach shed new light on the traitor's actions thirteen years ago, it did not erase the knowledge that Anderson murdered members of the holy conclave. The former priest may have committed his sins in order to save humanity from an unholy monster but he still needed to face righteous justice for his many crimes against the Church.

Slowly stalking away from her fellow paladins, Yumiko's hand thumbed the sheathed katana strapped to her waist as she stared at Ryuko from beneath messy black hair, "How well do you know Father Anderson?"

"Only that he's a complete asshole," Ryuko biting replied, her blue eyes narrowing when she looked around the larger paladin and noticed Yumiko's hand curled around the weapon at her waist. Spitting on the ground before huffing in annoyance as she harshly let go of Heinkel's cassock, the paladin quickly smoothing out the wrinkles on her uniform, Ryuko took a step back and once more pointed the Scissor Blade at the larger woman, "So are you going to stop screwing with me or do I have to beat the truth out of you?"

"The truth..."

Heinkel's tone contained the barest traces of melancholy as she calmly reached into her cassock, mindful of Ryuko's fingers tightening around the crimson blade clenched firmly in her hand. Carefully pulling out the slightly yellowed photograph she recovered from Hanobaro House, the corners bent from its time in her pocket, the paladin remained silent as she handed it to a suspicious Ryuko. Heinkel was well aware of Integra Hellsing's interest in the picture, if the slight tilting of the young woman's head was any indication. It was too bad that she didn't have the time to scold the Protestant for her rudeness and lack of tact.

"You spent four years at the Kobe orphanage alongside Yumiko, Maxwell and myself," the paladin's gaze softened behind her glasses when she noticed Ryuko's fingers beginning to tremble, "You were

very shy, always hiding from the other children in your room. I suppose that's part of the reason Maxwell took quite the liking to you."

"What... how..."

Ryuko found herself at a loss for words as she stared in mute shock at the discolored photograph. None of this made any sense! She would have remembered something, anything, if she grew up at an orphanage, damn it! Yet she couldn't deny the picture of a much happier Anderson crouched next to her clearly embarrassed younger self, the former priest looking like he was trying to cheer her up.

" **Ryuko?**"

Although he was unable to see the photograph due to the angle Senketsu could instinctively tell something was wrong. It was blatantly obvious to the Kamui that the subject matter of the previous conversation had been a sore point for his wearer, if the spike in blood pressure and Ryuko's rampaging emotions meant anything. Tightening around Ryuko when her fear and confusion bled across their connection, Senketsu looked upwards and asked, "**Are you alright?**"

"I'm fine, Senketsu," Ryuko muttered in a subdued tone, most of her anger and frustrating bleeding away. While she was still upset about the picture, there were far more important things to worry about at the moment. She could always hunt Anderson down and beat the answers out of him once she was finished kicking the Major's smug ass. Grumbling as she awkwardly handed the photograph back to Heinkel, Ryuko's eyebrow began twitching when something the paladin said came to mind.

"Wait a second," she growled before glaring suspiciously at the paladin, "How the hell was I friends with your stuck up boss? He's like ten years older than me!"



"Nobody knows. One day you just started following Maxwell everywhere he went. He never told us why," Yumiko muttered while shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly.

"Whatever, but one last question before I leave with Hellsing," Ryuko rolled her eyes while tilting her head at Integra, who sighed under her breath at the name. Propping the Scissor Blade against her shoulder, Ryuko suppressed a tired yawn and scoffed, "And it's been bugging me for a while. But what's your deal with Anderson? What did that bastard -"

Ryuko was cut off when dozens of loudspeakers simultaneously blared into existence, the harsh static causing her to wince and cover one ear. Growling under her breath as the noise quickly died away, she spun around and glared angrily into the smoke-filled skies only for her eyes to widen in surprise. Hundreds of helicopters and gunships, their silhouettes barely visible against the glowing horizon, were flying above the city. Bewilderment etched onto her face as she watched the multitude of aircraft fly overhead, the Scissor Blade held limply in her grip, Ryuko couldn't help but wonder who the hell these people were. Her expression twisting into an annoyed scowl when she noticed the symbols on the armored figures rappelling from the helicopters, Ryuko opened her mouth to demand answers from Heinkel when a familiar voice blasted out of the loudspeakers.

"England is guilty! The heathens are guilty!"

The passion permeating Maxwell's every word caused Ryuko to freeze with her mouth slightly agape. Staring in shock as the new archbishop's laughter echoed throughout the city, goose bumps broke out over her exposed skin when Maxwell gleefully continued, "You are all now sentenced... to your death. Death. Death! Death! DEATH! I can offer you my pity, but forgiveness? NEVER! Now prepared to be purged from the earth! Mowed down like grass! Crushed like bugs!"

"What the fuck?" Ryuko gasped while Senketsu's single eye swiveling upwards, "Is he for real?"

Integra angrily clenched her hands into fists. After the Grand Couturier's surprise appearance during their last meeting, her counterpart had reluctantly agreed to pool their resources in order to stop Ragyo Kiryuin and Millennium. But this... this didn't make any sense. Biting her lower lip as realization hit her, Integra stomped forward and seethed, "He wouldn't!"

"And all Quincy shall perish behind the might of God!"

Maxwell's fingers clenched the podium as the legions of papal knights moved to engage the remnants of the Jahrtausendarmee's undead army, their specialized holy weapons cutting through the vampirized soldiers. But none of that mattered in the slightest. The only thing of importance was killing any and all enemies of God. His left eye beginning to twitch when several pilots reported the fat bastard of a Major standing on the large zeppelin hovering over the far side of the city, Maxwell tightly gripped the nearest microphone and turned his attention towards Ichigo Kurosaki, "And you - Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi! You Life Fiber creatures are abominations against God! Monsters destined for the deepest pits of Hell! His Holiness has ordered the complete and utter eradication of you creatures!"

"Maxwell..." Integra could barely contain her fury when the Vatican forces opened fire on the city, machine gun and missiles slaughtering her fellow citizens who had been fortunate enough to survive Millennium's initial purge, "You have betrayed us."

"I cannot condone these actions."

Disappointment laced Heinkel's voice as she slowly stalked around Ryuko and Integra. In most circumstances she wouldn't have any compunctions about launching a crusade against heathens and heretics, especially those as blasphemous as the Quincy. Those who denied God needed to be purged, their souls expunged from the Earth. Backstabbing, betrayals and even classical offensives were all moral choices to be used in destroying such adversaries. But there were a few lines she adamantly refused to cross. The willing

slaughter of innocent men, women and children, even if they were all heathens, was something she could never condone.

It was one thing to slaughter enemy soldiers in the name of God. After all, those willing to take up arms against the Lord deserved to be sent to Hell, sentenced to eternal torment and agony. But Maxwell's words left a bitter taste in her mouth. The dangers posed by the Quincy were well documented. Massive casualties were expected in destroying such an ancient and unholy enemy of the Vatican. But this was different. Purposefully ordering her fellow servants of God to murder thousands of heathens? Calling up the Church's full authority to destroy London while enemies such as Ragyo Kiryuin lurk in the shadows?

This wasn't *right* .

Spitting angrily on the ground as she sneered angrily into the encroaching conflagration, Heinkel stomped her foot against the ground and snarled, "Launching a crusade to kill these blasphemous Quincy and their heretical king is one thing, but this? This isn't God's work, Maxwell!"

Ryuko's armored fingers tightly gripped the Scissor Blade as hundreds of missiles slammed into the streets of London, the resulting destruction and chaos creating plumes of smoke and burning ash that temporarily obscured the glowing horizon. As Senketsu's shocked voice reverberated inside her mind, the Kamui unable to comprehend how a human could ever willingly order the deaths of millions of people, Ryuko gnashed her teeth and turned her growing fury upon the nearest available target.

Her feathery hair flaring wildly as she pointed the Scissor Blade at Heinkel, the crimson weapon glowing faintly due to her emotional state, Ryuko stared into the paladin's eyes and exclaimed, "So what was that crap you were saying? Because it sounds like my 'friend' just said he wants to kill everyone in London! Including Ichigo and me!"

The paladin didn't react to Ryuko's threatening gesture, her expression unchanged even with the Scissor Blade hovering inches from her face. A scowl quickly spreading across her face upon spotting Maxwell, the silver haired man safely held within a shatterproof box, Heinkel's voice remained steady even as a cold sensation crept down her spine, "Something's wrong."

Integra clenched her hand into a fist upon hearing Wolfe's callous response. Scoffing as she turned from the conflagration enveloping her fair city, she noted the expression on Ryuko's Kamui before narrowing her eyes suspiciously at the paladin, "What do you mean 'wrong'?"

"It does not matter, Integra Hellsing," Heinkel countered, her cassock billowing as she turned away from Ryuko. The paladin did not see the point in explaining herself further to the other woman. Given both the heightened animosity between their respective organizations and the supernatural power Integra Hellsing still commanded, it would be extremely unwise to admit that the vanguard of paladins currently escorting her comprised Iscariot's only planned response to Millennium's attack.

When they first received word that Millennium was moving towards London, Maxwell had confided that while committing most of the Vatican's forces against their ancient enemy would assure victory, the cost would be staggering. Even the most optimistic scenarios anticipated more than half of the papal knights perishing against the blasphemous power of the Quincy and their undead soldiers. They would be completely defenseless when Ragyo Kiryuin felt it was time to feed humanity to her eldritch master. Instead, Maxwell had thought it best to wait until Alucard returned to London. Although the loss of life would undoubtedly be tragic, allowing the vampire to deal with the Quincy guaranteed the Vatican would be at full strength when the time came to slay Ragyo Kiryuin and her unholy followers.

"Gather our forces," Heinkel's boots echoed softly on the pavement as she approached Yumiko, the Japanese paladin's face pulled into

a tight grimace, "Maxwell has turned his back on God and must be brought back to his senses... by any means necessary."

"I'm way ahead of you!" Ryuko was sick and tired of standing around doing nothing while people died. Growling angrily, she swung the Scissor Blade outwards and shouted, "I'll deal with the bastard myself! Senketsu Ship -"

Senketsu had barely started shifting into his flight configuration when Ryuko suddenly found herself staring down several anti-vampire weapons, courtesy of the paladins rapidly moving to surround both her and Integra. The annoyed scowl on her face twisting angrily when one of the men attempted to grab her arm, she didn't even bother turning around before using that same arm to punch the offender hard enough to send him flipping backwards across the street. She couldn't believe these idiots thought they could take her down. Didn't they hear about her fight with that undead bastard? Shooting a harsh glare at Heinkel and Yumiko standing in the background, Ryuko prepared to deal with the rest of the paladins only to freeze when they aimed their weapons at Integra.

"Our orders are clear, Father Wolfe!" A nameless paladin declared while keeping his weapon trained on the forehead of a clearly unimpressed Integra, the anger simmering just beneath her eyes causing a bead of sweat to trickle down his cheek, "Sir Integra Hellsing is to be taken into custody and Ryuko Matoi dealt with!"

"Is that right?" Ryuko mockingly asked as she haphazardly spun the Scissor Blade around her wrist, the motion causing a couple of the paladins to involuntarily step away. While it would be extremely easy for her to take these idiots down, she needed to be careful in case one of them decided to shoot Integra. Fighting a pissed off Alucard was not something she wanted to do anytime soon.

Flexing her fingers around the Scissor Blade as a plan formed in her mind, Ryuko stiffened in surprise when loud gunshots echoed throughout the area and she felt several small objects impact her back. As Senketsu's multicolored eye narrowed angrily, Ryuko

quirked an eyebrow and looked over her shoulder. Standing several meters behind her with blood trailing from the small cut on his cheek, the idiot she punched earlier stared at her in complete shock while wisps of smoke drifted upwards from the muzzle of his pistol. The corner of her mouth curling into a half-cocked grin when she noticed the deformed slugs on the ground, she turned back to the nervous paladins, "Heh... so what was that about killing me?"

Integra ignored the collective firepower aimed at her person as she tilted her head towards Ryuko. Her expression remaining stoic even as the pistol pressed against the small of her back started growing mildly uncomfortable, she adjusted the hem of her sleeve and asked, "I hate to impress upon you any further, Ryuko, but I think it's time we returned to headquarters. So if you don't mind..."

"Right!"

There was the soft sound of Ryuko's heel clicking against the asphalt before she vanished in a burst of motion too fast for anyone but Heinkel and Yumiko to follow. Reappearing on the other side of Integra a moment later with the Scissor Blade held out to the side, the teenager smirked when every single paladin suddenly found their weapon falling to pieces. Senketsu's armor glowing with a faint crimson light as she pirouetted around, Ryuko didn't hesitate before reaching out and grabbing the nearest paladin. Effortlessly hefting the much larger man into the air with only a single hand, she glared at Heinkel before shouting, "Alright, last chance! Tell your friends to back off!"

Yumiko grunted and twisted her upper body sideways in response to Ryuko's actions, one foot sliding backwards as she drew her blessed katana from its sheath. Her black hair waving in the autumn breeze as the surrounding conflagration caused the polished blade to shimmering with an ominous glow, Yumiko frowned before tearing away the white scarf wrapped around her neck. Fighting against Ryuko was the last thing she wanted to do. The teenager's innate strength and speed, bolstered even further by that Kamui wrapped around her body, meant any battle was a foregone conclusion. She

would be cut to pieces in seconds, even accounting for Ryuko's amateurish swordsmanship.

Holding her katana horizontally in front of her body, Yumiko spent several seconds mulling over her options before addressing her partner, "Maxwell's behavior aside, we still have our orders. Sir Integra Hellsing must be taken into custody before Alucard returns."

"This doesn't feel right," Heinkel spat in response, her lips pulled into a grimace, before snapping her head upwards when she felt an unholy presence rapidly approaching.

A familiar but darkened spiritual energy washed over the nearby streets as a stream of glowing shadows tore through the night sky before slamming violently into the ground directly in front of Integra Hellsing. Her body materializing out of the encompassing darkness as the force of the impact sent the surrounding paladins flying away, save for the man still being held by a surprised Ryuko, Seras Victoria's crimson eyes narrowed upon spotting Heinkel Wolfe. The shadows composing her left arm writhing chaotically when Yumiko instinctively reacted to her arrival, the blessed katana snapping upwards, Seras didn't relax her stance as she addressed her superior, "My apologies, Sir Integra. I tried arriving as quickly as possible but something prevented me from finding you."

" ***Ryuko, do you see that?***" Senketsu's multicolored eye widened as he recognized the writhing mass of darkness twisting through the air, the memories of their fight against Alucard causing the Kamui to ripple slightly around Ryuko's body, "***Look at her arm. It's just like -***"

"Yeah, it's the same shadow crap as the undead bastard!" Ryuko growled before unceremoniously throwing the paladin somehow still held in her grip over her shoulder.

Seras' eyes shifted when she heard Ryuko speak with her Kamui. It was only now, after forced to drink blood and become a true vampire, that she finally understood how the teenager could have

fought and survived against her master. Life Fibers were truly ancient and nearly unfathomable creatures, possessing unnatural power and regeneration. She could see why Nudist Beach, even with all their advanced weaponry and specialized Anti-Life Fiber ammunition, would have difficulty defeating something like Ragyo Kiryuin.

"Are you all right, Sir Integra?" Doing her best not to stare at Ryuko as she examined Senketsu's form-fitting armor, Seras waited a few seconds before looking over her shoulder and asking, "Any injuries?"

"Nothing more than a few minor scrapes thanks to Ryuko's timely interference," Integra replied stoically, her expression hardening slightly as she realized what most likely happened at the manor, "How's the headquarters?"

"We were attacked by enemy soldiers led by a Sternritter. With Nudist Beach's assistance we managed to kill every last one of them. However..." Seras momentarily trailed off when she vividly remembered the carnage following in the wake of Zorin Blitz's rampage through the manor. Her blood red eyes dimming slightly as shattered remnants of the nightmares the Quincy dredged up passed along the periphery of her mind, Seras stared crestfallenly at the ground before adding, "The mansion has been destroyed. And Mr. Bernadotte... he is dead, sir."

"I see..."

Integra had known the moment Seras arrived that only the most desperate of situations, such as Millennium launching a full-scale assault on the manor, could have forced the former police girl to willingly drink the blood of a human being. Calmly reaching into her coat while observing Senketsu's single eye staring at the newly transformed Seras, she placed the unlit cigar between her lips and stated, "You drank from Mr. Bernadotte, didn't you? You've finally become a true vampire."



"Yes, I have!" Seras happily exclaimed with a forced smile on her face.

"So, it's come to this," Heinkel's tone contained a mixture of respect and mild astonishment as she slowly approached the newly transformed vampire.

It felt rather strange to see the once naïve and cowardly vampire, who fled in terror during their confrontation in Badrick, emit such a powerful unholy aura. But the shadows clinging to the tattered remains of her shoulder, wisps of darkness and corruption curling through the air around her body, was proof enough to the paladin that Seras Victoria had evolved into the same creature as her arrogant master. Her mouth twitching imperceptibly as she swiftly reaching into her cassock, pulling out a heavily customized pistol before aiming it squarely at Seras' forehead, Heinkel didn't flinch when she found several sharpened shadows hovering inches away from her throat.

"You've become a true creature of darkness, Seras Victoria," Heinkel begrudgingly complimented as she lowered her weapon and stepped away from Seras, "I suppose we'll have to update your kill on sight orders. But know this - I will be the one to finally put a bullet through your heart. Ending your unholy existence once and for all."

"I'm looking forward to it," Seras replied, a slightly unhinged expression adorning her face as the tension lessened, "It won't be anything like last time. I'm much stronger now."

"Hang on a second!"

Ryuko's heels rapidly clicked against the ground as she moved between Seras and Heinkel, the fact that the vampire basically confessed to devouring someone's soul pushed aside for the moment. Ignoring the slightly unnerving sensation of the shadows twisting through the air around her body, Ryuko stared into Seras' glowing eyes and asked, "You said you came from your

headquarters, right? Then you must know what happened to Anderson!"

"I sensed Mr. Anderson's presence after the battle. He was greatly wounded but still alive," Seras answered, causing Ryuko to sigh in relief at the news. Confused when the teenager turned away and mumbled under her breath at Senketsu, her enhanced hearing picking out key phrases like 'still able to get answers from that bastard', Seras grumbled quietly before half-heartedly adding, "Mr. Mikisugi survived the battle as well."

"You're fucking kidding me!" Ryuko's glare intensified as she turned back to Seras and exclaimed, "That naked asshole's in the city?!"

It was bad enough having to deal with the pervert at Honnouji Academy, but at least she had been able to count on Ichigo backing her up whenever the naked bastard tried any of his stupid tricks. And then there was that little stunt he pulled at the end of the Great Culture and Sports Festival. No matter how many times he apologizing, or bribed Mako into doing it for him, she would never forgive the bastard for stopping her from saving Ururu.

The crimson undertone in her feathery hair momentarily brightening as she tightened her grip on the Scissor Blade, Ryuko took a second to calm down, "Did the bastard at least leave his pants on? Because if he's running around London naked I'm going to -"

Ryuko froze midsentence when she heard the unmistakable sound of faint laughter on the wind, a cold sensation momentarily creeping down her spine moments before an extremely dark but familiar spiritual energy washed over the city. As both Heinkel and Seras perked up and turned in surprise towards the Thames River, the former shocked at how quickly the vampire managed to return, Ryuko narrowed her eyes. There was no mistaking this presence. Not after what happened the night they arrived in London.

" ***Ryuko,***" Senketsu's multicolored eye quivered as he asked, "***Do you feel that?***"

Senketsu's armor crackling as she clenched her empty hand into a fist, Ryuko opened her mouth to speak but was surprised when Heinkel suddenly sprinted forward. Briefly watching the paladin effortlessly leap several stories into the air, her boots landing softly on the rooftop of the same building she crashed into just a few minutes earlier, Ryuko growled angrily as she flipped the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip, "Yeah, it looks like the undead bastard's back..."

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An amused grin stretched across the Major's features as his arms fervently swept through the air in rhythm to the conflagration raging below, the screams of survivors mixing with the occasional explosion into a beautiful cacophony of music. This glorious night was the moment he had waited decades to witness. Despite the myriad of obstacles fate had deigned to place in their path, including garnering Ragyo Kiryuin's undivided attention, the Sternritter took pride in the knowledge that he would be one of the select few to watch His Majesty's plans come to fruition. Everything was nearly ready. The various actors were in position, ignorant of the fact that they were mere puppets to be discarded at His Majesty's whim.

All that was left was to wait for the curtains to rise over the final act.

The sudden stiffening of the late autumn wind was the only warning the Major felt before an intimately familiar and dark spiritual energy washed across the city. Slowly lowering his arms when the HMS Eagle emerged out of the thickening fog enveloping the Thames River, the once proud and majestic *Invincible-Class* VTOL aircraft carrier now little more than a dilapidated shell of its former self, the Major's yellow eyes shone with barely concealed anticipation as he pleasantly announced, "It would seem our guest of honor has finally arrived onto the stage."

"Hold still!"

Standing just a few feet away with an exasperated expression plastered on his face, the Doktor audibly growled when the Captain attempted to pull his bleeding forearm out of his grip for the fifth time in so many minutes. His brow creasing into a scowl when he was forced to circulate spiritual energy through his arteries just to keep the larger man from leaving, the Doktor shook his head as he began dressing the Captain's wound, "You know wounds from a weapon like the Scissor Blade will not regenerate. You'll get an infection if you don't let it heal properly!"

"Please, I seriously doubt our dear Captain can even get sick," Schrodinger's ears twitched playfully as he stood at attention next to the Major, gloved hands folded against the nape of his neck while pink eyes narrowed in thinly veiled amusement at the Doktor's angrily glare. The cat-like Quincy couldn't understand why the Doktor was so worried about the Captain's health. After all, the perpetually mute Sternritter hadn't gotten sick even once in his more than one thousand years of serving His Majesty. So the odds that he would get an infection, even from a wound caused by the Scissor Blade, were nonexistent.

"That's not the point!"

His fingers twitching as he angrily marched towards Schrodinger, any thoughts the Doktor had about punishing the disrespectful Sternritter were quickly forgotten when Quilge Opie appeared on the Deus Ex Machina in a burst of Hirenkyaku. Noticing the crimson splattered along the Quincy's left sleeve, tracing a path from his wrist all the way to the shoulder, the Doktor adjusted his specialized lenses as he leaned forward, "An injury? I didn't think the Vatican possessed anyone besides Heinkel Wolfe with enough power to wound someone of your stature."

"They don't," Quilge calmly replied with just the barest hints of disdain as he lazily swung his saber through the air before sheathing, the thick coating of blood splattering across the zeppelin.

Absentmindedly brushing a hand against the blood staining his sleeve, the action accomplishing little more than smearing the liquid deeper into the uniform, Quilge briefly took note of the Captain's wounded forearm as he walked towards the Major. Given that Ichigo Kurosaki was still fighting Bazz-B the last time he checked, it would be fair to assume that his comrade had sustained that injury while fighting Ryuko Matoi.

"Oh my," Quilge sighed when Ryuko Matoi's nauseating spiritual energy skyrocketed, undoubtedly a response to Alucard's arrival, "This is turning into quite the quandary, wouldn't you say?"

"And that is why we should be thankful to Alucard!"

The excitement permeating the Major's voice was nearly palpable as he firmly clasped his hands together. His thick glasses shining malevolently in the flickering light, the Sternritter stared out over the burning streets of London before continuing, "Trust is something that is easy to destroy but ever so hard to obtain. And thanks to his actions during that one fateful stormy night seven days ago, Alucard found himself bereft of both assistance and allies during his hour of need. I am speaking, of course, of Rip Van Winkle's usage of Heilig Königs Palisade. If either child had deigned to accompany Alucard, they would have easily torn through His Majesty's protection with complete ease, rendering our efforts at containing him all for naught."

"Rip Van Winkle accomplished her stated task to His Majesty's specifications," Quilge pointedly acknowledged, the corners of his mouth twisting into a displeased frown as he stared in the general direction of the Hellsing Manor. A disappointed sigh leaving his lips when he sensed Seras Victoria's distinct spiritual energy, Quilge raised a finger in front of his face and evenly added, "But the same cannot be said for Zorin. Her failure at killing Alucard's un-awakened progeny is most disconcerting."

"You should have seen it. Nudist Beach really brought out all the stops to kill her!"

A contemptuous smirk stretched across Schrodinger's face as the Sternritter tilted his head backwards, the memories of Zorin's pitiful final moments among the living still fresh in his mind, "They really didn't hold back! First there was Alexander Anderson, who possessed quite a lot of spiritual energy for a human. And then there was that amazing walking panzer with enough firepower to tear through Zorin's Blut Vene. She would have died before stepping through the front doors if not for her Vollständig."

"One mustn't underestimate the tenacity of those who have fought against a monster like Ragyo Kiryuin," the Major lightly chastised, completely deafened to Schrodinger's response as he watched Alucard swiftly leap from the battle-torn deck of the HMS Eagle.

Quilge felt only the barest shifting of spiritual energy when the Captain took a single step forward before vanishing in an extremely rapid burst of Hirenkyaku. His lips pursed into a tight grimace as he watched his comrade race across the rooftops below, the former captain of the Jagdarmee pulled his hat further onto his forehead and grimly stated, "Zorin's death complicates the Schatten Ausrufung. If Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi were to realize the true extent of our plans..."

"Ah! But they won't!"

Raising an arm into the air while the corners of his mouth twisted into a manic grin, the Major stared at his outstretched fingers before harshly clenching them into a fist, "For you see, I have ingrained into their minds a singular and memetic notion. A self-replicating thought, if you would. That idea, my dear comrades, is quite simple - *insanity*!"

"Most people, be they human, shinigami or Quincy, view insanity as something to be avoided at any cost! For how could a rational being hope to understand the mismatched firing of neurons within the mind of the insane? Such a thing is incomprehensible! And so in their deluded obliviousness they refuse to believe anything else! They *cling* to the narrow view of reality! So when I professed the desire for

an endless war, an eternal conflict with blood running freely through the streets of London, our adversaries instantly believed that to be the truth! I was but a raving lunatic and His Majesty a madman! Nothing could be further from the truth!"

"I *love* war," the Major momentarily paused as he took a deep breath, the crisp autumn air burning his lungs. Holding both arms outstretched in front of his body, the Sternritter's grin imperceptibly fell as he continued, "But a war without meaning or motives? A war created simply for the sake of war? Such nonsense! A war must always have a purpose, even if said purpose is obscured behind fallacies and delusions! The eternal war Integra Hellsing and her allies believed I was planning, the endless conflict Alucard so eagerly anticipated, does not exist! For tonight is both the beginning and end of this glorious battle!"

Pressing a finger firmly against the receiver attached to his glasses when it blared to life, Quilge calmly listened to the slightly muffled voice on the other end of the connection before turning in amusement towards the Major, "Integra Hellsing, Seras Victoria and Ryuko Matoi have been spotted in close proximity to where Alucard landed. The soldats eagerly await your orders to engage the vampire."

"Engage? You mean sacrifice," Schrodinger mockingly scoffed as he sat down on the zeppelin, one hand lazily propping up his chin, "None of these pathetic excuses for soldiers will survive what is about to happen."

"And so it came to pass..."

The Major's grin widened when he sensed a disruption in the boundaries between dimensions, a shadow portal in the shape of a six-pointed cross phasing into existence a few inches above the zeppelin's patterned surface, "That those, who had once gathered before a painted line of spears, found themselves reunited before the real thing. On one side His Majesty's most loyal soldats, the five hundred and twenty one vampire soldiers of the Jahrtausendarmee.

On the other, two thousand nine hundred and forty three knights of the Roman Catholic Curia - the Ninth Airborne Mobile Crusade - led by a man whose mind has already fallen victim to Ragyo Kiryuin's dreadful control. And in the middle, we have England's Hellsing Organization with but three mighty soldiers still standing."

Holding his arms once more in the air as a man silently emerged from the shadow portal behind him, creeping darkness desperately clinging to his white uniform, the Major's yellow eyes gleamed wildly as he passionately continued unabated, "And last but certainly not the least we have our vaunted allies - Nudist Beach! An organization opposed to the tyranny of Life Fibers that through sheer coincidence has found themselves embroiled in this fateful battle. Five hardened members of this organization remain within the city, but the course of this war rests on the shoulders of two teenagers."

"Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi..." The Major's tone shifted as he mentioned the names of the two Life Fiber Hybrids, a sense of longing permeating his voice. Lowering his arms while pivoting around, the Major briefly glanced at the newest member of the Sternritter before turning towards the Doktor, "Two children with bodies woven completely out of Life Fibers, wielding weapons that can easily cut through our Blut Vene. Both are progeny of those directly touched by the Original Life Fiber, their very existence anathema against all of creation, and yet in their hands lay the keys to our salvation."

As the Major finished speaking and turned his attention back to the conflagration raging below, the Doktor took the opportunity to examine the new arrival. One gloved finger absentmindedly adjusted the focus on the side of his glasses, the Doktor's gaze rapidly crossed over the Sternritter's uniform before falling onto his white fingerless gloves, "It seems His Majesty completed the writing ritual ahead of schedule. How truly fascinating..."

"Doktor, you know it is quite rude to stare," the Major halfheartedly chastised, his attention focused on the thick and encompassing darkness beginning to wash across the city, "And here it comes! The



final act of the Schatten Ausrufung is upon us. This is the night His Majesty has anticipated for over ninety years! The players are already on stage as the curtain rises over this Walpurgis Dawn!"

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A bitter autumn wind coursed through the suddenly quiet streets as the paladin glared venomously at the crimson abomination waiting in the darkness. The creature's slightly amused expression, the subtly shifting shadows contorting around his boots, enough to cause her fingers to twitch of their own accord. Grey-green eyes narrowing as the whispered prayers and hushed mutterings from the surrounding crusaders echoed loudly in the early hour, the deathly silence following in the wake of the vampire's arrival causing the air to unnaturally still, Heinkel resisted the temptation to growl.

This didn't make any damn sense. Alucard *shouldn't* be here yet. Even with his entire repertoire of unholy and eldritch abilities, powered by the souls he used to sustain his unnatural and blasphemous existence, he shouldn't have been able to cross the Atlantic Ocean so damn quickly! All of their contingencies and worst-case scenarios had predicted the vampire's return requiring at least another thirty minutes. And in most circumstances the undead monster's earlier than anticipated arrival would have been bad enough. But to appear during the zenith of the Ninth Crusade's battle against Millennium and their Quincy superiors, right when most of the soldiers were gathered in one place?

It *couldn't* be a coincidence.

While Heinkel's mind tried to fathom the reasoning behind Alucard's sudden appearance on the battlefield, the vampire's mouth was stretched into a pleasant smile that contained just the barest hints of madness. He could feel the various energies suffusing the sky that burned so heavenly above the city, the familiar sensation in the deepest recesses of his darkened soul bringing back fond memories.

Both of those teenagers, those two interesting creatures that professed the inane notion that they still possessed their humanity, were still around. In the depths of his mind he could instinctively sense their Life Fibers, the alien creatures shining like a beacon in the darkness.

One of the children, the temperamental girl he fought that rainy night, was even standing next to his master. How *amusing*.

Grinning predatorily as blue-white spiritual energy quickly coalesced around the Captain's tightly clenched hands, the Sternritter's glaring stoically at him from underneath the white officer's cap, Alucard's entire body stiffened before he passionately shouted, "My lord and master, Integra Hellsing! Give me your orders!"

Situated in relative safety on the mostly intact rooftop of an old church as her servant's voice echoed across the night, Integra Hellsing gazed calmly at the scene unfolding below with a mildly detached expression. As individual strands of platinum blonde hair fell across her face, the light from the surrounding conflagration reflecting ominously off her glasses, she exhaled slowly before momentarily turning her attention towards the teenager standing several feet away. Armored fingers clenched tightly around the handle of the red Scissor Blade hanging limply at her side, the Kamui's multicolored eye shifting back and forth, Ryuko's face was set into an irritated scowl as she glowered at the vampire.

The leader of the Hellsing Organization understood quite well the teenager's frustration and annoyance, as misguided and pointless as it was, with her servant. After all, Ryuko's first encounter with Alucard hadn't been the most amiable. He had killed two members of Nudist Beach while injuring dozens of innocent bystanders before confronting her, resulting in a battle where she not only survived completely uninjured but also managed to inflict temporary wounds upon her servant. However, after Wolfe's departure she had given the teenager a single warning - no matter how angry she might be with her servant, despite any desires for revenge she still possessed, that she not leave her side.

"Alucard, take heed. Here are your orders."

Integra's authoritative tone resonated in the deathly quiet night as she addressed her servant. Sweeping an arm through the air while stepping towards the edge of the roof, the autumn wind causing her coat to billow around her body, the intense anger she felt making itself known as she continued, "Your silver gun shall turn the white army crimson. Your iron gun will stain the Quincy army scarlet. I would know my foes by the marks of red you leave upon their chests! Now search and destroy! **SEARCH AND DESTROY!** Run them down! Do not let any of them leave the island alive!"

An ominous wind blew through the streets as Alucard grinned at his master's words, "My master... it shall be done. As you command."

"Release Control Art Restriction - Zero!" Integra's tone didn't falter as she clenched her hand into a fist, "Announce your return! Say the words and release your full power! Now!"

The immediate silence that followed Integra's declaration was nearly deafening, the harsh and bitter wind blowing through the streets seeming to still as the full weight of her orders bore down upon her servant. Crimson eyes half-lidded as he exhaled slowly, Alucard drank in the nearly forgotten feeling of exaltation coursing through his blackened heart. He could feel the locks placed upon his powers by Abraham Van Hellsing, that epitome of a human who miraculously defeated him more than a century ago, slowly breaking apart, unraveling under his master's orders. As the seals woven into his gloves shone with a fierce blood red light that put the Wolfe and the Captain on edge, everything seemed to come to a crashing halt when pulse of vile spiritual energy tore its way out of his body.

With the singular exception of Heinkel none of the crusaders, trained to counter supernatural threats and monsters, were prepared for the unholy existence that was Alucard's true and unbridled power. Beads of sweat trickled down terrified and panicked faces when more than half of the gathered papal knights were violently driven onto their knees, shaking hands holding onto their weapons to keep

themselves from collapsing entirely onto the blood-soaked street. On the other end of the spectrum, the undead soldiers were fairing exponentially worse. Their rudimentary ability to sense spiritual energy allowed them to glimpse Alucard's true power, the infinite darkness dwelling with the depths of the vampire's soul enough to make the battle-hardened soldiers take several fearful steps backwards.

Standing in the middle of all this with a passive expression on his face, the edges of Alucard's overcoat started dissolving away into flickering glowing shadows as he spoke, "I am the Bird of Hermes..."

Ryuko grumbled irritably under her breath as she glowered at the undead bastard, the unpleasant memories of their fight still fresh in her mind. She couldn't believe the vampire had this much power hidden up his sleeves. His strength had been completely unreal during their fight once he started getting serious, easily putting all of Nui Harime's psychotic power to shame. But this was an entirely different level of bad. The strange power radiating from Alucard was growing darker by the second and she had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that things were only going to get worse.

God damn it! Just how much was this guy holding back against her?

Fingers strumming angrily against the handle of the Scissor Blade while her eyes stared at the barely noticeable shadows emerging from within Alucard's overcoat, Ryuko perked up in surprise when Senketsu suddenly shivered violently around her body, "Senketsu? What's wrong?"

**" I don't know,"** Senketsu shuddered a second time as he replied, his multicolored eye narrowing apprehensively while goose bumps broke out across his armored form, **"But my Life Fibers started quivering strangely the moment that woman finished speaking. Stay on your guard, Ryuko. I have a feeling something really bad is about to happen."**

She had been through a lot of shit since transferring to Honnouji Academy and meeting Ichigo and Mako. From months of fighting Satsuki and her stupid nonsense, hunting down Nui Harime for what she did to her dad and dealing with her psychotic bitch of a mother, Ryuko thought she developed a relatively accurate sense of danger. But Alucard and his vampire bullshit threw all that out the window, "Bad, huh? Worse than what happened to Junketsu?"

**" Worse than what happened to Junketsu."**

"That's bad," Ryuko muttered quietly as she mulled over Senketsu's answer. The red undertone in her feathery hair glowing faintly as she propped the Scissor Blade on her shoulder, Ryuko kicked her heel against the side of the roof before smirking, "Don't worry, Senketsu. If that undead bastard tries anything, we'll just have to find a way to kick his ass!"

Senketsu sincerely hoped Ryuko was right and that his power would be enough to deal with Alucard. It was shameful that he couldn't even explain to her why he had suddenly started shivering. Growling under his metaphorical breath as he gave the vampire one final unblinking look, the Kamui turned his attention to his wearer and said, **"I suppose we could even ask Ichigo and Mugetsu for help. But perhaps we could ask that woman next to us for information. After all, she is Alucard's master."**

"Oh yeah..."

As Ryuko started turning towards Integra, determined to get some damn answers about her servant, she froze when the barest sense of something seriously wrong prickled at the edges of her mind. She would normally have just ignored it, chalking it down to whatever the vampire was doing, but the source of the feeling creeping slowly down her spine and causing Senketsu no small amount of discomfort *wasn't* coming from the bastard. Flipping the Scissor Blade around in her grip as she marched across the rooftop, her blue eyes momentarily locking with Integra's, Ryuko looked across the burning horizon before suddenly staggering back in shock when she found

the source. The ship. That damned creepy ship the undead bastard arrived on.

"What the fuck?" Ryuko found herself nearly speechless when the Life Fibers composing her body reacted to whatever was on the ship, painting an extremely vivid and nightmarish image of something she couldn't even begin to understand. Angrily growling as she spun around and glared at Integra, her desire for answers growing by the second, she had barely managed to take a single step towards the woman before the undead bastard's voice echoed loudly in the quiet night and all hell broke loose.

"Here standeth the Bird of Hermes! EATING MY OWN WINGS!"

Heinkel's boots skidded along the ground as she hastily threw herself away from Alucard, the unholy miasma of vile energy erupting from his body sending shivers racing down her spine. The sheer intensity of the power radiating from the vampire was mindboggling, easily eclipsing anything she had ever felt. If they didn't find a way to kill him here and now, before he could reach the pinnacle of his strength, they might all be doomed. Cursing grimly as she flicked her wrists outwards, fingers expertly clasping around the familiar cold steel of her pistols as they slid out of her sleeves, the paladin's cassock fluttered violently around her body as she leaned sideways and unloaded both clips into the smirking vampire.

A sharp crackle echoed loudly in the darkness as a hailstorm of bullets exploded from the paladin's pistols in less time than it took her to blink. As the blessed rounds spun through the air and slammed into Alucard's grinning visage, blood and visceral spraying wildly as large chunks of his body simply evaporated into nothingness, the Captain grunted softly before deciding to make his move. Rushing forward using Hirenkyaku to bolster his speed, wisps of dust clung futilely to his overcoat as he stomped one foot against the ground and twisted his upper body. Fingers flexing tightly as he thrust his right arm towards Alucard, the Sternritter's stoic expression didn't waver as the spiritual energy surrounding his hand erupted

forward and reduced what remained of the vampire's body into scraps of flesh and shadows.

As if reacting to some unseen signal, the soldiers still able to stand under the immensity of Alucard's power screamed loudly before rushing forward. The gathered crusaders, fear and terror evident in their eyes, raised shaking hands and fired everything they had at the amorphous mass of burning shadows. Hundreds of rounds pierced into the vampire's increasingly inhuman form, flesh quickly dissolving into writhing shadows under the deluge of bullets, while the undead soldiers rapidly sprinted towards Alucard, hands desperately reaching for the Seele Schneiders clasped on their belts.

"What the hell?"

Sneering when the slides of her pistols clicked empty, the last of her rounds buried somewhere within Alucard's monstrous form, Heinkel ignored the chill racing down her spine as another pulse of power rippled through the night. It felt as if the very air was growing heavier. Nothing in the Vatican's archives or the detailed memoirs confiscated from Jonathan Harker mentioned anything of this nature! Had they underestimated the true scope of the vampire's power or had he simply been holding back this entire time?

"Damn it!" Crossing her arms as she crouched and leapt upwards, fingers expertly reloading her pistols in the blink of an eye, the paladin landed on the edge of a nearby roof before growling, "It feels like Hell itself is erupting in the streets! Just what sort of monster is Alucard?"

"To make..." Alucard's voice warbled with an audibly strained tone while bullets continued tearing into his form, "Myself tame..."

Anxious shouts of 'cease fire' resounded through the night when the vampire's voice suddenly trailed off, his body enveloped in a thickening cloud of acrid smoke that made it nearly impossible for anyone to view the writhing mass of burning shadows. Sharing confused expressions when nothing happened for several frightful

seconds, the undead soldiers winced when the receivers in their ears blared loudly before suddenly cutting off in a harsh and static-filled whine. Slowly backing away from the amorphous mass of shadow matter when it began growing in size, the blood-like substance threatening to spill forth and swallow them whole at any second, the soldiers tensed as every light within the city began flickering out one by one. The roaring flames that had previously turned the horizon a deep and menacing orange slowly faded away, leaving naught but a deep purple twilight.

"By all that is holy..." One crusader found his throat suddenly dry when he looked up into the sky and saw the pale white light of the full moon, the guiding beacon by which they had assaulted the heretic's capital, bleeding away into a deep and foreboding crimson. Forcibly looking away from the eldritch moon when his comrades began shouting in panic, a gasp leaving his mouth when hundreds of inhuman crimson eyes opened simultaneously amongst the shadows oozing towards them, he attempted to flee only for his body to fall apart in a spray of blood when dozens of impossibly sharp cards cut through his neck and limbs.

Fiery blood and twitching shadows clinging to their malformed bodies as they slowly emerged from the erupting mass of chaos, the white-clad forms of Tubalcain Alhambra and Rip Van Winkle were but a mockery of their former selves. The darkness composing Alucard's true form seemed to merge with the souls of the former Sternritter, warping and twisting their once human features into something that could only be called a caricature. As the thing that had once been Alhambra raised his only visible arm, a deep crimson glow covered the spiritual cards leaving his fingers as they spiraled through the air towards the armies.

"Fall back!"

The panicked order came across as little more than a terrified shout as the soldier leapt away from the vampire, his eyes widening when several X-Axis enhanced Heilig Pfeils pierced through his comrades before continuing unabated into the surrounding buildings. His boots



rapidly stomping on the cobblestones when he managed to catch a glimpse of the way Rip Van Winkle's face was only half-formed, the entire left side of the former Sternritter's head replaced by the same sinewy darkness chasing him, the soldat pressed a finger against his ear and shouted, "Fall back to defensive position sigma! I repeat, fall \_."

A choked gurgle cut off the soldat's desperate orders to retreat when a nodachi sliced into his neck, the polished blade severing his head in a violent spray of blood. Her sandaled foot touching down lightly onto the road, Alucard's shadowy mass replacing the entire right side of her body, the woman's long brown hair waved delicately as she effortlessly parried the Seele Schneider from another undead soldat. Adjusting her fingers around the sword as she spun around and bisected the Quincy, the symbol for the Third Division clearly visible on the back of her blood-soaked haori, the former shinigami captain's eyes were completely hollow as she walked through the rain of blood towards the retreating armies.

Ryuko's eyes stared in disbelief when the writhing shadows composing Alucard's body burst forth, the millions of souls and lives he'd absorbed over the centuries emerging as a tidal wave of death and suffering that quickly overwhelmed the soldiers below. This was the same bastard she thought she had a shot of beating? As she watched the blood and souls rush through the streets, killing anyone they came across, she came to a startling realization. She had thought her bitch of a mother and Nui Harime were bad, but how the hell could anyone defeat something like Alucard?

"This is the true face of the vampire Alucard."

Integra's cold tone, the nearly impassive tone in her voice as she answered Ryuko's unspoken question, easily reaching across the rooftop. Folding one hand within the pockets of her coat, the leader of the Hellsing Organization stared at the growing calamity below before continuing, "Blood is the currency of the soul, the medium by which life itself can be transferred. To drink blood is to take the

essence of the soul into oneself. You understand the ramifications of this now, don't you Seras?"

A crestfallen expression momentarily crossed Seras' face as she stood up, the shadows composing her left arm settling slightly in the process, "Yes."

"I thought someone like you would understand such a concept... Ryuko."

Nearly a second passed in absolute silence before Ryuko whipped her head towards Integra, a furious expression burning in her eyes. Ignoring the incensed glare from the teenager as she gazed at the crimson moon hovering almost directly overhead, the stars slowly but surely winking out of existence, she sighed and looked over her shoulder. As the deluge of blood crashed through the streets, the screams and moans of the perpetually damned an unholy cacophony in her ears, Integra narrowed her eyes at Ryuko and explained, "After the Grand Couturier's unwarranted appearance I spoke with Olivier Armstrong. She explained to me the fundamental aspects of your Kamui. Including how it functions. It feeds of your blood, does it not? Your Kamui grants you incredible power, enough strength to fight a true vampire, in exchange for nothing more than devouring your very essence."

"What the hell did you just say?!"

Ryuko snarled angrily at what the woman was insinuating about Senketsu. Flipping the Scissor Blade deftly around her wrist until it was pointing directly at Integra, steam shot out of the ventilation grill on her upper back as she growled, "Are you comparing Senketsu to that undead asshole? Take a good look! I don't think Senketsu is going around eating everyone in sight!"

"Both Alucard and Seras reported that your Kamui is fully capable of speech and reason. That it somehow communicates with you," Integra's tone never wavered as she purposefully walked towards Ryuko, aware of Seras' worried expression as she stopped several

inches away from the Scissor Blade and narrowed her eyes in suspicion, "But look at its brethren - the COVERS. They function by *devouring* humans, feeding off our blood like stuck pigs. Torn down to their barest essence, Life Fibers are no different than my servant."

"Why you..."

The biting curse about to leave her mouth was suddenly cut short when the building started shaking violently. Planting the Scissor Blade deeply into the rooftop for support when she nearly fell onto her ass, blue eyes noticing Integra was completely unaffected while Seras seemed to have perfect balance, Ryuko stiffened when she felt Senketsu shudder once more around her body, "Let me guess. That undead bastard's not quite done?"

" **Yes,**" Senketsu's multicolored eye didn't pull away from the blood-like substance flowing through the streets, the moans from the damned causing his Life Fibers to subconsciously shudder. Grunting as a burst of steam shot out of the ventilation grill on Ryuko's back, the Kamui took a moment to compose himself before looking at his wearer and growling, ***"Stay focused, Ryuko. Even if that woman's telling the truth, and Alucard's on our side, whatever he's becoming is completely different than what we fought."***

"Stop! It's impossible! How on earth could something like... like *that* exist?!"

Maxwell pressed his palms against the surface of the shatterproof glass as he stared in disbelief at the carnage running through the streets, violet eyes quivering as the unholy glowing substance. This was impossible! It didn't make any sense! None of the documents describing Alucard made any mention of this! The detailed journals written by those who fought the vampire described his ability to summon souls from within his body. But this... this defied reason. No, it went against nature itself. It spat on the very concept of life and death.

"Wallachia..."

The archbishop found his throat suddenly dry when dozens of heavily armored figures emerged from the shadowy mass, blood dripping down their bodies while hands clasped tightly around jagged spears and razor-sharp halberds. Even from this height, with the transfigured moon's crimson light bathing London in an eerie glow, he recognized the insignia on the undead army's breastplates. Staggering backwards, one hand placed against the podium while tens of thousands of damned souls materialized from the writhing chaos, Maxwell's voice came out as little more than a whisper, "By God... it's true. Y-You consumed them all! Your own soldiers and subjects! You devoured *everything* !"

"You... you..."

Words rapidly failed the archbishop as his back slammed against the glass with a dull thud. One hand holding tightly onto the podium as the built-in radio blared with the voices of an uncountable number of crusaders, the holy knights screaming for evacuation only to be cut off by the blasphemous bloody substance overtaking them, beads of sweat dripped down Maxwell's terrified face when a shrouded figure slowly emerged at the epicenter of the calamity. His mouth opened in a silent gasp as wisps of writhing darkness clung to the tattered cape clasped around the man's broad shoulders, the archbishop swallowed the lump in his throat before speaking loudly enough for the speakers to pick up, "You're a fiend! A monster! A devil! You... DRACULA!"

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## **Kamui Tales #31 - The Snow Day**

Mugetsu sighed in deep satisfaction as she lounged lazily on the couch, her uniform stretched over the edge of the armrest. Ichigo's house was much better for a Kamui such as herself than that cramped and ugly room Satsuki gave him when he joined the Student Council. There was a lot more freedom to move around and

relax, enjoying her daily ironing, without having her every actions closely watched by the Sewing Club. As she flipped over onto her back and yawned, white sleeves draped over her midsection, Mugetsu's multicolored eyes narrowed when a familiar presence hopped onto the couch, ***"What do you want?"***

***" We're doing a Kamui Tales!"*** Senketsu waved fervently at his fellow Kamui, ***"So get up!"***

***" No,"*** Mugetsu growled in annoyance before flipping onto her side, one sleeve purposefully slapping Senketsu in his lapels, ***"All that fighting in England was exhausting. Even with Ichigo's delicious blood I still want to take a nice, long nap. Go bother Junketsu or something."***

Grumbling while rubbing a sleeve against his lapels, Senketsu gave the uncaring Mugetsu one final scathing glare before hopping off the couch. Why did the task of getting Mugetsu to help with anything always fall on his sleeves? Everyone knew they didn't see collar to collar, which really frayed his threads. It didn't make sense. After all, in his humble opinion he was the most popular character in the story. So obviously the problem laid with his fellow Kamui and nothing he could have possibly done.

His multicolored eye staring at the pictures hanging on the wall as he left Ichigo's living room and headed towards the front door, Senketsu gave his best impression of a frown. If he wanted to find Junketsu and finish making the omake he would he need to complete the monumental task of opening the door. After nearly a minute of fumbling with the knob, lapels drooping at his lack of fingers, Senketsu grinned when he finally managed to open the door... only to find several inches of snow piled up against the house. Visibly deflating in defeat while a gust of bitter wind caused him to rustle, the Kamui stiffened in surprise when a firm hand gripped the back of his uniform and picked him off the ground.

"What the hell are you doing, Senketsu?" Ichigo flipped the Kamui around while slamming the front door shut with his other hand before

the entire house froze over.

**" I was trying to find Junketsu for the omake segment. I asked Mugetsu first... but... well..."** Waving a sleeve in the general direction of the other Kamui, which earned him a faint growl from Mugetsu, Senketsu quickly changed topics and turned his attention back to Ichigo, **"Where is Junketsu?"**

"Satsuki brought her back to Kisuke's shop to check something out," Ichigo replied in a mildly annoyed tone as he walked into the living room with Senketsu in tow. Letting go of the Kamui as he collapsed into the chair opposite the couch, Mugetsu's eyes instantly zeroing in on the fact he was wearing other clothing, the teenager rubbed the back of his neck before sighing, "Why did you try going outside instead of asking Ryuko to take you?"

**" Ryuko is currently sleeping in the spare bedroom right next to yours. It would have been rude to wake her up,"** Senketsu's neckerchief twitched as he motioned towards the stairs with his sleeve. Completely oblivious to Ichigo's annoyed reaction at his mentioning of the spare bedroom, otherwise known as Satsuki's new room, the Kamui hopped onto the other end of the couch from Mugetsu. It was really boring whenever Ryuko was wearing him. While he could surely find something to do - watch television, get ironed, annoy Mugetsu for everything she's done to him, get ironed - it just wasn't the same without Ryuko. Nobody else gave the perfect ironing, knew the secret to smoothing out all the creases in his threads with such expertise as Ryuko.

**" So why are you bothering us?"** Mugetsu's eyes focused intensely on the sweater Ichigo was wearing, a faint growl reverberating across the living room as thoughts of tearing apart the offending garment passed through her mind, **"Go find a coat hanger or something and leave us alone."**

**" I need someone to help with the omake!"** The Kamui angrily waved his sleeves at Mugetsu, sparks shooting between their multicolored eyes. Eventually turning away and huffing, Senketsu

folded his sleeves and grumbled, "***And I didn't want to ask Danketsu. Not after what she did last time...***"

"Sorry, but Mugetsu can't help you with whatever... *this...* is," Ichigo really didn't care to find out what Kinue's Kamui did to Senketsu and frankly he would rather *not* know. Simply thinking about this pretend little game was giving him a headache. Sighing as he stood up, Ichigo looked out the window into the raging snowstorm before adding, "I just came to pick her up. The iron finished heating and - "

There was a rapid flash of movement as Mugetsu leapt off the couch before throwing herself across the living room. Crashing into her wearer with nearly enough force to knock him over, the Kamui excitedly wrapped her pants and sleeves around Ichigo while her eyes shimmered with joy. She had nearly forgotten about Ichigo's promise to iron her thanks to all of Senketsu's stupid and annoying comments. And to think she wanted to take a nap when something like this was waiting for her!

" ***Don't forget the back of my sleeves this time, Ichigo!***" Mugetsu warned threateningly as Ichigo managed to untangle himself from her uniform. As the teenager walked towards the laundry room, the Kamui clinging tightly to his body, Mugetsu's voice slowly faded away, "***And make sure the iron's at the right temperature. It was far too cold last...***"

Senketsu sighed in depression when he found himself completely and utterly alone. As he hopped off the couch and began the long and slow climb upstairs, he couldn't suppress the jealousy he felt for Mugetsu. He would have loved to get ironed. It was one of the best parts of the day. His sleeves fumbling with the spare bedroom door once he reached the second floor, the Kamui was nearly bowled over when the door opened and Ryuko stepped out into the hallway.

"Senketsu? What are you doing out here?"

" ***Well... you were sleeping and I didn't want to bother you,***" the Kamui stumbled nervously over his words only to stiffen when Ryuko

picked him up.

"Man, you look exhausted," Ryuko muttered, her blue eyes half-opened as a yawn tore its way out of her throat, "Have you been fighting with Mugetsu again?"

**" *She started it!* "**

"Well, it doesn't matter," Ryuko didn't bother listening to anything else her Kamui had to say as she shuffled back into Satsuki's room. Carefully draping Senketsu over the special hook her sister had installed for Junketsu, the Kamui perking up before relaxing in contentment, she collapsed onto the bed and muttered into the pillow, "It's a freaking snow day so I'm going to get as much sleep as possible..."



# Death or Glory

*I present to you Chapter 49 of **To My Death I Fight** . I do apologize for the large wait. We are ramping up towards the climax of this arc and everything needs to be just right. So if that takes a few more days... or a week... then so be it. This is my gift for you, my readers, and so it's going to be the best damn chapter I can possibly make it. With my beta reader's help of course. So enjoy the chapter and write a review if you can. There is exactly... one OC in this chapter. But they are not exactly new to the story. I actually first mentioned them quite a few chapters ago. But they shouldn't be too hard to spot. In fact, it should be fairly obvious who they are once they make their appearance.*

*Also, I rewrote the entire last section from Chapter 4 from scratch - it was the scene with Nui inviting herself into the back of Isshin's car. There were several large and outstanding issues with what I've written, mostly pertaining to how Isshin usually deals with a Grand Couturier wild encounter. I don't think actively threatening to kill her, and promising to do so, is something Isshin would normally say. Yeah... that was a plot hole I had to fix. So instead of a minor patch I just said 'screw it' and rewrote the whole thing. Over a year of practice with the Kill la Kill cast really helped me rewrite Nui Harime's personality and mannerisms much more accurately, especially when she still had her eye patch.*

*So I hope you enjoy this chapter. Remember that I have a tvtropes page for this story. You should go check it out sometimes and maybe add a thing or two.*

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## Chapter 49 - Death or Glory

"What the hell?"

A frustrated expression crossed Batou's face as he slammed his foot against the brake. Jolting forward as the military jeep came to a screeching halt accompanied by the acrid smell of burning rubber, the nudist commander craned his head upwards and frowned at Maxwell's stammering declaration. What, did nobody in the Vatican ever realize that the most powerful vampire in the world was Dracula? It was hard to imagine that Iscariot, the organization whose sole purpose was destroying supernatural threats, never made that connection. All the undead asshole did was spell his name backwards.

"Damn it, some people are just morons," the nudist scoffed as he vaulted over the vehicle's door.

Ignoring the sound of his combat boots disturbing a puddle of what was most likely not water as he landed on the ground, Batou swept his grey eyes across the surrounding area and cursed angrily. He had thought the inhuman crap he witnessed in South American had been nasty. Paramilitary and other anti-government groups brutally executing captured civilians without a moment's hesitation. But this was just sickening. Corpses of men, women and children lined the road, unfortunate victims of the ongoing battle. Shaking his head in disgust at the brutality, the nudist's stomach dropped when he noticed several bodies looked like something had tried *eating* them.

These Quincy were some real sick bastards.

As he reached into the backseat of the jeep and picked up the M-15 Anti-Life Fiber Assault Rifle, the sound of someone landing on the opposite side of the vehicle not escaping him, Batou narrowed his eyes. There was something extremely wrong here. *More* wrong than the hundreds of corpses strewn throughout the area. Refusing to look over his shoulder at the blood-red moon hovering ominously in the night sky, the crimson orb bathing the darkened city in an eerie light that caused his skin to crawl, the nudist couldn't shake the feeling that someone was constantly watching him. But aside from

the gunships and helicopters flying in formation overhead they hadn't found any sign of life. Had the Quincy actually managed to kill three million people in the half hour it took him to leave and come back?

"Ye feel that unfathomably evil power?"

The sound of tearing cloth and linen drew Batou's attention as Alexander Anderson finished bandaging the wounds sustained from his battle against Zorin Blitz. His damaged cassock fluttering in the bitter autumn wind as he slowly marched past the front of the jeep and down the road, green eyes staring in transfixed fury at the crimson moon that seemed to pierce his very soul, there was a slight shimmer when the former paladin flexed his wrists and summoned a pair of tailor bayonets, "The vampire has released his full power onto the world for the first time in over a century."

Batou tightened his grip on the assault rifle at that piece of information. His boots scraping against the asphalt when something unsettling on the wind caught his attention, a faint but growing humming causing the hairs on the back of his neck to stiffen, he ignored the way the surrounding shadows appeared to writhe and turned to Anderson, "Alright, what the hell does that mean?"

"It means that - "

The former paladin's explanation was prematurely cut off when the deeply unsettling humming filling the air abruptly transformed into an increasingly growing cacophony of hellish screams and gurgling moans. Calloused fingers reflexively tightening around the pair of tailor bayonets as he turned towards the source of the noise, Anderson's mouth pulled into an angry sneer when the ground itself began to shake. As he stared across the crimson-lit city, his fellow commander taking a few hesitate steps backwards when the rumbling continued growing louder, the former priest's eyes widened when a veritable deluge of blood and death came roaring out of adjacent streets several hundred feet away.

"Oh, hell no!"

It took Batou less than a second to fully understand the situation before he turned around and sprinted away from the approaching torrent of undeath. He would need to be a complete idiot to think his weapon could do anything to that thing. Alucard already demonstrated the unnerving ability to rapidly regenerate from their specialized Anti-Life Fiber needles. If he tried fighting back, throwing everything in his arsenal at that thing, he more or less guaranteed a fate worse than being eaten alive by a COVERS. Wisps of condensation escaping his mouth as he pushed his body harder, exhaustion starting to overwhelm the adrenaline pumping through his veins, Batou had less than a second to cover his eyes when Anderson spun around and swung his arms forward.

Dozens of tailor bayonets, connected by a length of tightly woven detonating cord, flew out of the seals on the former paladin's gloves before stabbing deeply into the asphalt directly in front of the undead familiars. Gnashing his teeth as he waited several tense seconds for the tormented souls to get within range, Anderson's finger depressed the trigger in his hand before shutting his eyes as the entire street was temporarily engulfed in an explosion large enough to send a cloud of multicolored smoke rising high into the crimson-tinted midnight skies.

Even as the intense heat from the explosion brushed against the back of his neck, the abrupt shift in air pressure causing his ears to pop, Batou didn't try stopping to see if Anderson's attack did the trick. He highly doubted it did so much as slow down the oncoming wave of familiars, which meant he needed to think of something and fast. Moving to higher ground was the only feasible option that didn't involve him sprouting wings or suddenly gaining superhuman speed. The only question was whether they could reach the rooftops before the horde of undead souls overwhelmed and swallowed them.

A sudden flickering of blue light in the distance, the brightness a sharp contrast to the surrounding darkness, caught the nudist commander's attention. His eyes widening as he quickly recognized

the familiar tint of the pulsating coloration, Batou shouted at Anderson, "Incoming airlift! Raise your right arm!"

Moments before the deluge of familiars overwhelmed the nudists, blood dripping freely from the weapons poised inches from their backs, they were suddenly and harshly pulled off the ground when an armored hand clamped tightly around their wrists. The deep sapphire light bursting forth from his transformed lower body increasing in brilliance as he avoided the tortured souls attempting to latch onto him, Ichigo Kurosaki tightened his grip on his two passengers before twisting his body sideways and flying vertically upwards.

Glancing over his shoulder at the undead familiars flooding through the streets, their moans and screams mixing together into an unholy orchestra, Ichigo sighed in relief before flying towards the relative safety of the nearest rooftop. He didn't want to imagine what would have happened if he had been only a few seconds later. The lifeless bodies strewn throughout the city, their souls conspicuously absent, was bad enough.

Carefully releasing Batou and Anderson as he hovered several feet above the top of the building, shimmering blue stars briefly surrounded Ichigo as Mugetsu transformed back into her normal active configuration. The stiff autumn breeze causing his orange hair to shift slightly as Tournesol appeared in his hand, Ichigo silently grimaced for a few seconds before speaking in a depressed tone, "Sorry about that. Alucard's spiritual energy makes sensing anything difficult."

Pushing Ichigo's answer aside for the moment, Batou frowned as he slung the assault rifle over his shoulder and walked towards the edge of the roof. A light grunt leaving his mouth as he crouched onto one knee and observed the thousands of souls meandering with a purpose through the streets below, the nudist commander scratched his chin before cursing under his breath. It might have been a very long time since he taken any sort of history class but he sure as hell recognized some of the more detailed armors. If he was right, and he

hoped to whatever God did exist that he wasn't, than things were actually *worse* than he first imagined.

"Alright," the nudist commander shook his head as he stood up and turned around, "What happened?"

Ichigo was momentarily silent as he stared at the ground with a troubled expression on his face. The failure to rescue anyone, to save innocent people from Millennium's vampirized forces or Alucard's indiscriminant slaughter, weighed heavily on his conscience, "One of the Sternritter from Honnouji Academy ambushed me. He said his mission was to stall me, to keep me away from Ryuko. I beat him... but then Iscariot came out of nowhere and opened fire. Their boss ordered them to attack everyone... including innocent people. And then Alucard arrived..."

Despite the viciousness of the Vatican's surprising betrayal, in paled in comparison to the moment when Alucard released his full spiritual energy. The disgusting and vile feeling of the vampire's power, that overwhelming darkness that spread across the city and made his Life Fibers quiver apprehensively, was on a completely different level from anything he ever experienced. It put the traces of fear he remembered from Ulquiorra's segunda etapa, which the espada used in order to show him true despair, in a new context. And then there were the souls. Millions of souls, consumed over nearly five hundred years, trapped in a cycle of torment and pain. Ichigo couldn't understand it. How could Alucard have been given free reign for so long?

Why hasn't the Captain-Commander already killed him?

***" I can feel some of my Life Fibers still quivering, Ichigo."***

Mugetsu lightly growled while shuddering in disgust around Ichigo's body as she vividly remembered the overwhelming dread coming from the HMS Eagle. There was something on the ship so powerful that it resonated with Ichigo and her Life Fibers from halfway across London, painting a nightmarish image in their minds. Even now, after

all this time, her Life Fibers were still quivering in fear. Nui Harime's cold touch back at Honnouji Academy, when her perfectly manicured finger knowingly and curiously poked against one of the many banshi composing her form, had been horrible but Alucard's full power was at least ten times worse.

Craning her multicolored eyes upwards, the Kamui sighed mentally, ***"I'm starting to think Alucard might not be a vampire. His powers and abilities were never mentioned in that book Nudist Beach forced us to read. It would be wise to stay as far away from him as possible, Ichigo."***

"So Iscariot stabbed us in the back?" Batou muttered, ignorant of the ongoing conversation, before shaking his head in annoyance, "That's just perfect..."

The nudist commander couldn't believe their bad luck. Trapped in the middle of war-torn London with Dracula's army of undead souls running rampant throughout the streets, killing and devouring anyone in their path, without any possibility of contacting headquarters in Osaka. And if Ichigo was telling the truth it appeared that the smug bastard in charge of the Vatican's operations went batshit insane and backstabbed the Hellsing Organization, which was an incredibly stupid thing to do. Batou knew from experience that it was only a matter of time before the vampire decided to personally deal with Iscariot.

At least his men were safe at the Hellsing Manor with Aikuro and the destroyed remains of the DTR Model Ray. Olivier was going to kill him when she found out.

"Ichigo, there's something you should know," Batou frowned as he walked towards the teenager, one hand adjusting the assault rifle strapped around his shoulder. Pointing his thumb at Anderson, the former paladin silent as he grimly watched the gunships firing upon Alucard's familiars, the nudist commander cleared his throat with a small cough, "According to Anderson, this entire battle is a damn

smokescreen. Millennium's planning something big... and it involves Alucard."

The bitter autumn wind briefly picked up as Ichigo stared pensively at the ground, his eyes narrowed in contemplation. Whatever Millennium had planned for Alucard it couldn't be good. Even separated by several kilometers he could still detect the vampire's massive spiritual energy, his presence standing out like a beacon in the darkness and making him almost impossible to miss. Respectfully nodding at Batou for the information before turning around, fingers curling tightly around Tournesol's hilt when he sensed Ryuko's spiritual energy suddenly increase in power, Ichigo managed to take two steps before a familiar voice spoke up.

**" What are you planning?"**

Frowning at Mugetsu's question, Ichigo didn't break his stride as he answered, "I'm going to stop Alucard."

**" Ryuko's synchronization with Senketsu during their fight against Alucard was nearly perfect. Almost equal to our own. Yet they still lost."**

Mugetsu ignored the surprised reaction from the nudist commander as her multicolored eyes stared upwards at Ichigo in both concern and worry, **"My power might be slightly greater than Senketsu's, Ichigo, but Alucard easily defeated Ryuko. Even with my superior speed, attempting to fight him is very risky."**

"I know... but Alucard must have a weakness," Ichigo replied, his attention drawn to a series of explosions in the distance.

"Don't be an idiot, Ichigo," Batou growled as he reached out and gripped one of Mugetsu's pauldrons, his grey eyes narrowing at what he knew Ichigo must be thinking. The teenager was strong. Hell, he could probably kick the Grand Couturier's ass. But he wasn't about to let Ichigo fight someone that made a monster like Ragyo Kiryuin cautiously nervous. Isshin would kick his ass and kill him, in that



order, if he found out, "You want to fight Alucard? All right then, what's your plan? The undead bastard already demonstrated that your Kamui don't possess the raw power necessary to put him down."

"You think I don't know that?!"

A burst of steam erupted from Mugetsu's ventilation grills before Ichigo turned around, easily pulling himself free of Batou's grip in the process. Clenching his free hand tightly into a fist as the tormented screams of Alucard's familiars faded into the background, the trapped souls flowing through the streets towards the remaining crusaders and vampirized soldiers, Ichigo glared at the nudist commander before stating, "Alucard's power is unreal. It's on an entirely different scale from anything I've ever felt. What do you think will happen to everyone if he isn't stopped? He'll devour their souls! He doesn't care if someone's innocent! Mugetsu's power might not be enough to defeat him... but like hell I'm just going to sit back and do nothing!"

For nearly half a minute Batou didn't say anything, instead choosing to watch the subtle movements of Mugetsu's eyes while he weighed his options. Grimacing when he heard Anderson's heavy footsteps slowly but methodically growing closer, the former paladin's face set in a nearly unreadable snarl, the nudist commander sighed deeply before reaching into one of his armored vest's many pockets, "Isshin's going to kick my ass. But we don't exactly have any other option. Here, take this."

Handing over the small device from his pocket, a local network radio receiver, Batou cautiously warned, "You were right about one thing, Ichigo. Alucard needs to be stopped before he devours all of London. But we can't forget about those Quincy bastards in Millennium. We still have no idea what they have planned for the undead bastard. For all we know they could be counting at you going after him."

Placing the radio device in his ear as he walked across the rooftop, Ichigo nodded appreciatively at Batou before turning to his Kamui, "Let's go, Mugetsu. Mugetsu Gufū!"

The nudist commander briefly squinted when Ichigo rocketed upwards into the night sky before changing trajectories, the intense blue light from his Kamui rapidly dwindling until it vanished into the darkness. As the eerily calm wind gently blew across the rooftops, the bitterness in the air helping to distract him from the feeling that he just made a monumentally stupid decision, Batou continued mulling over the single question that had been on the forefront of his mind since returning to London - stopping Alucard. He wasn't an idiot. Even if the vampire was technically working with them, or rather desiring nothing more than to slaughter a monster like Ragyo Kiryuin, he was still a walking nightmare. Taking him down in a standard fight would be difficult if not impossible.

An explosion, the close proximity enough to leave a sharp ringing in his ears, harshly tore Batou from his thoughts as one of the Vatican's helicopters crashed to the ground as nothing more than burning wreckage. His expression shifting into an angry frown as dozens of aircraft were destroyed in rapid succession, the nudist commander's eyes widened when one of the last remaining gunships attempted to retreat only for an invisible attack to effortlessly perforate through the armored exterior. He recognized that attack from the Great Culture and Sports Festival.

That was a Quincy's technique.

Grumbling as he turned towards Anderson, the former paladin's expression nearly unreadable, Batou sighed wearily, "I'm surprised you didn't try stopping Ichigo."

"I would like nothing more than to destroy his Kamui. It is a threat to humanity, a potential weapon ready to be worn by Ragyo Kiryuin and used against us. However..." Anderson's guttural voice trailed off when the remaining Vatican aircraft were destroyed, his attention focused on one helicopter in particular. Tightening his grip upon the

pair of tailor bayonets as the helicopter crashed some distance away, he sneered, "I am willing to leave Ichigo alone for the moment. Now if ye'll excuse me..."

Batou frowned as the former paladin began walking away, "Where are you going?"

"Ichigo said Maxwell went insane with power. That it consumed him. But I don't buy it," Anderson ignored the deep-seated pain in his shoulder, the once white bandages stained red with his blood.

It may have been more than thirteen long years but he still remembered the Iscariot oaths and vows. All paladins were allowed free reign to attack and slaughter Protestants, provided that the heathens attempt to interfere with their sacred mission. The massacring of innocent people, admitted treachery and betrayal when faced with the Vatican's oldest enemy, was strictly forbidden. Grimacing as a lance of pain shot down his left arm, Anderson paused before half-looking over his shoulder, "Ye should head back to Aikuro. The General needs to know about the Quincy for when they inevitably stab us in the back."

Stalking purposefully across the rooftop once he finished speaking, his cassock billowing in the late autumn wind, Anderson was abruptly pulled to a stop when Batou reached out and grabbed his uninjured shoulder, "Look, I already know about your connection to Iscariot. But how the hell do you plan on getting over there?"

"I am more than capable of dealing with any damned souls that get in my way," Anderson growled in response as he pulled Batou's hand off his shoulder. Ignoring the darkened stain on his cassock, which was the result of aggravating his wounds, the former paladin ruefully added as he walked away, "Don't do anything foolish, Batou."

Before the nudist commander could process Anderson's hypocrisy, a look of confusion rapidly giving way to dawning realization, the former priest was already on the move. Rushing forward in an

impressive burst of speed, the nudist's body was briefly silhouetted against the darkened crimson sky before he vanished into the surrounding shadows. Left completely alone on the rooftop, the faint screams and moans of Alucard's familiars the only sounds seemingly able to penetrate the encompassing shadows, Batou ran a hand down his face and sighed. Adjusting the assault rifle around his shoulder as he walked across the rooftop, the grey haired nudist found his attention drawn to the red and black checkerboard-patterned zeppelin passing overhead.

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"That does it! Now I'm freaking PISSED!"

Streams of turbulent ruby energy exploded from Senketsu's ventilation grills as Ryuko blasted down the street, her blue eyes narrowing into a furious scowl when yet another one of Alucard's familiars emerged from the shadows and tried to blindside her. Goddamn it, she was getting sick and tired of the undead bastard's little helpers. They were really starting to piss her off. Easily avoiding the undead soldier's sword by twisting her body sideways, the blood-soaked weapon missing her neck before shattering against Senketsu's armor, Ryuko growled angrily before curling her hand into a fist and smashing it squarely into the familiar's face.

As the undead soul's head burst apart in a shower of blood, the concussive blast accompany her punch knocking back every familiar within thirty feet, Ryuko scoffed and continued rushing forward while ignoring the slight pang of guilt in her chest. There would always be time later to feel guilty about killing these guys. But right now she had far more important things to worry about - like beating the crap out of the shinigami bitch.

Violently cutting a path through the horde of screaming familiars as she wove her way down the street towards her opponent, one hundred feet rapidly dwindling to ten, Ryuko pushed herself harder

when several crimson eyes appeared on the shadows composing the captain's white haori. Like hell she was just going to let the undead bastard come in and pull some stupid crap. Curling her fingers tightly around the Scissor Blade as she hefted it over her right shoulder, the surrounding shadows rapidly retreating from the crimson aura enveloping her body, Ryuko stared into the undead shinigami's soulless eyes before swinging downwards. There was no way in hell she was going to miss hitting the bitch at this range!

"God damn it!"

Digging her heels into the pavement when the captain vanished in a burst of shunpo, Ryuko snarled and twisted around. This was starting to get annoying. Every time she attacked the woman, the bitch used her stupid speed technique. It was bullshit! But there was a silver lining. She just needed to remember to thank the mute Quincy bastard when she kicked his ass. Stiffening when she heard the faint sound of footsteps directly behind her, Ryuko growled and raised the Scissor Blade just in time to block the nodachi aimed at her neck.

"Not this time, you bitch!"

A blast of spiritual energy erupted outwards as Ryuko countered the woman's ambush, multicolored sparks dancing through the air while the cracking pavement underneath her heels shattered. Her mouth twisting into a frustrated snarl as she pushed back against the captain's supernatural strength, the Scissor Blade quivering as it struggled tooth and nail for every inch of leeway, Ryuko still couldn't wrap her mind around how this stupid fight started. One second she's walking away from Integra Hellsing and Seras to look for Ichigo, ignoring the woman's stern warning in the process, only for the bitch to appear out of nowhere and kick her into the waiting clutches of the undead bastard's army.

It hadn't been nearly as difficult as she originally thought to free herself from the veritable flood of blood and death. Even with Senketsu complaining about how the rancid blood would never come

out of his threads, escaping from the undead souls had been rather easy. But when she finally managed to break free, cutting apart hundreds of the undead bastard's familiars in the process, the shinigami bitch had tried pulling the same stunt a second damn time.

And it had almost worked.

"You know something? I think I'm starting to get the hang of this."

Ryuko's lips curled into a smug smirk as she slowly but surely began pushing back the undead captain's nodachi. Bead of sweat trickling down her face at the effort of overwhelming the shinigami's zanpakuto and supernatural strength, she flexed her fingers around the Scissor Blade and snorted, "Ichigo told me all about you shinigami. But there's not a chance in hell I'm going to lose to a samurai wannabe like you!"

There was an imperceptible shift in the captain's emotionless expression at the comment before the atmosphere suddenly doubled in weight. Abruptly twisting her wrist, the sudden motion breaking the surprised teenager's amateurish guard and sending her staggering backwards, the undead shinigami shift her foot and attempted to pierce Ryuko's heart only for the teenager to leap out of the way of her zanpakuto. Writhing darkness clinging to her haori like water as she deftly followed the teenager's movements, the captain spun around the Scissor Blade arcing towards her neck before smashing her foot into Ryuko's bare stomach.

A strangled gasp escaped Ryuko's throat at the strength behind the kick, blood and spittle flying from her mouth as she was sent careening down the street. Her back slamming against the ground as she crashed through several cars before finally managing to regain her balance, Ryuko stabbed the Scissor Blade into the street and winced at the phantom pain rippling through her body. All right, so maybe the bitch was stronger than she first thought. Maybe stronger than Nui Harime. But there was still one key difference between them - her current opponent didn't have freaking regeneration.

Scoffing as she staggered back onto her feet, Ryuko opened her mouth to speak only to freeze when the captain took a single step forward before disappearing in a burst of shunpo she couldn't even follow, "What the -"

Ryuko choked when she felt something slice through the side of her stomach, leaving a large and jagged wound in its wake. Stumbling forward before falling to one knee as a copious amount of blood sprayed through the air, the teenager angrily bit out a curse when she suddenly sensed the captain standing right behind her. Goddamn it, she didn't even see the bitch move! But as she leapt back onto her feet and twisted around, Scissor Blade carving towards the surprised shinigami's back, Ryuko couldn't help but wonder *why* the hell she hadn't already transformed into Senkou. That much extra power would have made kicking the captain's ass much easier.

"I finally got you!"

Shadowy blood dripped from the Scissor Blade's edge as the captain avoided the second strike and leapt away, the red stain growing across the back of her haori bringing a smug grin to Ryuko's face. She had *finally* hit the bitch! Spitting on the ground when she felt her own wound rapidly regenerating, skin and flesh knitting flawlessly back together in less than a second, Ryuko rubbed a hand against her face and scoffed, "What's the matter? Didn't that undead freak tell you I could heal?"

***"Are you alright, Ryuko?"***

Ryuko shrugged her shoulders when Senketsu's worried voice echoed in her mind. Holding the Scissor Blade against her waist, fingers curling tightly around the crimson weapon's curved handle, she glared at her opponent and viciously scowled, "I'm fine. But she's tough, I'll give her that!"

***"From her appearance, this woman is most like one of the shinigami Ichigo told us about,"*** the Kamui's multicolored eye

remained fixated on the undead captain waiting patiently down the road, the darkness clinging to her haori sending a shiver through his Life Fibers, ***"Her strength and speed are far greater than any Goku Uniform. Ryuko... we should shift into Senkou before she has a chance to release her zanpakuto!"***

When Ichigo explained the basic rundown of shinigami, aside from wearing clothing that went out of fashion centuries ago, he explained that each of them had a special sword called a zanpakuto. While she didn't bother paying attention to the more boring details, especially when Kisuke Urahara started talking, one thing that stuck in her mind was that zanpakuto had two transformations that granted shinigami crazy abilities like illusions and controlling millions of razor sharp flower petals. But Senketsu was right. She couldn't afford wasting any more time.

"I was thinking the exact same thing! So let's hit her hard and fast!" Ryuko swung her arm outwards and grinned maliciously, "Senketsu Sen -"

"Bakudo Number Sixty Three - Sajō Sabaku."

Dozens of shimmering golden chains materialized above the captain as she spoke for the first time since the fight began, her voice echoing with the same disturbing hollowness as her vampire master. Zanpakuto held aloft while she curled several fingers inwards before clenched her hand into a fist, the spiritual chains immediately responding by whipping through the air towards the surprised teenager, the undead shinigami remained silent as the fully incanted Bakudo bound Ryuko's arms against her upper body before proceeding to constrict around her neck and thighs.

"H-Hey!" Forced to let go of the Scissor Blade, the hardened Life Fiber weapon clattering against the street when the chains abruptly tightened, Ryuko struggled against her bindings before indignantly shouting, "What the hell is this?"



Briefly losing her balance and nearly falling onto her ass, courtesy of the golden chains making it rather hard to stand up, Ryuko sputtered out an annoyed curse while her arms flexed in an attempt to break the technique. Whatever the hell the chains are, she thought with growing irritation, they were anything but normal. Gritting her teeth as she shot a venomous glare at the shinigami, Ryuko's eyes widened when she noticed the woman silently reciting something under her breath, her right hand braced firmly against the opposite arm. So that was her plan! The bitch knew she couldn't beat her in a straight fight so she used this stupid technique to hold her down long enough to get in a cheap shot.

Like hell she was just going to stand around and let that happen!

The ruby undertone in her feathery hair brightening as she redoubled her efforts to escape, steam shooting out from her Kamui while minute cracks rapidly began appearing across the ephemeral chains constricting her upper body, Ryuko let out one final defiant shout before the bakudo shattered into its composite spiritual energy. Having just enough time to notice a look of surprise cross the captain's face before she grabbed the fallen Scissor Blade and sprinted away, Ryuko felt a tingling sensation radiate through her body before a torrential burst of electricity tore its way through the exact spot she had just been standing.

Slightly out of breath as she crouched behind an overturned car, the Scissor Blade stabbed deeply into the ground next to her, Ryuko waited for the last vestiges of the captain's attack to dissipate before grimacing, "Alright... so maybe I should I have used Senkou from the start."

***"That was too close for comfort, Ryuko,"*** Senketsu's multicolored eye narrowed when he felt Ryuko's heart pounding in her chest. The shinigami's last attack had come far too close to hitting them, the massive amount of energy contained within that lightning blast sending a shiver throughout his Life Fibers. He didn't want to imagine what would have happened if Ryuko hadn't managed to

break that strange binding so quickly, ***"But it seems these shinigami possess abilities other than their zanpakuto."***

"No kidding!" Ryuko growled while cautiously peeking out from behind her cover at the captain down the street, a bead of nervous sweat trickling down her cheek, "Ichigo didn't say anything about shinigami using freaking magic!"

Senketsu listened to his wearer vent her frustrations before something troubling came to his mind, ***"Ryuko, be extremely careful. We have no idea what other tricks this woman has hidden up her sleeves, especially with the possibility of at least sixty more techniques like those last two."***

The grating sound of steel crumpling screeched loudly as Ryuko's hand crushed the front fender of the overturned vehicle, "Say what?!"

***"Right before we were trapped by that rather... uncomfortable... technique I heard the woman say something strange,"*** Senketsu cautiously explained while repressing the growing urge to shudder. The strange sensation of those glowing ropes against his Life Fibers was not something he would soon forget, ***"She referred to it by a number - sixty three."***

Ryuko glowered in frustration, the unwanted news nearly enough to make her slam a fist against the ground, but quickly perked up and looked over her shoulder when she felt a very familiar sensation. Asphalt shattering as she leapt out from behind her cover moments before the overturned vehicle was pierced by a concentrated beam of electricity, Ryuko dragged her hand against the ground for balance before spinning around and growling. All right, that was it. If the bitch wanted to take potshots, then she needed to stop pulling her punches and hit back with Senketsu's full power. And *thanks* to the Quincy and the undead bastard, she didn't have to worry about any innocent people.

"I don't give a crap about how many freaking spells you have!"

Her defiant tone reverberated throughout the cramped streets as she noticed an orb of crimson energy rapidly coalescing around the undead shinigami's outstretched palm, the swirling flow of energy causing the woman's face to take on a sinister hue. A stubborn growl escaping her throat as she threw caution to the wind and rushed the captain completely undeterred by the technique's growing power, the ground buckling beneath her heels as blasts of ruby light burst from Senketsu's vents, Ryuko narrowed her eyes when the woman disappeared using shunpo right before the Scissor Blade could slice into her body.

"Because nothing's going to stop me..."

Pivoting around when she sensed the woman standing behind her, Ryuko hefted the Scissor Blade over her shoulder before angrily swinging it downwards against the incoming burst of crimson spiritual energy. A faint trace of a grin pulling on the corners of her mouth when the captain's attack slammed into the Scissor Blade with the force of a large truck before immediately deflecting to either side of her body, torrents of spiritual energy parting like water against the hardened Life Fiber weapon, Ryuko glared at the woman hovering in the air as a massive explosion lit up the surrounding area, "... from kicking your freaking ass!"

The ominous glow from the moon deepened at Ryuko's taunt before the captain began moving her arms. Brown hair waving in the wind as she gathered blue spiritual energy around her extended index fingers, flesh and clothing contorting as crimson eyes blinked into existence upon the writhing shadows composing her undead form, the shinigami's warbling tone echoed across the night, "Ye lord! Mask of blood and flesh, all creation, flutter of wings, ye who bears the name of Man! On the wall of blue flame, inscribe a twin lotus..."

"Oh no you don't!"

Ryuko wasn't about to stand around and let the bitch finish her little chant. Not this time. Feeling Senketsu tightening around her body as she shifted her grip on the Scissor Blade, the hardened Life Fiber

weapon rapidly expanding into Decapitation Mode, she snarled and leapt straight towards the captain, "Like hell I'm going to let you finish - "

Time appeared to slow to an unbearable crawl when Ryuko blinked and suddenly found the captain hovering in front of her, white haori fluttering in the breeze while both hands were held inches from her stomach. Her eyes widening in shock as blue light and spiritual energy blended into a cacophony of destruction around the shinigami's hands, the teenager could not react before the woman thrust her arms forward.

"Sōren Sōkatsui."

A massive explosion tore through London as the spiritual energy contained within the high level Hado slammed into Ryuko, the unconstrained deluge of power sending the teenager screaming through the air while everything around her disintegrated into nothingness. Yet the undead captain's expression never wavered as she unsheathed her zanpakuto and gently landed back on the ground. Sandaled feet tapping lightly against the overturned pavement as she slowly stalked towards the fallen teenager, the writhing unholy darkness composing her body growing more prominent with every step, the woman's empty eyes widened when the smoke cleared, revealing a still conscious and incredibly pissed off Ryuko.

Despite the overwhelming power of an incanted Sōren Sōkatsui combined with the spiritual energy possessed by a captain belonging to the first generation of the Gotei 13 hitting her point blank in the stomach, Ryuko could remember several instances where she had felt worse. So what if her body was covered in cuts and bruises, blood rapidly being reabsorbed as her Life Fibers regenerated the damage. And sure, maybe Senketsu was complaining about the tears in his uniform that were already knitting back together good as new. The captain's attack may have taken them off guard, but it sure as hell beat getting her leg shot off by that undead bastard.

Her expression twisted into a defiant glare as she staggered back onto her feet, the extended Scissor Blade glowing faintly in her hands, Ryuko sneered and opened her mouth to curse at the captain only to pause when she felt something odd. She couldn't describe it but she felt, well not stronger, but more full of energy. It was strange. Barely two hours ago she had been exhausted and wishing she could just get some sleep. Now she felt perfectly fine. No, better than that. It didn't make any goddamn sense!

Reading his wearer's turbulent thoughts, Senketsu gave the Kamui equivalent of a nod, ***"I feel it too, Ryuko. Her last attack damaged us, yes, but it also increased our energy. How odd..."***

"You think so?" Ryuko tightened her grip around the Scissor Blade's extended handle as she watched the undead captain slowly raise her arms, pale crimson moonlight reflecting off the zanpakuto clasped firmly in her fingers, and scowled, "But there's no time to think about that now!"

Heels springing forward off the ground the moment she witnessed the captain vanish using shunpo, Ryuko roared passionately as she twisted her upper body and slammed the Scissor Blade against the visibly surprised shinigami's nodachi. Almost immediately an explosion of spiritual energy and twinkling multicolored stars rippled outwards through London, the surrounding darkness torn away as the two combatants viciously struggled to overpower each other. Gritting her teeth as the street behind the captain abruptly shattered, the pavement disintegrating when the power contained within Decapitation Mode was redirected around its intended target, Ryuko shifted her grip on the Scissor Blade before rushing forward, her arms blurring into motion as she furiously exchanged blows with the shinigami.

"Not! So! Freaking! Tough! ARE! YOU?!"

Her voice continuously growing in volume and reaching a crescendo when the captain's zanpakuto broke through her guard and sliced deeply into her neck, bloody spraying through the air before the

wound quickly knitted back together, Ryuko snarled as she swung the Scissor Blade against the shinigami's nodachi with enough force to send her skidding backwards several feet. Rubbing a hand against the side of her neck as she angrily spat on the ground, Ryuko growled in annoyance. Damn it! This wasn't working!

"Shō."

A surprised gasp escaped Ryuko's mouth when the Hado collided directly with her stomach, hitting with enough force to push her down the street and away from the captain. Digging her heels into the road as she quickly recovered her balance, the corners of her lips twisting into an embarrassed sneer at being caught off guard, Ryuko froze in bewilderment when a thick black and red miasma of spiritual energy enveloped the captain's increasing shadowed form. Flexing her fingers around her nodachi as she slowly rotated it clockwise in front of her face, hundreds of crimson eyes emerging from the darkness spilling forth from her body, the undead shinigami's expression shifted malevolently as she uttered four simple words.

"Bankai: Rengoku no Kurushimi."

Ryuko couldn't help but take several involuntary steps backwards when an enormous construct of bones violently tore its way free of the ground directly behind the captain, writhing flames and burning shadows coalescing around the bankai as it stretched to its full height of more than one hundred feet. A bone-chilling groan echoing throughout the area when the spiritual construct held up its arms, a phantasmal nodachi wreathed in blue flames and a set of shadowy scales materializing in either clawed hand, the bankai remained still for several long seconds before its head slowly craned downwards at the teenager standing below.

"H-Holy crap..."

Senketsu nearly perfectly shared his wearer's shock at the situation, although he did not agree with her choice of vulgar language. Shivering around Ryuko's body when the bankai's spiritual energy

abruptly darkened, he tore his multicolored eye away from the towering construct and stammered in bewilderment, "***This is a bankai?***"

"Goddamn it," Ryuko ignored the nervous pounding of her heart as she gripped the Scissor Blade. She could literally feel the power radiating from the bankai. It felt, no, was stronger than Junketsu when she took over Satsuki's body back in Karakura Town. Damn it, defeating the bankai would be extremely difficult but like hell was she just going to let the bitch or the undead bastard win.

"Heh... and I thought kicking her ass would be easy!"

A deep crimson aura enveloped Ryuko's body as she glared at the captain, the bead of nervous sweat dripping from her chin ignored. Raising her arm protectively in front of her face when the bankai stepped towards her, the impact shattering the ground, Ryuko narrowed her eyes and stubbornly declared, "This is going to be tough, Senketsu. But like hell will I let some undead bitch beat us! Let's do this! Senketsu Senkou!"

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Consciousness returned painfully to Enrico Maxwell as he opened his eyes, the surrounding blur of colors coming back into focus accompanied by a lance of pain shooting through his skull. Several harsh coughs tearing their way from his throat as he gingerly touched the bleeding wound on his forehead, the archbishop grimaced before carefully pushing himself back onto his elbows. He just *couldn't* understand what happened. The last thing he remembered was witnessing that walking wasteland, that demon in the guise of a man, release the final restraints upon his power, inundating the entire city in his unholy presence, before something tore through the Ninth Crusade's airborne division.

The unrelenting sound of something scratching against the undamaged glass box tore the archbishop from his thoughts. Slowly craning his head upwards, Maxwell let out a strangled gasp at the nightmarish sight of Alucard's familiars converging upon his location. Eyes widening in shock as he fell backwards until he was pressed against the glass wall, terror and fear quickly succumbed to arrogance when he noticed the damned weren't able to get him. Laughing uncontrollably as bloodied fingers and rusted blades scrapped futilely against the box, Maxwell pointed a finger at the horde and exclaimed, "This is hardened tektite compound glass! Not a single one of you foul creatures will even be able to scratch it!"

"That is quite the remarkable boast..."

Maxwell's entire body stiffened at the unexpected response. Tearing his attention away from the shambling undead while twisting around until he was looking over his shoulder, the archbishop felt his blood freeze when he caught sight of a spectacled man calmly sitting on top of a nearby pile of debris. Bloodied fingers clenching tightly as the man slowly began clapping his hands, the incessant mocking sound grating on his nerves, the leader of Iscariot seethed as Quilge Opie leaned forward and smirked, "But it seems your words carry a hint of truth. Why, I don't think Alucard's familiars will be able to penetrate it."

"Y-You!"

The Sternritter's mocking and condescending tone grated relentlessly upon the archbishop's already heavily frayed nerves. Ignoring the pain radiating up his arm as he smashed a fist against the glass barrier, Maxwell furiously gnashed his teeth and shouted, "Quincy! What have you done? What is your *BASTARD* of a king planning?"

"That is quite the interesting question," Quilge's smirk faded as he calmly adjusted his spectacles, the light from the crimson moon reflecting off the opaque lenses and making them shimmer with a sinister hue. Shaking his head while slowly unsheathing the ornate



saber strapped to his waist, the Sternritter's tone contained a dangerous edge as he continued, "But I'm afraid that silence is golden. It would be rather inappropriate if strange ears were to rudely overhear our conversation."

"What are you talking about, you swine?" Maxwell glared impotently at the Quincy with all the hatred he could muster, "What is your heretical king trying to - "

A brief shimmer of blue-white light shone from the Sternritter's saber before a single Heilig Pfeil pierced straight through the tektite glass a few inches from the archbishop's visibly stunned expression. His eyes widening in utter shock when an explosion tore through the night behind him, the wet sensation trailing down his cheek all but forgotten, Maxwell could only watch helplessly as cracks rapidly spread across the glass box before it shattered. Wisps of smoke rising from his weapon as he casually observed the countless undead familiars swarming the newly vulnerable archbishop, Quilge took the time to smooth out a crease in his sleeve before responding.

"Unfortunately your usefulness to His Majesty has ended."

Lazily swinging his saber through the air before sheathing it with an audible click, the Sternritter raised a single finger in front of his mouth as he watched Alucard's familiars drag the archbishop kicking and screaming into the street. It was truly pitiful witnessing the leader of Iscariot behaving in such an ugly and dreadful manner, doubly so considering the man's previously arrogant and barbaric behavior. Nevertheless, it was clear from the Daten that Maxwell's usefulness against Ragyo Kiryuin and Revocs had reached its limit. His inability to resist the influence of the Life Fibers wrapped around his neck meant he was a liability to His Majesty, which was quite shameful. The Vatican's resources and artifacts could have been useful in countering that dreadful woman's power.

The wind briefly picking up as nearly a dozen spears perforated Maxwell's body from every direction, the man's bloodied face frozen

in an expression of pure agony, Quilge turned to leave only to quickly pause. It was very faint, nearly undetectable, but there was a noticeable disturbance in the ambient spiritual energy. Eyes narrowing beneath his spectacles as he glanced over his shoulder, the corners of his mouth curled upwards when he spotted several rather powerful grenades rapidly falling towards him.

"Oh?"

Flickering out of existence using Hirenkyaku right before the starch grenades bounced off the ground and exploded, Quilge reappeared standing on the edge of a nearby rooftop while calmly brushing a strand of hair from his face. He had to give his ambusher credit for planning such a well-timed attack. Any lesser member of His Majesty's army would have most likely been caught in the fiery inferno.

But *he* was anything but a simple soldier.

His mouth slowly curling into a shadowed grin when he heard the unmistakable sound of someone rushing across the rooftop directly towards him, Quilge deftly unsheathed his saber before twisting around and easily parrying away the two tailor bayonets aimed at his heart and throat. Sparks of blue energy dancing through the air when he was forced to adjust his footing to prevent an incensed Alexander Anderson's third strike from stabbing through his eye, Quilge locked gazes with the former paladin and stated, "You are quite the dangerous man, Alexander Anderson."

Unperturbed by the furious expression on the nudist commander's face as he fired a single Heilig Pfeil from the edge of his saber, forcing Anderson to leap backwards to avoid getting hit by the spiritual attack, Quilge frowned when he noticed a tear on the sleeve of his uniform. It seemed he had underestimated his opponent's strength to some extent, but he wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. Using two fingers to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose, the Sternritzer turned his attention back to the nudist before raising a hand into the air and exclaiming, "How truly extraordinary!"

Not even His Majesty's Sternritter can escape from Zorin's Täuschung Kaskade without activating Vollständig. Yet you managed to do so through sheer force of will! A remarkable feat, if I may say so myself."

"Bite yer tongue, *foul* Quincy!"

"Yer false words fall upon deaf ears," Anderson refused to listen to Quilge as he flexed his wrists. Flipping the two bayonets into a reverse grip, he glared venomously at the Quincy and seethed, "For I am a servant of a higher power, set upon the world to cleanse it of monsters and abominations alike."

The battle-torn cassock fluttered around the nudist commander's body as he crossed his arms over his chest, the sinister crimson light from the full moon reflecting ominously off the bayonets clasped tightly in his hands, "So laugh yer annoying laugh, Quincy, for yer plans are already in tatters. The General knows about yer betrayal this night. Ye and yer king will not be able to step foot in Japan without facing the full might of Nudist Beach. But I vow to make sure ye don't live to see that day!"

"Oh my..."

A thoughtful frown pulled at the corners of Quilge's mouth. It was abundantly clear from Anderson's passionate threat against his life that the man was at least partially aware of the Schatten Ausrufung, including His Majesty's plans surrounding Alucard. The only question plaguing the Sternritter's mind was *how* it came about. Could the nudist commander have somehow read Zorin's mind when she used Täuschung Kaskade? If so, that remarkable and seemingly impossible feat made Anderson a rather dangerous man. In any other instance he would immediately kill the nudist. However, any sort of overreaction on his part might lead to consequences down the line, especially if the man only possessed partial knowledge of their plans.

"Far be it for me to deny the validity of your threat..."

Deliberately trailing off while slowly raising his saber, strands of blue-white spiritual energy branching outwards from the weapon's guard into a facsimile of a bow, Quilge swept his free hand through the air before adding, "But your chances of defeating me are rather slim, wouldn't you agree? You no longer have your associate's grand panzer. The Wild Geese are all but destroyed, thanks to Zorin's efforts. And Seras Victoria is at her master's side. As someone acquainted with Ragyo Kiryuin's plans for humanity, sure you can - "

Quilge paused when half a dozen bayonets launched across the rooftop from the former paladin's outstretched hands. Firing an equal number of Heilig Pfeil from his saber, the arrows intercepting and shattering the incoming projectiles, the Sternritter brushed off his shoulder before continuing in a dangerous tone of voice, "His Majesty has expressed displeasure at the Jahrtausendarmee being forced to fight our allies in Nudist Beach. However, anything that threatens the success of the Schatten Ausrufung must be dealt with promptly. So there is certainly nothing stopping you from attacking me a third time, Alexander Anderson. Other than, of course, falling dead before you can take three steps..."

A tense silence covered the rooftop when it appeared that Anderson would take the Sternritter up on his challenge, freshly summoned tailor bayonets appearing within his fingers in a flash of light. Seething angrily from between clenched teeth as he relaxed his shoulders, the nudist commander allowed his arms to fall listlessly at his side before growling, "Tell me, *Quincy* . What are ye planning for Alucard?"

"That is a most interesting question."

The corners of Quilge's mouth twisted into a perplexed frown while he sheathed his saber with a small but audible click. Humming as he adjusted his spectacles, the Sternritter turned his back to the nudist commander and added, "You are truly a dangerous man, Alexander Anderson. However! I am afraid my lips are sealed. Silence is golden, after all..."

Vanishing in a burst of nearly silent Hirenkyaku, Quilge barely left before a bayonet sliced through the air and pierced into the roof where he had just been standing. Fingers clenched around his remaining bayonet while growling in frustration, Anderson did not say a single word as he turned his attention towards the street below. A tailor bayonet appearing in his hand as he sprinted across the rooftop before leaping off the side, the nudist commander ignored both the cold bitterness of the late autumn night as well as the constant groans coming from the undead souls below. He knew anytime before this night, before he knew what the Quincy were actually capable of doing, he would have launched himself at Quilge without a moment's hesitation. But his battle against Zorin Blitz at the Hellsing Manor demonstrated what would have happened.

He might have lasted a minute, maybe even two, but the end result would undoubtedly be death.

His boots smashed through the heads of two familiars as he crashed to the ground, crushing their skulls in a spray of blood while alerting the rest of the undead. Spinning around one familiar's attempt to skewer him on the edge of a rusted halberd, Anderson's hands flashed outwards before he began viciously and methodically cutting a large swath through the gathered ranks of undead. Bayonets severing limbs and heads with contemptuous ease, black metal steadily becoming stained with the blood of his enemies, the former paladin's mind remained singularly focused when he found himself facing an armored knight. Ducking underneath the knight's sword before reciprocating by stabbing his bayonets through his open mouth, Anderson grimaced when he came to a halt several feet from the fallen body of Enrico Maxwell.

"This was no way for yer life to end, Maxwell..."

Anderson's tone was full of bitterness and self-loathing as he reached down and tore away the intricate stole wrapped around the archbishop's neck. Clenching his fingers when he felt a familiar tingling in his hand, he swung his arm upwards before cutting the offensive garment to shreds. His eyes narrowing in anger while

strands of glowing red Life Fibers floated gently through the air around him, the alien threads visible for only a few seconds before fading away into nothingness, the nudist commander shook his head before kneeling down in front of Maxwell's body. Reaching out and closing the archbishop's unseeing eyes, Anderson muttered a somber pray before venomously declaring, "But I vow to make that monster pay for what she did to ye."

The autumn wind briefly causing his cassock to flutter outwards as he stood back up, Anderson did not turn around when he heard the recognizable sound of a gun cocking behind his head, "I see ye have grown into a formidable woman... Heinkel."

An incomprehensibly long second passed in nearly absolute silence as Heinkel Wolfe kept her customized pistol trained on the back of Anderson's head. Her eyes flickering sideways to Maxwell's limp corpse, the artificial madness plaguing his mind having left him in death, she bit her lower lip before turning her attention back to Anderson and scoffing, "I heard every single word you just said."

"Then ye know Maxwell was not to blame for his actions," Anderson flexed his wrists as he slowly turned around, the tailor bayonets clasped in his hands returning to the seals etched onto his gloves. Seeing the once awkward teenager, who didn't possess the confidence to assert herself without Yumiko's support, had not only developed into a woman but was also Iscariot's finest paladin filled the nudist with both pride and sorrow, "He was being controlled by Life Fibers. The threads were woven throughout his stole, controlling his body like a blasted puppet. In all likelihood he succumbed to their tainted power long before the onset of the battle. If I arrived sooner I could have saved him..."

Heinkel kept her pistol stubbornly locked on the nudist commander even while her expression somewhat softened. Maxwell's sudden and inexplicable bout of madness and insanity, which she initially assumed had resulted from allowing his newfound power to corrupt his mind, had caught the Iscariot expeditionary force off guard. Knowing that their leader had not been in his right state of mind

came as a small comfort. But that did not change a damn thing about what she was going to do with Anderson.

"You may have been right about Ragyo Kiryuin being an abomination," Heinkel's mouth twisted into a furious snarl as she stepped closer to Anderson, the muzzle of her pistol aimed squarely between the nudist's eyes, "But you're still a goddamn murderer, Anderson! Did you think the Vatican would forgive you just because you were telling the truth? More than a dozen cardinals died by your damned hands!"

Anderson's expression didn't waver at the accusation, "Ye have every right to kill me for what I've done. My soul is forever stained with the blood of the innocent, cast down by my own hands in a fit of unthinking madness. I fully expect to receive punishment for my crimes, to face the judgment of God and ask for the forgiveness I do not deserve. But I'm afraid that can wait, for there are far more serious matters to deal with at the moment."

It took less than a second for Heinkel to understand what Anderson was implying - Alucard. Despite the overwhelming and nightmarish powers of his army of familiars, the darkness enveloping the city casting the moon in a sinister crimson glow, she knew this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. For the first time in more than a century Alucard was vulnerable to normal anti-vampire weapons. By unleashing the legions of tortured souls trapped within his body, the vampire could *finally* be slain, forever ridding the world of one of the most evil creatures to ever exist.

Breathing deeply through clenched teeth when something the nudist commander previously stated caught her attention, Heinkel slowly lowered her pistol away from Anderson's face and scowled, "What do you know, Anderson?"

"This entire battle, this rampant slaughter of the innocent, is all one giant smokescreen," Anderson's head whipped to the left when he felt an enormous wave of spiritual energy pulse across London. Even while surrounded by the encroaching darkness there was no

mistaking the underlying corruption pervading the energy. It was far too similar to Alucard's power to be anything besides the vampire. But the nudist commander could not shake the feeling of how the dwindling energy reminded him of the shinigami back in Karakura Town.

Suppressing the urge to grimace as a lance of pain radiated from his injured shoulder, Anderson turned back towards Heinkel before gruffly adding, "Everything these Quincy have done, every barbaric act and murder, deals with whatever they're planning for Alucard."

The paladin's mind churned at the implications of what the Quincy could want with Alucard. Vatican reports and documents dating back to World War II showed the vampire and the Hellsing butler fighting against the Nazis in Poland, preventing a very familiar First Lieutenant from creating an army of vampirized soldiers. But the Jahrtausendarmee's exposure as an organization of Quincy hidden in the shadows threw all of that into doubt. The ongoing battle proved that well enough. However, a single disturbing thought continued tingling on the edge of her mind. If Iscariot had been mistaken about Millennium's aspirations for the last sixty years, then what else could they have been wrong about?

Scowling as she twisted away from the nudist commander, Heinkel raised a hand to her ear and announced, "This is Father Wolfe to all surviving paladins. The Ninth Crusade is lost. Maxwell is dead. All paladins unable to bear arms against the undead and Quincy are to fall back to the surrounding countryside and await further orders."

"... are you saying, Heinkel?" Yumiko's Takagi's perplexed question was lost in a sea of static before she asked, "What happened to Maxwell?"

Heinkel momentarily paused as she mulled over the question before calmly replying, "The stole gifted to him by His Holiness had been tainted with Life Fibers. Maxwell's mind was twisted until he was little more than a puppet for Ragyo Kiryuin. According to Anderson, it is likely Maxwell was compromised before arriving in London."



"You found Alexander Anderson!?"

Yumiko's eyes widened while she wrenched her katana free from one of the few vampirized soldiers fortunate enough to escape Alucard's initial rampage. Allowing the corpse to fall limply to the ground as she turned towards her fellow paladins, the variously injured men and women equally shocked at the news about Anderson, Yumiko tightened her grip around her weapon's hilt at the silence coming through the radio, "What are our orders?"

"I'm taking the fight to Alucard," Heinkel ignored the moans and gurgles as she stoically gazed upon the horde of undead souls marching their way towards her, "For the first time in living memory the vampire is in a form that renders him vulnerable to our holy weapons. With the last of his demonic restraints lifted, he has become mortal."

Snorting lightly under her breath when she glimpsed Anderson retreating into the shadows, the nudist's form briefly visible against the crimson moonlight as he effortlessly scaled the side of a building, Heinkel curled her hand into a fist and growled, "Those willing to lay their lives on the line for God, to charge headfirst against the forces of Hell, are to rendezvous one kilometer east of my current location. It's time we ended this once and for all..."

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Ichigo's hair whipped around his face as he sped through the skies above London, the surrounding darkness retreating from the twin bursts of blue energy erupting from his transformed legs. Reflexively tightening his grip around Tournesol as he banked sharply to the left and looked down into the darkened streets, the moonlight bathing the shadows in an unnatural crimson pallor, Ichigo frowned when Mugetsu's voice came across loud and clear over the rushing wind, ***"We're getting close, Ichigo."***

"Yeah, I know."

Sensing Alucard's spiritual energy wasn't nearly as difficult as he originally thought. Even across the hundreds of square kilometers composing London the vampire's presence stood out like a bright beacon in the darkness. It almost felt like the bastard was taunting everyone capable of detecting spiritual energy to come directly to his location. But while something like that was worrying enough on its own, Ichigo felt a cold chill creep down his spine for a very different reason.

Alucard seemed far too *weak* .

It was likely that anyone that survived long enough to witness the overbearing sensation of death and terror that followed in the wake of Alucard releasing his final restraints thought that they were experiencing the vampire's full power. But Ichigo knew that wasn't close to the truth. While the vampire might have unlocked every seal on his power, releasing all the souls he devoured over the centuries under his direct control, it wasn't anywhere close to the strength he possessed during his fight against Ryuko. There was no doubt about it - the vampire was *actively* suppressing his spiritual energy.

"Damn," Ichigo felt Mugetsu's multicolored eyes swivel towards him and scowled, "The bastard's holding back."

" ***Holding back?***" Confusion laced the Kamui's voice as she stared incredulously at her wearer, "***Why would someone like him hold back? Do you think he knows we're coming?***"

"I'm not sure," Ichigo didn't know if Alucard could detect spiritual energy like a shinigami. However, he knew the bastard was capable of sensing the Life Fibers woven inside his and Ryuko's bodies. If he managed to track them down when they first arrived in London, hunting them through the rain and lightning, it was more than likely that the vampire would sense him coming from a mile away. But Ichigo refused to let something as trivial as that dissuade him. There was too much at stake to worry about Alucard luring him into a trap.

If he wanted any chance of stopping the vampire before he devoured every soul in London, then he needed to move hard and fast.

" ***Hmm...***" Mugetsu hummed as she turned her unblinking eyes away from Alucard and towards the checkerboard-patterned zeppelin in the distance. A faint growling reverberating through her threads as she sensed several Quincy on board the airship, she huffed and asked, "***Are you still planning on fighting Alucard?***"

"We might only get one shot at taking him down," Ichigo felt some of Mugetsu's emotions bleed across their connection as the sapphire energy bursting from her twin jets suddenly increased in intensity. He knew enough about Alucard's history, thanks to Yoruichi and Anderson, to realize that the millions of souls trapped in his body was the key to the vampire's power, "If we hit him with a Getsuga Tenshou before he can release his full power, it might be enough to beat him."

Mugetsu frowned in worry at Ichigo's determination before giving the Kamui equivalent of a nod, "***Understood! My speed far surpasses anything Senketsu can achieve. Just don't do anything stupid, Ichigo.***"

"Don't worry, Mugetsu. I know what - "

A massive burst of spiritual energy exploding across the city caused Ichigo to stop midsentence as every muscle in his body stiffened in shock. Twisting around as he abruptly stopped somewhere over the Thames River, the sudden change in momentum causing Mugetsu to briefly complain, Ichigo's eyes widened in astonishment when he focused his senses on the source of the spiritual energy. There was no mistaking it. That was a *bankai* . But he didn't recognize the captain's spiritual energy in the slightest. While he was curious about the captain's identity, a more important question troubled the former substitute shinigami. How did the Soul Society manage to send a captain to London without anyone, least of all him, noticing?

"Wait... what the hell?"

Ichigo frowned in confusion as the bankai's spiritual energy settled down, allowing him to sense Ryuko practically standing on top of the captain. Hovering in silence when a burst of red light exploded upwards into the midnight sky as Ryuko shifted into Senkou, Ichigo felt his frustration and confusion at the situation growing. It was obvious Ryuko was fighting against the captain and their bankai. But that didn't make any sense. If the Soul Society sent a captain to London, it had to be either to take out Alucard or deal with Millennium and the Quincy. They had the same goals, damn it! So why...

The eerie wind weaving through the darkened city suddenly cut off as Ichigo realized there was something *off* about the captain. With the initial surprise of seeing the bankai wearing off, he finally managed to get a clear picture of the captain's spiritual energy. And what he sensed was startling. Now he understood why Ryuko seemed so determined to fight the captain. Their power felt just like Alucard's- a seemingly bottomless chasm of darkness lurking just underneath the skin.

Yoruichi had been right. The bastard actually devoured a captain.

Completely ignorant of her wearer's thoughts, Mugetsu's armor briefly rippled around Ichigo's body at the familiar vileness underlying the captain's spiritual energy. That sensation wasn't something she would ever forget. Not after the vampire blew several holes through her pristine uniform. Narrowing her eyes at the strange construct towering over the skyline, she turned to Ichigo and asked, "***What is that thing, Ichigo?***"

Ichigo blinked at the question before replying, "It's a bankai."

" ***A bankai?***"

Mugetsu was well aware of the term. Her creator and Ichigo had gone into great detail about shinigami and their zanpakuto after retreating from Honnouji Academy in the wake of the Great Culture and Sports Festival. But she never thought she would witness one

with her own eyes. She could feel her Life Fibers quivering under the enormous power radiating from the bankai. It was simply incredible that shinigami were capable of matching Ichigo and her full power... and Mugetsu did not like that one bit.

***" It seems a lot bigger than what you told me your bankai looked like, Ichigo."***

"Well, mine was a little different..."

***" This shinigami feels a lot stronger than that annoying Quincy we fought,"*** Mugetsu's eyes narrowed hatefully as she remembered their earlier fight against Bazz-B, the burns and scorch marks his flames created still fresh in her mind. Growling when the enormous bankai suddenly lurched forward faster than she thought possible only for a massive explosion of ruby energy to drive it backwards, the Kamui watched Ryuko temporarily retreat from the construct before bluntly stating, ***"Humph. Senketsu might actually have difficulty beating something that powerful."***

Ichigo tightly clenched his hand into a fist at Mugetsu's comment before twisting around and flying at full speed towards the imposing bankai in the distance, all thoughts of stopping Alucard forgotten, "Ryuko is strong but fighting a bankai isn't something that can be decided by strength alone. There's no telling what abilities the captain's zanpakuto has."

***" While I don't have a problem helping Senketsu, if only to show I'm the better Kamui, I feel a strange quivering in my threads,"*** Mugetsu gazed down into the darkened streets as a stray thought passed through her mind, ***"Alucard absorbs souls by drinking blood, right?"***

Ichigo tilted his head around to face one of Mugetsu's eyes, "The bastard tried to pull that stunt against Ryuko, remember?"

***" I know,"*** Mugetsu was silent for a moment before adding, ***"But I can't help but feel we're forgetting something important."***

Pulling his attention away from his Kamui when he felt something flicker against the edges of his senses, Ichigo turned back over his shoulder and asked, "Important? Like what?"

" ***Well...***" Mugetsu's multicolored eyes swiveled around on her wings until she was staring at Ichigo, "***Alucard's been sent on several missions against Quincy, right? Including one just a few hours ago. So what happened to them?***"

A look of startling realization crossing his face at Mugetsu's question, Ichigo barely managed to sense the slight explosion of spiritual energy in the distance before a circular hole was torn clean through his torso. Two pairs of eyes simultaneously widening at the unexpected wound while the abrupt shift in momentum caused him to lurch forward with thick streams of blood spraying through the air, Ichigo had just enough time to wonder what was happening before another dozen similar attacks pierced his body from every conceivable angle and direction. Grimacing when his right leg was severed just above the knee, the limb quickly dispersing into blue Life Fibers, he rapidly descended through the air as he lost his balance before harshly slamming onto a roof.

"Damn it!"

Cursing at the phantom pain as he stabbed Tournesol into the mostly shattered roof and slowly pushed himself back onto his feet, Ichigo didn't bother looking at his already regenerated leg. As his wounds rapidly healed, the circular holes perforating both his body and Mugetsu's armor flawlessly knitting back together, he craned his head upwards and scowled, "What the hell hit us?!"

" ***I don't know,***" Mugetsu's normally passive tone carried a hint of anger. She was having difficulty understanding what happened. One second Ichigo was flying towards Ryuko and the next something managed to bypass her uniform, one of the toughest armors on the planet, and tear a hole in his body, "***But we should be careful, Ichigo. There's no telling - "***

The Kamui's cautious warning quickly devolved into surprised stammering when hundreds of what looked like playing cards suddenly materialized out of nothingness just beyond the edges of the building. Gripping Tournesol tightly with both hands while protectively raising the blade in front of his body when the cards briefly shimmered before they rapidly began rotating in a sphere around them, Ichigo felt a bead of cold sweat trickle down his forehead when he noticed the barrier cleanly slicing through the rooftop.

And it was slowly growing closer.

So this was their plan all along. Whoever he was fighting must have already known his Life Fibers would easily be able to regenerate all the damage from their first attack. They were probably hoping something like this would be enough to overwhelm his regeneration and kill him. But Ichigo wasn't exactly keen on letting that happen. His inability to feel pain and regeneration aside, allowing someone to slice his body to ribbons was at the very bottom of things he wanted to try out before dying.

"Mugetsu Zangetsu!"

Sweeping Tournesol through the air while Mugetsu shifted into her advanced configuration accompanied by a burst of blue stars, Ichigo took a moment to steady his breathing before calmly placing a hand over his right wrist. His eyes narrowing in determination when a thick layer of turbulent energy instantly enveloped the hardened Life Fiber weapon, a pulse of power repelling the shadows as his Life Fibers further synchronized with Mugetsu's, Ichigo bent his knees before vanishing in a burst of speed towards the encroaching whirlwind of razor sharp cards.

Gritting his teeth when the several tears appeared on Mugetsu's armor, Ichigo swung Tournesol vertically downwards through the air while shouting, "Getsuga Tenshou!"

A crescent of sapphire light erupted outwards into the surrounding midnight skies as the massive amount of energy contained within Tournesol exploded against the swirling tide of razor sharp cards. For just a moment the technique appeared to resist Ichigo's attack, the hardened Life Fiber weapon shaking as it slowly pushed forward, before something audibly shattered and everything began disintegrating. The thousands of microscopic blades composing the Getsuga Tenshou simultaneously struck at every card within range, tearing them apart in a wave of power before detonating and completely shattering the technique.

"Alright... now where did he go?"

Ichigo scowled as he stared across the darkened landscape. Whoever ambushed him was good... but not good enough to deal with Mugetsu's power. It had taken a little more effort than he anticipated but their Getsuga Tenshou easily destroyed the technique. Half-listening to his Kamui comment on the burning remnants of cards falling like confetti through the air, Ichigo stiffened when he felt a powerful spiritual energy suddenly appear behind him. Eyes widening upon seeing a man dressed similarly to Bazz-B standing on the opposite end of the roof loudly snap his fingers, Ichigo barely had time to notice the ground shaking before a veritable storm of card tore upwards through the building beneath his feet.

Tendrils of darkness spread out from beneath Tubalcain Alhambra as the former Sternritter reached up and gripped his fedora moments before an intense burst of wind tore across the roof. Glowing eyes staring into the thick plume of smoke while the shadows replacing his left leg below the knee writhed chaotically, the undead Quincy's emotionless façade twisted into an annoyed frown when the dust cleared, exposing a mostly unscathed Ichigo.

"I get it now."

The sound of footsteps echoed softly across the roof as Ichigo emerged from the dissipating smoke looking little worse for wear, the



only sign of Alhambra's vicious attack being the glowing cuts and abrasions covering Mugetsu's armor that were already knitting back together. Frowning thoughtfully while listening to his Kamui express her annoyance and hatred of the Quincy for daring to damage her uniform, Ichigo propped Tournesol against his shoulder and continued, "I'm going to take a wild guess. Alucard absorbed your soul after you lost to the bastard, didn't he? It's why your spiritual energy feels almost like his... and how your cards cut through Mugetsu."

Ichigo quickly removed Tournesol from his shoulder when Alhambra's posture suddenly shifted and he swept his arms forward, sending a maelstrom of cards spiraling through the air towards him. A faint sapphire light covering the hardened Life Fiber weapon as it became little more than a blur, slicing through each and every one of the Sternritter's cards, Ichigo's tone didn't waver as he added, "You Quincy don't deal well with Life Fibers... but Alucard doesn't have that problem."

A brief disturbance in the surrounding spiritual energy caused Ichigo to stiffen before he instinctively twisted his body sideways, the all-penetrating bullet aimed at the junction of his neck missing him by only a few inches. Twin jets of blue energy violently blasting from Mugetsu's armor as he watched the attack continue through the building across the street, he shifted his balance before rapidly rushing across the roof towards Alhambra. That last sneak attack confirmed his growing suspicions. He was fighting against not one but *two* undead Quincy, which complicated everything. He needed to defeat this guy before his friend took another potshot or worse - decided to team up against him.

Using Mugetsu's superior speed to easily overwhelm Alhambra's efforts to evade his attack, Ichigo swung Tournesol at the former Sternritter's arm only to frown in mild confusion when he felt the blade momentarily meet with heavy resistance. Choosing not to follow the undead Quincy when he retreated using Hirenkyaku, droplets of shadowed blood dripping onto the roof, Ichigo turned around and

stared at the bleeding gash on Alhambra's arm before commenting, "So... you can use Blut Vene."

Thanks to the mysterious and baffling friendship between his old man and Uryu's dad, which only came to light after the Great Culture and Sports Festival, Ichigo had a pretty good understanding of most Quincy abilities. While most of the techniques used by Bazz-B and the rest of the Sternritter still didn't make a lot of sense, especially when compared to what Uryu bragged he could do, Ichigo grimaced as he recognized the brief resistance he felt before Tournesol cut into Alhambra's arm. There was no question about it - thanks to Alucard the Sternritter's Blut Vene worked against Life Fibers.

That was going to make things a little difficult.

" ***Ichigo...***" Mugetsu's tone was tense as she narrowed her eyes in annoyance at the undead Quincy hovering above them. Although the Kamui still had the strong urge to shudder in disgust at the writhing shadows composing Alhambra's form, her full attention was completely focused on how he was *floating* in the air, "***How is he floating?***"

"It's something most Quincy and shinigami can do," Ichigo explained offhandedly, his attention firmly locked on Alhambra.

" ***Could we do something like that?***"

The innocuous question momentarily threw Ichigo off balance. Why *hadn't* he tried air walking while wearing Mugetsu? It hadn't been all that difficult to learn back when he was a shinigami. Kisuke's torture disguised as training had made damn sure of that. He certainly had enough spiritual energy to relearn the technique. The only question was whether the same principles applied since his body was made entirely of Life Fibers. And, to be perfectly honest, he was annoyingly frustrating having to fight opponents that could float. While Mugetsu's flight configuration could cover large distances faster than shunpo and Hirenkyaku, it wasn't all that useful when fighting someone that could simply stand in the air.

"I don't see why not," Ichigo scowled when Rip Van Winkle slowly emerged from the shadows in front of him, a faint smirk pulling at the edges of her mouth as she stood opposite of Alhambra on the roof. Tightening his grip around Tournesol as he was forced to split his attention between the undead Quincy, Ichigo narrowed his eyes and warned, "Get ready, Mugetsu. It looks like Ryuko and Senketsu will have to wait just a little longer..."

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"Damn it!"

A small burst of superheated steam erupted from Senketsu's ventilation grills as Ryuko sat with her back pressed firmly against the partially destroyed dividing wall, her chest steadily rising and falling with every frustrated breath. Blue eyes sweeping angrily across the most destroyed office while her fingers expertly reached for the transformed Scissor Blade lying on the glass-covered marble tiles next to her leg, Ryuko waited until the hardened Life Fiber weapon was firmly in her grip before cursing under her breath. Five minutes. Five whole freaking minutes! She fought the captain and her stupidly broken bankai for five minutes before things went to hell. God damn it! That stupid Hat-and-Clogs wasn't kidding when he said a shinigami's bankai was their ultimate trump card.

Normally she wouldn't care if someone released the 'absolute pinnacle of their strength' besides wondering how to use Senketsu's power to kick their ass. There were enough of those morons back at Honnouji Academy. But how the hell was she supposed to fight something that can turn anything into ash just by freaking looking at it?

Ryuko grimaced before smashing her fist against the ground hard enough that her knuckles left a visible indent in the marble tiles. The Scissor Blade gripped tightly in her hand as she cautiously leaned out from behind the wall, the line of shattered windows across the

office bathing everything a deep crimson light, Ryuko narrowed her eyes when she saw the fiery visage of the captain's bankai only a few streets away. Quickly ducking back behind the wall when the skeletal giant's head shifted subtly in the darkness, the teenager waited several seconds before letting out an angry snort.

There was not a chance in hell she was going to allow the stupid bankai to get another good look at her. Watching her arm literally disintegrate into ash was *not* something she wanted to experience a second time. Even if it didn't hurt and her Life Fibers regenerated the damage just as quickly, having something like that happen against was not at the top of her list.

Pushing herself into a kneeling position while her high heels scrapped against the floor, Ryuko felt the ruby undertone in her hair brighten as she turned towards Senketsu's single eye and grumbled, "Alright, so maybe attacking that thing head on wasn't such a good idea. But what else was I supposed to do?"

Senketsu stared unblinkingly at Ryuko for several seconds before replying, ***"I warned you it was a bad idea attacking the captain without a plan, Ryuko."***

"I'm sorry, alright?"

Ryuko hastily turned away from her Kamui in mild embarrassment when she felt his worry and concern bleeding across their synchronized connection. She should have known better than to ignore Senketsu's sensible warning and attack the bankai like a damn idiot. Had she learned *nothing* from Honnouji Academy and fighting the undead bastard? She didn't even make it halfway to the bankai before an unsettling blood-red light shone from its empty eye sockets and most of her right arm, besides the Scissor Blade, exploded into a fine mist of ash. If not for her inherently strong regeneration and Senketsu instinctively shifting into Shippu before the bankai could attack a second time she might have been killed.

Running a hand through her dual-toned hair as the stiff autumn wind caused goose bumps to break out across her exposed stomach, Ryuko glowered thoughtfully before the corners of her mouth curled into a smug grin, "Heh... but I think I figured out the secret of her bankai. It can't do shit if it can't see us!"

" ***Yes, I noticed that as well,***" Senketsu gave his best impression of an excited node as his multicolored eye swiveled away from the bankai and towards Ryuko, "***We should be fine as long as we avoid the bankai's gaze. Still... we should be extremely careful. We don't know what other abilities it might have.***"

"It's already freaking overpowered!" Ryuko shouted angrily while waving her right arm through the air, "What else does it need to do? It already turns everything it sees into ash!"

" ***I'm not so sure about that,***" Senketsu could feel his wearer's annoyance and confusion bleed across their connection as he briefly paused before continuing, "***It was brief, but when the bankai attacked I noticed an intense heat coming from inside your right arm. Instead of simply turning everything it sees into ash, I think the bankai actually causes whatever it looks at to ignite and burn until nothing remains but ash.***"

Ryuko grumbled under her breath at Senketsu's answer. Knowing how the bankai turned her arm into ash was great and all, but it didn't get her any closer to coming up with a plan to beat it. And as much as she wanted to retreat and get reinforcements, preferably Ichigo since he already dealt with shit like this, Ryuko knew that was out of the question. There would be no telling what sort of evil or sadistic bullshit the undead captain would pull if she tried running away. Not to mention Ichigo had own problems. It had been brief, nearly forgotten after watching her arm dissolve into a fine cloud of ash, but she felt Ichigo and Mugetsu fighting at least two Quincy.

Dragging him into her fight wouldn't help anyone.

The shattered glass covering the floor crackled loudly under Ryuko's heels as she stabbed the Scissor Blade into the ground and stood up. One hand gripping the wall as she chanced another glance at the bankai in the distance, Ryuko huffed angrily before narrowing her eyes and scowling, "So the bitch thinks her bankai is unstoppable, right? Fine! Let's see how she feels after we hit it with Niban Genkai!"

Senketsu immediately felt a worrisome chill course through his threads at that declaration, an act that wasn't missed by his wearer, ***"Ryuko, do you remember what happened the last time we tried using Niban Genkai?"***

"Yeah... but thanks to the vampire bastard and Millennium there aren't any people left to get hurt," Ryuko tightly clenched her free hand into a fist upon remembering all the millions of people lying dead throughout the city, "Besides, I don't think we have much of - "

Whatever Ryuko was about to say died on the tip of her tongue when everything around them simply *disintegrated* . In the split second it took the teenager to understand what the hell was happening the building began loudly collapsing as several floors and thousands of pounds of concrete and steel sublimed directly into ash, the air instantly growing thick under a cloud of the superheated material. Gritting her teeth as she rushed forward and nearly lost her balance, courtesy of both the collapsing building and the captain's bankai causing part of her left leg to evaporate, Ryuko vaulted over what was left of a table before leaping through one of the broken windows and out into the night.

For a moment she could feel nothing besides the superheated ash enveloping her body, the normally lethal boiling temperatures not so much as uncomfortable against her skin, before she left the expanding cloud of ash and slammed into the bitterly cold autumn night. Her breath coming out in visible wisps as she continued freefalling towards the ground, bursts of ruby light shimmering from within the parts of her body that were simply *gone*, Ryuko mentally

shifted Senketsu into Shippu before twisting around and blasting vertically down the street away from the collapsing building.

"What the hell?"

Ryuko's bewildered exclamation could clearly be heard despite the fact nearly half of her throat had been caught within the bankai's effects. Banking sharply to the left while ignoring the sensation of her Life Fibers flawlessly knitting together the normally lethal wounds, Ryuko glared in the direction she *knew* the bankai was waiting and snarled, "It didn't even freaking see us!"

" ***It might have known where we were all along,***" Senketsu couldn't help but briefly ripple around Ryuko's body at the unsettling sensation of feeling parts of his uniform disintegrate only to quickly regenerate a few seconds later, "***We weren't exactly subtle when we crashed into the building, Ryuko.***"

"I didn't exactly have many options!"

Sparks danced off the edge of the Scissor Blade as Ryuko flew close enough to the ground for the weapon to scrape against the asphalt. Her face twisting into an annoyed scowl as she abruptly leaned backwards and came to a quick stop, the street melting slightly under the constant deluge of energy erupting from her transformed legs, Ryuko turned around towards the bankai hidden just beyond the roofline and spat, "Fine! If the bitch wants to play dirty than I guess we'll just have to take her out instead!"

" ***Ryuko...***"

"I already know what you're going to say, Senketsu," Ryuko growled lightly under her breath as she felt, rather than heard, the Kamui's growing concern for her safety through their synchronized connection. Fingers tightening around the Scissor Blade as she easily hefted the transformed weapon into the air, a deep crimson aura flickering around her body, Ryuko stared straight into Senketsu's multicolored eye and declared, "Do you remember what

Yoruichi told us about the undead bastard? I don't think this bitch has been alive for a long freaking time. So as far as I'm concerned we're just finishing the - "

Ryuko gasped indignantly when she felt something suddenly clasp around Senketsu's wing and awkwardly pull her towards the ground. Growling furiously as she was slammed face-first into the pavement, a brief shimmer of ruby light surrounding her body as Senketsu automatically shifted out of Shippu, Ryuko spat on the ground before angrily pushing herself back onto her feet. All these surprise attacks and blatantly bullshit abilities were really starting to piss her off! Senketsu's heels clicking softly as she glanced around the suspiciously deserted street, the faint droning sound pressing against her ears ignored in favor of finding whoever attacked her, Ryuko never noticed the shadows rippling under her feet. Blue eyes widened when the darkness erupted upwards, thick trails of blood sprayed through the air as writhing maws of solidified darkness pierced Senketsu's armor and latched onto her arms and legs.

"Hey! Get the hell off of me!"

As the seconds passed it rapidly dawned on the teenager that despite her best efforts, and Senketsu's power, she wouldn't be able to tear her way free from the eldritch familiars biting deeply into her body. Thinking quickly when she noticed the writhing shadows growing thicker, the crimson hue of the full moon dimming as oozing streams of darkness flowed forth from the surrounding buildings, Ryuko flipped the Scissor Blade around and attempted to sever the shadows entrapping her right arm. When that failed to work, the unholy substance parting like water as the hardened Life Fiber weapon cut through it, she cursed loudly and profusely before redoubling her efforts to escape.

" **Ryuko!**" Several bursts of steam erupted from Senketsu's ventilation grills as the Kamui desperately tried to help Ryuko escape, his armor fearfully rippling at the vile shadows, "**I can't break free!**"



"There's no way I'm getting caught by that bastard a second time!" Memories of her recent unpleasant journey into the heart of Alucard's undead army flashed through Ryuko's mind as a turbulent ruby aura exploded from her body, "So screw that! Senketsu Senkou!"

For a brief moment it appeared as if the increased strength from Senkou would be enough to tear apart the surrounding darkness. Blood and visceral violently spraying through the air as she tore her ensnared left arm free, brilliant ruby light shining from the jagged wound before it quickly knitted back together, Ryuko reached over and tightly clenched her fingers around the familiar latched onto her other arm only to pause when she felt a chill race down her spine. Jets of steam escaping from Senketsu in quick succession as she gazed upwards, every muscle in Ryuko's body froze when she noticed hundreds of familiar eyes imposing themselves upon the miasma of darkness oozing down the surrounding buildings.

"You've got to be kidding me..."

Shocked eyes widening when the low droning in the background devolved into a full-blown cacophony of the damned, Ryuko could only scream as her body quickly began dissolving into ash.

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"God damn it..."

Heinkel Wolfe ignored the pain rampaging through her heavily burnt right arm as the last masked demon faded away into oblivion. Breathing heavily while blistered fingers twitched around her pistol, the paladin grimaced as she looked at the damaged flesh underneath the tattered remains of her sleeve. It was surprising that her regeneration couldn't easily repair the damage sustained in her battle against the vampire. But that was the least of her concerns. She was lucky the larvatum diabolus's aim had been so terrible.

Several more inches to the left and that blasphemous emerald blast would have taken her arm off entirely.

Roughly tearing away the remains of her sleeve, the burn fabric flaking apart in her fingers, Heinkel stiffened and glanced over her shoulder when she heard Yumiko shouting loudly in her native tongue. Her straw-blond hair rustling in the wind while she watched her friend carve a path of destruction through the undead ranks while the rest of the paladins stood unyielding against the relentless tide of familiars, she tensely exhaled through clenched teeth before turning her full ire upon the vampire standing before her.

Even in the darkness she could still make out the amused and sadistic grin stretched across his pale face.

"You stand before me... I'm impressed."

Shadows clung viciously to the ancient vampire's overcoat as he gazed passionately at the paladin from his perch upon the pile of metal and shattered concrete, blood pooling around his boots from innumerable impaled corpses. Leaning forward when Heinkel made no move to confront him, to continue their dance until only one of them remained, Alucard placed a hand over his heart and mockingly asked, "What's wrong, Iscariot? Your goal is nearly within reach. Don't tell me that pathetic creature wore you down. Your arm is only damaged, muscle and sinew still intact."

The vampire's manic smirk widened as he briefly paused, hints of insanity tearing at the edges of his face, before his crimson eyes widened, "Are you going to give up... to die like a dog... when victory is so near at hand?"

"... shut the hell up, vampire."

Heinkel scowled angrily at the vampire as the pistol in her right hand, the metal cracked and warped from the previous battle, slipped from her fingers and clattered to the ground. She wasn't Alucard's damn entertainment. Her only mission was to bring about an end to the

vampire's eternal reign of terror and bloodshed, to destroy Alucard when he was at his most vulnerable. Reaching into her cassock while Alucard's condescending grin grew even wider, Heinkel narrowed her eyes and sneered, "You are a plague! A blight that will never cease consuming souls until there is nothing left! If you are not destroyed then all of humanity is doomed! I am prepared to do whatever it takes to see you destroyed, vampire!"

A deafening silence blanketed the city as the paladin extracted a thin wood box from her cassock, glowing blue seals etched onto every visible surface. His amused grin transforming into a disgusted frown at the energy radiating from within the confines of the box, Alucard's voice grew progressively more sinister as his eyes narrowed, "What is *that* ?"

The sudden shift of the vampire's tone threw the paladin off balance. Standing firm while the darkness surrounding Alucard grew thicker, shadows expanding along the ground while a crimson aura enveloped his body, Heinkel ignored the increasing heaviness of the air. Her fingers clenching into the box as she raised it above her head, the seals rapidly unraveling, her face twisted into a grimace before she smashed the box against her knee and grasped the obtained once contained within.

"It's been centuries since I've seen one of those *things*..." Alucard stared at the artifact clenched within Wolfe's fingers with an expression of absolute loathing, "The Nail of Helena."

The hatred and disgust in the vampire's voice drew the undivided attention of those still fighting when the unrelenting flood of undead familiars dissolved into shadows. Ignoring the other humans muttering incessantly in the background as he stared at the Nail of Helena held foolishly in Wolfe's hand, Alucard scoffed derisively, "The Shroud of Turin... the Holy Grail... the Lance of Longinus... should I assume you are threatening to use the last of the so-called holy artifacts of Rome against me?"

So it seemed even an unrepentant monster like Alucard could sense the power of miracle permeating the holy artifact. Nervous fingers curled tightly around the Nail of Helena as she pointed the artifact at her heart, Heinkel glared into the ancient vampire's widening eyes before exclaiming, "Yumiko! Retreat as far away from here as possible! I don't want you -"

"Wolfe, stop it!"

Alucard's desperate plea caught Heinkel by surprise, causing her to involuntarily relax her grip on the Nail of Helena, "Do you know what that thing will do to you? I have witnessed firsthand what happens to those that use such *things* in the name of God! You'll become nothing more than an unthinking monster! Devoid of humanity and reason! Don't succumb to power! Retain your humanity! Even if by some miracle that *thing* allows you to defeat me... will it be worth it... if you become nothing more than a monster in the end?"

A solemn wind blew through the deserted streets as the vampire king's expression fell, the manic look in his eyes fading away alongside the crimson aura, "This fated battle between us... would you really push it this far... into the realms beyond mortality? A monster such as myself... a pathetic creature of such weakness that I could not bear the weight of a human life... who threw away his very soul for power... if I am to ever be defeated, it must be by a human! Don't do it, Wolfe. Don't become a monster... a monster like me..."

For a moment Heinkel truly considered listening to the vampire's strangely desperate pleas before steeling her nerves, "I wish I could have defeated you with my own two hands... but it's become clear that no matter how hard I try, I'll never be able to kill you. Do not think this is about power, vampire. I am fully aware of what this artifact will do to me... of what it will transform my body into... but I am a member of Iscariot! It is our sacred duty to lay down our lives for the sake of God! To rid the world of heathens and monsters! If the price to save humanity is to become a monster... then so be it."

Ignoring Alucard's final attempt to dissuade her from her current path, Heinkel breathed deeply and prepared to plunge the Nail of Helena into her heart only to be forcibly prevented when a bayonet pierced straight through her hand. Blood dripping onto the ground as the sudden shock caused her to let go of the nail, the holy artifact clattering twice before rolling to a stop, Heinkel's eyes widened in disbelief when Alexander Anderson landed in front of her. Grunting as she pulled out the bayonet, the wound hissing shut, she opened her mouth to speak only for the former paladin to turn around and punch her square in the jaw.

"Yer still the same idiot girl as always! Never thinking about the damned consequences when ye go off and do something foolish!"

Carefully picking up the discarded Nail of Helena as Heinkel staggered backwards with blood spewing from her mouth, Anderson took one look at the holy artifact before throwing it away. He couldn't believe the damn girl was foolish enough to even attempt using such a thing. The holy artifacts of Rome weren't toys! Green eyes narrowing furiously as he turned his back on the highly intrigued Alucard, Anderson's voice was dangerously stoic when he spoke, "The vampire was right about one thing - only a human can kill a monster."

"I've spent years fighting against a terrible monster... tracking her minions and servants in order to slaughter them. But never did I give into the temptation to use the abhorrent power of Life Fibers," Anderson angrily bared his teeth as he reached out and grabbed the still recovering Heinkel by the front of her cassock, "Ragyo Kiryuin and that blonde demon are far worse monsters than Alucard! So what stupid reason do ye have for throwing away yer humanity?!"

Heinkel stammered at the older man's words before regaining her composure and shouting back, "God damn it, Anderson! What the hell are you doing here?!"

"Alexander Anderson..."

The pressure relentlessly pressing down upon their shoulders vanished as the vampire stared at the nudist commander, his deathly pale face twisting into an expression of amusement and deranged respect, "You are quite the remarkable man. Any ordinary human would have long succumbed to such debilitating wounds... their flesh bleeding out within minutes."

Anderson growled at the vampire's unwanted praise. Two tailor bayonets flashing into existence within his hands as he harshly released Heinkel's cassock and turned around, he narrowed his eyes at Alucard and exclaimed, "I don't care for yer damn praise, vampire. But tell me something - how many shinigami did ye devour?"

Faint laughter broke the silence that followed Anderson's question as Alucard slowly descended the pile of rubble, his boots echoing with each deliberate step he took towards the two humans. Baring his teeth slightly in amusement at the rapidly changing situation, the vampire's face was hidden in shadows when he finally stopped chuckling and answered, "Only one... but she was the strongest out of those three fools four hundred years ago. But captain or not, shinigami are nothing more than spirits in the guise of humans... pathetic monsters attempting to replicate humanity. They could never have hoped to kill a monster such as myself."

"However..." Alucard tauntingly trailed off when he stepped onto the street, the shadows warping around his body before he continued in an amused tone, "That particular captain's bankai was quite interesting. A powerful ability meant to utterly crush and destroy one's enemies. It should be amusing to see how that monster girl deals with such lethality..."

The wind gusting through the streets suddenly picked up as Anderson's eyes widened in realization at the vampire's comment. Chuckling when he noticed the bayonets in the nudist commander's hands shaking out of anger, Alucard's grin grew increasingly deranged as he stomped to a halt, "Do you intend to fight me, Alexander Anderson? With such debilitating wounds it's only a

matter of time before you bleed out and die. Do you foolishly believe that a human such as yourself... a normal man possessing neither regeneration or special abilities... has any hope of defeating a monster in your present condition?"

"I don't think I will defeat ye vampire..." Anderson's tone brooked no arguments as he crossed the tailor bayonets in front of his body, "I *know* it."

A surprised gasp escaped the vampire's mouth, lips curling into a mirthful grin as anticipation coursed through his black heart. The certainty in which Anderson believed he possessed the ability to kill him momentarily startled the vampire. For several seconds silence reigned across the street, the monotonous lack of noise broken only by a faint muttering and scoff from Heinkel as she pulled out her remaining pistol, before Alucard threw his head backwards and began laughing madly. Yes! This was it! His fangs glistening in the moonlight as he leaned forward, the sound of his psychotic laughter causing the two humans to tense, the vampire king manically exclaimed, "YES! You are a man worthy of respect, Alexander Anderson! A pinnacle of humanity that reminds me of that *man* from one hundred years ago! So come! Fight alongside your protégé... your successor... and attempt to pierce my heart with your bayonets!"

The sound of rapid footsteps immediately followed Alucard's insane proclamation before Yumiko landed into a tight crouch on Anderson's right, her dark eyes staring furiously at the vampire while she flicked blood off her katana. Shifting her attention momentarily to the nudist commander, the paladin scoffed and growled, "Don't think this changes a damn thing, Anderson. Once we deal with Alucard I'm taking you back to the Vatican."

The former paladin nodded at Yumiko before grimacing, "Once the vampire *and* Ragyo Kiryuin are destroyed... their bodies buried deep beneath the earth... I will gladly surrender to ye and face judgment for my crimes."

"God damn it," Heinkel cursed lightly as she removed her damaged glasses, the lenses badly cracked and frame bent. Never in her wildest dreams did the notion of fighting alongside Anderson, one of the worst traitors in the Vatican's history, cross her mind, "Can you even fight in your condition, Anderson?"

"I've fought far worse than vampires for over a decade in worse condition," Anderson replied, his eyes narrowed when the darkness composing Alucard's true form shifted. Clenching his fingers tightly around the tailor bayonets, the former paladin loudly exclaimed, "A few wounds won't slow me down! Now get ready - he's coming!"

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### **Kamui Tales [Alternate Weave #1 - Ryuko]**

Ryuko knew something was seriously messed up when she opened her eyes just seconds before harshly slamming into the ground. Biting back a string of curses as she picked herself off the ground, the taste of copper momentarily filling her mouth, Ryuko rubbed a hand against the back of her neck and growled, "What the hell just happened?"

***"Are you all right, Ryuko?"***

Senketsu's comforting voice reverberating inside her mind instantly snapped Ryuko out of her confused stupor. The last thing she could remember before smashing face-first into the ground was that bitch's bankai somehow sneaking up on them, which didn't make any sense. How could something over one hundred feet tall sneak up on anything? Growling as she pushed that thought to the back of her mind and looked around for the captain, all but certain the shinigami would try another cheap trick, Ryuko's eyes widened in astonishment upon noticing she wasn't in London but Osaka.

And it was still on freaking fire.



"What the hell? How did we get to Osaka?" Ryuko whipped her head back and forth in confusion, the noticeable absence of the Scissor Blade not a priority at the moment, "Where's that shinigami bitch?!"

**" What are you talking about, Ryuko?"**

Senketsu felt worry course through his threads about Ryuko. Her behavior after regaining consciousness was different yet he couldn't detect any issues with her body. Both her blood pressure and heart rate were perfectly normal. In fact, there was absolutely nothing wrong with her - no injuries or anything. Swiveling his multicolored eye towards Ryuko's face, the Kamui asked, **"And what's a shinigami?"**

The honesty of her Kamui's question threw Ryuko off balance, causing the teenager to involuntarily raise her voice, "What are you talking about? We were just fighting her a minute ago! You literally *just* warned me about her bankai's ability to turn shit into ash... including my freaking arm!"

**" I do not recall saying such a thing,"** Senketsu was almost certain Ryuko was suffering from a concussion. Tightening protective around her body, a hint of confusion bleeding across their connection at the lack of any head injuries, the Kamui gave his best impression of a frown before adding, **"Furthermore, such an ability would undoubtedly be lethal. If we had been hit but such an attack, you would still be missing your arm."**

"Hold on! Don't tell me you - "

The intimately familiar echo of a high heel clicking arrogantly against the ground cut Ryuko off before she could finish the question. A cold feeling coursing through her body as she slowly turned around, several large and violent explosions dotting the fiery inferno of a landscape, Ryuko felt her breath hitch when she saw Satsuki standing directly behind her with Junketsu in her activated configuration, "Satsuki?"

"It is clear from your confusion that you finally grasp the futility of your actions, Matoi," Satsuki's condescending voice pierced through the crackling conflagration as she continued marching towards Ryuko, Bakuzan clasped tightly in her right hand, "But even so, you shall meet your end here in Osaka!"

As Satsuki slowly strutted across the desolate landscape, completely confident in her assured victory over those that would defy her, the only thoughts passing through Ryuko's mind were about what the hell was happening. Her sister's behavior didn't make any sense! It was almost as if she went back in time to when Satsuki was still a total bitch! But cliché shit like that only happens in bad movies and books. Mouth twisting into a snarling frown when she noticed Bakuzan in Satsuki's hand, which she was pretty damn sure was shattered by Ragyo, she bit her lower lip and growled, "Is that right? But I have a question for you, Satsuki! Where's Ichigo?"

Satsuki's brow creased into a suspicious frown at Matoi's behavior. The Ryuko Matoi she knew, that she was molding into the perfect weapon to use against her mother, was prone to fits of childish anger and rage. Allowing her emotions to dictate her actions instead of tempering her mind. Yet the teenager standing before her seemed more annoyed by some inane trivial nonsense than their ongoing battle, when not two minutes ago Matoi had rudely proclaimed the notion of defeating her. Flexing her fingers around Bakuzan's hilt as she raised the blade to her shoulder, Satsuki's voice remained perfectly stoic, "Your words fall on deaf ears, Matoi. The name Ichigo means nothing to me!"

Heels exploding off the ground as she rushed forward with Bakuzan slicing dangerously through the air, Satsuki's focused eyes widened in disbelief when Matoi appeared to casually lean out of her blade's path. That was impossible. Even with her increased synchronization, brought about by the Grand Couturier's actions and the Tri-City Schools Raid Trip, there was no explanation for Matoi's new speed and reaction time. It brought everything Inumuta gathered about Senketsu's capabilities into question. Gritting her teeth at the

implications of such knowledge, Satsuki attempted to follow through with a strike to the solar plexus only for Matoi to nonchalantly dodge it at the very last second.

It was almost as if she were fighting against the Grand Couturier.

"Damn it! This doesn't make any sense!"

Ryuko's already worsening scowl deepened as she continued avoiding her sister's attacks, the black hardened Life Fiber weapon passing inches away from her body. Since when was Satsuki this damn slow? Increasingly frustrated by the situation, Ryuko reached out and harshly grabbed her sister's wrist before shouting, "I'm not going to ask again. Where the hell are Ichigo and Mugetsu?"

"Still you persist with this nonsense?" Satsuki demanded as she ripped her arm free of Matoi's grasp, an act that required a tremendous amount of strength. Ignoring the slight tingle of pain in wrist, the muscles undoubtedly bruised despite Junketsu's defensive capabilities, she pointed Bakuzan at her opponent's throat and sneered, "And what is this... Mugetsu? Is that the name of yet another Kamui created by your late father?"

That settled it. Something was seriously messed up. There was no way Satsuki wouldn't remember they had the same dad. Her sister's mind was like a steel trap. She never forgot a damn thing. Her hands tightly clenching into fists as realization dawned upon her, Ryuko didn't bother moving out of the way when Satsuki rushed forward and slammed Bakuzan's hilt squarely into her bare stomach. Barely flinching as the accompanying release of power exploded through the ruins behind her, Ryuko's eyes were cast in shadow as she swung her arm forward and punched Satsuki squarely in the face.

A twinge of guilt tore at her heart when she saw her sister stagger backwards, blood spewing from her mouth. Damn it, was she really that much stronger than this Satsuki? A love tap like that would have barely even fazed the sister she knew. Steeling her nerves as she walked towards the recovering Student Council President, Ryuko

snorted derisively and folded her arms, "I get it now. So let me just get this off my chest - this whole freaking plan of yours ain't going to work!"

Satsuki wiped away the trail of blood leaking from the corner of her mouth before responding, "Do you believe you possess the ability to best me, Matoi? I may not know how your power increased in such a short amount of time but it will not be enough to derail my ambitions!"

Ryuko didn't bother waiting for Satsuki to make the next move before she stepped forward and promptly vanished in a burst of speed. Reappearing not a second later already standing several inches away from her sister, she scoffed angrily before reaching out and once more grabbing Satsuki's wrist, "Stopping you is damn important but that's not what I meant! So listen up, Satsuki Kiryuin, because I'm only going to say this once! Your stupid academy is not nearly enough to take down that rainbow bitch!"

A cold chill raced down Satsuki's spine at the comment, "How do you \_."

"Know about your dear old mom?" Ryuko let go of Satsuki's arm and stepped backwards, "Does it really matter?"

"I suppose not," the tension draining from her body when Matoi showed no further indications of hostility, Satsuki ignored Gamagori's worried exclamations in the background as she sheathed Bakuzan, "You seem quite sure of yourself, Matoi. Therefore let us assume that you speak the truth, that your words carry validity. How would you deal with my mother if she were, in fact, the person you so callously claim her to be?"

As Ryuko opened her mouth she was blindsided when Mako slid into view right next to her, a familiar red blade hugged tightly against her chest, "Um... Ryuko? You dropped this."

Awkwardly but sincerely thanking Mako for returning the Scissor Blade, her friend happy at being able to help, Ryuko nearly fell onto her ass when everything began shaking before a massive explosion rocked the city. Pivoting around when a pink figure came soaring out of the ruins accompanied by a burst of explosions, she glared at Nonon Jakuzure as the pink haired girl cheerfully saluted Satsuki, "And that is that! I destroyed the Nudist Beach as per your orders, Lady Satsuki!"

And that was another checkmark on her growing list of things that proved she was somehow in an alternate, crazy universe. There was not a chance in hell Jakuzure would have stood a chance against the Nudist Beach she knew, especially when led by Olivier Armstrong who could destroy a Three-Star Goku Uniform with her bare hands. Not to mention Jakuzure was in her Symphony Regalia Mark II, which Ryuko clearly remembered Ichigo nearly destroyed while that nudist bastard went after Senketsu.

"At last we have delivered the deathblow to the fools who dared oppose us! And with Nudist Beach destroyed the objective of our raid trip has been accomplished!"

A brilliant backdrop of pure white light enveloped Satsuki as she calmly leapt upwards and onto the back of a waiting helicopter. Ignoring the blood still oozing from the corner of her mouth, the young Kiryuin locked gazes with Ryuko before sneering, "I'm still waiting for your answer, Mato!"

"I'm not going to beat around the bush with some vague answer bullshit!" Ryuko pointed the Scissor Blade at her sister and exclaimed, "Your bitch of a mother has Life Fibers woven inside her freaking body! You won't be able to kill her with just Bakuzan!"

For a brief second a genuinely surprised and slightly fearful expression crossed Satsuki's face before it was quickly extinguished, "I have no idea what you are talking about but it would be wise to keep your pathetic delusions to yourself, Mato. And do not let your

new found power go to your head. For the next time we meet shall be our last!"

Ryuko was silent as Satsuki and her forces retreated from Osaka, her face a mask of stoicism. As the last traces of Honnouji Academy vanished into the surrounding conflagration, she collapsed onto her knees and cursed loudly to the heavens, "God... *fucking*... damn it!"

Mako clasped her hands against her cheeks in shock at Ryuko's choice of language, "Oh my gosh! Did Lady Satsuki hurt you, Ryuko?"

"Mako!"

Desperately grabbing her friend's shoulders, Ryuko's voice cracked as she asked, "Does the name Ichigo ring a bell?"

"Hmm... nope!" Closing her eyes as she answered, Mako missed the crestfallen expression on Ryuko's face, "Why? Are they someone important?"

Senketsu's worried voice echoing in the recesses of her mind when she noticed Mikisugi and Tsumugu, both men naked as the day they were born, Ryuko could barely muster up the energy to whisper as the full weight of her situation became apparent, "Yeah... he was pretty damn important..."

# Zu der Nacht des Krieges

*I do apologize for how long this chapter took. More than two months... that's how long it's been since Chapter 49 was posted. But given that this chapter is a rather pivotal moment for my story (it's also my 50 chapter!) I wanted to make sure it was perfect. This is the climax of the Hellsing Arc, where everything comes together. A lot of your theories, some of which you PM'd me, were wrong. Some of you were correct, so please accept a heartfelt congratulations for guessing correctly.*

*So I really don't have anything else to say besides acknowledging that this is Chapter 50... posted on the eve of To My Death I Fight's second anniversary. So I want to thank all of you, my faithful readers, who've continued reading this story over the course of its evolution. Now, some of the earlier chapters were a bit... rough... but as my writing's improved I've gone back and fixed them. Applying what I've learned and making them better. The entirety of Chapter 11 is a rather good example. Most of it was rewritten, the quality brought up several orders of magnitude.*

*But enough about that! You came here to read the chapter. So I hope you enjoy it!*

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## Chapter 50 - Zu der Nacht des Krieges

Hushed voices filled the *Deus Ex Machina's* command center as soldats, some beginning to sweat profusely, constantly relayed data to their superiors. With Zorin Blitz's advanced battalion obliterated, the London force decimated and Alucard's familiars rampaging through the city, the data able to be gathered was severely limited. In less than an hour what had been an assured victory had turned

into a massacre. As explosions continued echoed in the background, causing the zeppelin to momentarily list sideways, the Major stared at the wall of screens stretching before him and smiled in complete satisfaction.

"This night is simply full of surprises."

The stout Sternritter's yellow eyes gleamed with dark exhilaration when the familiar visage of Alexander Anderson suddenly appeared on the screens. Watching in veiled amusement as the nudist commander prevented Heinkel Wolfe from using the Nail of Helena against Alucard, the vampire's expressions cycling through a myriad of emotions, the Major leaned backwards and pondered the situation. It would seem he had grossly underestimated the man's tenacity and determination. Alexander Anderson was quite the spanner in the works. He had anticipated with great excitement Heinkel Wolfe using one of the Vatican's many artifacts to even the playing field against the vampire. Turning her flesh and blood into that of a monster.

But for a man like Alexander Anderson to directly confront Alucard while injured, slipping through the vampire's innumerable army of undead souls to prevent someone seeking his death from using a dangerous artifact? The irony of the situation brought an excited smile to the Major's face. Everything he had planned, decades of constant backbreaking work to achieve His Majesty's vision, had been thrown to the side. Scattered like leaves in the wind from a single man's actions!

Yet it made no difference to the Schatten Ausrufung.

Calmly drinking his tea while a soldat updated him on the newest daten transmitted from the battlefield, the vampirized soldier nearly out of breath by the time he finished, the Major didn't react when the secured doors to the command center slammed open and a bloodied Bazz-B angrily marched into the room.



"Oh dear..." the Doktor's pleased expression vanished as he turned away from the live feed displayed on the monitor. His trained eyes quickly deducing the extent of the Sternritter's injuries, he shook his head and sighed, "It would appear you took His Majesty's orders to delay Ichigo Kurosaki a bit too literally."

The condescending tone in the Doktor's voice, the way his fellow Quincy shook his head in disappointment, irritated the hell out of Bazz-B. Rudely brushing aside the blonde haired man when he attempted to examine his injuries more carefully, the pain from aggravating his wounds worth seeing the annoyed expression on the Doktor's face, Bazz-B frowned and stomped to a halt when he found the Captain barring his path. He should have expected the mute bastard doing something like this. Narrowing his eyes when the Sternritter didn't say anything, Bazz-B looked at the bandages wrapped around the Captain's left arm and grinned, "Heh... was Ryuko Matoi too much for you, Hans?"

Hans Günsche, otherwise known as the Captain, pulled his officer's cap further down over his eyes before responding with a flurry of hand signs. Scoffing at the silent man's sarcastic answer, Bazz-B didn't say anything as he stormed around the Sternritter. There was just no point in arguing with the guy. His mouth twisting into a frustrated sneer when his attention was drawn to the live feed of Alucard laughing insanely on the screens in front of him, Bazz-B spat and turned to the Major, "I don't know why you're watching this crap. They don't stand a chance against that monster."

"One mustn't deny the tenacity, the sheer *determination* to win at any personal cost, that our friend in Nudist Beach possesses."

The image of a grinning Alucard disappeared when the Major pressed a button on the remote in his hand. Sweeping an arm through the air when the shadowed silhouette of Alexander Anderson and the two paladins from Iscariot took the vampire's place, the stout Sternritter grinned proudly, "Years of resisting the tyrannical rule of Ragyo Kiryuin, of countering that illustrious woman's desire to cover the world in Life Fibers, have ingrained in

Alexander Anderson's mind a singular notion. To destroy... to *utterly* decimate... any threat to humanity no matter the cost!"

Clenching his hand tightly into a fist as the events unfolding within the ruins of downtown London continued along their unexpected path, the Major's grin widened even as Bazz-B frowned, "A truly laudable goal. One worthy of admiration! Yet it is virtually impossible to *kill* Alucard! Greater beings have tried and failed, fallen at the might of that pathetic being rampaging below. But watching these humans struggle to overcome that indomitable monster, pushing tirelessly against the threads of fate to achieve victory in an otherwise hopeless battle? My pulse quickens in anticipation just imagining it!"

Bazz-B couldn't help but scoff at the Major's grandiose speech. Cocking his head slightly to the side as his attention was fully drawn to the battle erupting across the wall of monitors in front of him, the Sternritter frowned in confusion. He couldn't understand what the hell was going on. Alucard was supposed to be an all-powerful monster on the same level of His Majesty. Someone that scared even a bitch like Ragyo Kiryuin. So how were these humans fighting the bastard on relatively equal grounds? It didn't make any damn sense!

As he snorted in annoyance at the smug expression on the Major's face, Bazz-B's attempt to retort was cut off when one of the vampirized soldiers turned away from their station and shouted, "Sir! We're picking up a massive spiritual energy! Its speed is nearly eighty kilometers per hour and is heading directly towards us!"

A curious silence fell across the room as the video on the wall of monitors shifted from Alucard to a darkened figure soaring through the skies over London. It was incredibly obvious to the Sternritter what, or rather who, was flying towards them. With Integra Hellsing's arms tightly gripping her shoulders for support while tendrils of fiery shadows writhed through the air, Seras Victoria's crimson eyes shone ominously in the darkness right before she vanished off camera.

"At her current speed she will intercept the *Deus Ex Machina's* course in just over four minutes! What are your orders, sir?!"

"Orders, you say?"

There was no mistaking the veiled amusement in the Major's voice, "We will do *nothing* . The fraulein and her pet shall board without opposition. Do not bother trying to stop them."

It warmed the Sternritter's heart to witness everything falling neatly into position. And all it took to draw Integra Hellsing's complete and undivided attention away from Alucard was nothing more than a simple aerial bombardment of their location. A pointless strike against such targets but nevertheless effective at achieving results. While it had cost the Deus Ex Machina the last of her armaments, rendering them vulnerable to counterattack, it was well worth the cost. There was just one small thing to consider.

"Oh dear... it would seem our guests are intent on making quite a mess of things," the Major's yellow eyes were visible behind his glasses as he leaned backwards in the chair, the cup of tea slowly cooling at his side forgotten, "Perhaps we should consider, Doktor, preparing to shift operations?"

"Yes, of course."

The Doktor nervously bit his finger hard enough to stain the glove crimson as he replied. Even with assistance it would take an exorbitant amount of time cataloging and transferring every last piece of daten within his laboratory. Under the best conditions it would take nearly half an hour to complete the process, which didn't take into account the undead monster currently approaching them. Not to mention the arduous and dangerous process of unsealing SHI, which he could not do on his own!

"But I'm afraid such strict conditions will require that I prioritize specific daten," the Doktor's mouth twisted into a displeased grimace at the mere thought of having to leave even a single piece of the

research he spent nearly a century collecting behind. It was unthinkable to a man of science such as himself! Yet there was no other viable course of action. Sighing dejectedly at the situation, the Doktor adjusted his multi-lensed spectacles as he turned to leave, "Also... it will be impossible for me to unravel the seals around SHI and prepare it for transport."

"I shall go with you."

The articulated voice of Walter C. Dornez drew the Doktor's attention when the newly ascended Sternritter slowly emerged from the shadows, the abrupt shift in lighting causing his monocle to shimmer as he calmly adjusted his white fingerless gloves, "The seals require the input of one of His Majesty's Sternritter, do they not? Therefore you will require my aid in preparing to transport SHI back to the Silbern."

"HA! What a load of bull!"

Intense blue flames licked the ground around Bazz-B's feet while his mocking laughter filled the chamber, "Do you think anyone here believes that excuse?! You just want to go with the Doc because you're afraid of meeting your old 'master!'"

Bazz-B quickly stopped laughing when several razor sharp wires composed of spiritual energy materialized around his throat. The flames emerging from his body growing in intensity at the unprovoked attack from a fellow Sternritter, Bazz-B scoffed and reluctantly relaxed his guard when Walter flexed his fingers and dismissed the threads, "Integra Hellsing is *not* my master. My loyalty lies with His Majesty and no other. It would be wise to remember that... Bazzard Black."

The blue flames surrounding Bazz-B writhed at the condescending expression on Walter's face before dying down once the Sternritter left the room with the Doktor. It pissed him off that the bastard acted so high and mighty just because His Majesty decided to award him for seventy years of undercover service. Frowning in thought when

he noticed Hans shaking his head, Bazz-B was about to ask the mute bastard what the hell he was suggesting when the Major stood up and proudly stared at the wall of monitors.

"Gentlemen... it would seem our work is nearly complete."

There was no mistaking the pride in the Major's voice as he spoke, his yellow eyes enraptured with the climatic battle raging in the ruined city below, "The stage is set... the pieces are in place... and Alucard remains blissfully unaware. The memories he stole from our comrades useless! I do believe congratulations are in order. Your role in the Schatten Ausrufung, of distracting those two children, has guaranteed our success! Now... I must insist that you both leave before Integra Hellsing and her pet arrive."

"I am the fraulein's sole objective, the archenemy that she must destroy at all costs!"

With a dramatic flourish gesture the Major turned his back on the image of Alucard and exclaimed, "The antithesis to her organization, representing everything she stands against. She believes with every last fiber of her soul that my death is the solution to her problem. Anything that threatens to get in her way will be ripped apart by her pet! Torn to shreds by that monster in the guise of a young woman!"

The Captain's stoic expression briefly shifted at the Major's passionate declaration. Pulling the white officer's cap firmly over his eyes while communicating rapidly via sign language with his other hand, he remained completely silent when his fellow Sternritter chuckled in response, "Your assistance is most appreciated, Hans, but we must *not* underestimate Seras Victoria at any cost! We are no longer dealing with a vampire holding onto the dissolving threads of her humanity, clinging to that which she will never recover! Nonsense! This is a creature far more dangerous to us than either Ryuko Matoi or Ichigo Kurosaki!"

His glasses shimmering opaquely as he pressed a button on the remote in his hand, the live feed on the screens instantly shifting to a

combination of Ichigo and Ryuko's current fights against Alucard's familiars, the Major grinned, "These children, whose existences border on the edge of *madness*, possess bodies and weaponry that render our techniques useless. We would not stand a chance against either of them if they were so inclined... yet that is their weakness! For all their power they are unable to take a life! How disgustingly ironic! That those touched by that *filthy* creature... their bodies composed of naught but Life Fibers... value the existence of a human life to such an extent!

"Seras Victoria... on the other hand... does not have that problem."

Clasping his hands against the small of his back when blaring sirens filled the command center, a soldier frantically warning him that Integra Hellsing and Seras Victoria were thirty seconds away, the Major chuckled and turned to Bazz-B, "She possesses the necessary drive to slaughter us! To rip our bodies apart and devour our souls! We can look no further than our fallen comrade for proof of Seras Victoria's power! For within her twisted souls rests a piece of Alucard's very essence, a power so dark and inhuman that Zorin could not hope to win! Attempting to stop such a creature would be an exercise in futility."

As Hans nodded and turned to leave, Bazz-B snorting under his breath before following him a few seconds later, the Major sat back down and smirked. It always filled his heart when everything fell into place. Of course, one could never account for every variable. But it was far too late for Integra Hellsing or her pet vampire to stop the Schatten Ausrufung. For the Walpurgis Dawn was nearly upon them and nothing, not even his death, could stop it.

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Ryuko Matoi panted heavily as she knelt in the middle of the street, beads of sweat freely trickling down her face. Glaring venomously at the bankai looming just beyond the skyline, she angrily spat on the

ground before reaching for the Scissor Blade impaled next to her foot.

"God damn it!"

Ignoring the crimson light shining from within the depths of her body as her left hand finished knitting back together, Ryuko experimentally flexed her newly woven fingers into a fist and seethed angrily. This captain was a real pain in the ass! Nothing she tried against the bitch freaking worked! Her high heels sliding against the cracked asphalt as she slowly stood back on her feet, Ryuko spat to the side and sneered, "You got any ideas, Senketsu? Because we're going to freaking die if we don't figure out a way to beat that thing!"

**"Calm down, Ryuko. Getting angry causes your blood to taste exceptionally sour,"** Senketsu ignored the resulting indignant curse from his wearer as he narrowed his single eye and glanced upwards, **"But I'm afraid I don't have any ideas. This bankai is completely different from anything we've ever faced. More importantly, I can sense from your heart rate and blood pressure that you are growing tired and exhausted."**

"Gee, thanks for the help!" Ryuko scoffed irritably at her Kamui's response, "But it's not like I wanted to get into a freaking fight at two in the morning!"

While forced to fight in the early hours of the morning was one of the reasons she wanted nothing more than to pound the shinigami's face into a bloody pulp, it wasn't why she was so freaking pissed. No, the main source of her growing anger was that she couldn't hide from the bitch's stupid bankai. Every time she tried to lay low and figure out a way to beat the thing, the undead bastard sent his shadow creatures to pin her down and let the captain get in a free shot. It was annoying as hell! Pursing her lips into a tight grimace as she reined in her irritation, the ruby undertone in her hair dimming in the process, Ryuko took a deep breath and steeled her nerves.

She couldn't keep running forever. And hiding was out of the question. Whether she liked it or not, and she *really* didn't like it, she needed to attack the captain directly. Which meant willingly throwing herself against that overpowered thing. Just one thing bothered her.

There was no question in her mind that the captain's bankai was overpowered. That was the only word Ryuko felt that accurately described something that turned *everything* into ash with only a glance. At the beginning of this stupid fight that thing needed only to make eye contact for a single second to dissolve whatever unlucky part of her body and Senketsu it locked onto before their regeneration fixed the damage. But something changed. She didn't know if it was because the bitch never fought someone that could recover after having half their body turned into ash or not, but the last couple of attacks had been rather pathetic.

***" We should move, Ryuko."***

Blinking when Senketsu's concerned voice derailed her train of thought, Ryuko looked into her Kamui's single eye as he warned, ***"The longer we stay here the more likely Alucard will send his familiars after us."***

"Don't remind me."

Ryuko didn't show the slightest trace of strain as she hefted the Scissor Blade onto her shoulder, the transformed hardened Life Fiber weapon resting between her neck and Senketsu's armor. While beating the crap out of the captain was her number one priority at the moment she couldn't forget about the undead bastard. He was up to something. She could *literally* feel it. So the sooner she kicked the bitch's ass, the quicker she could meet up with Ichigo and take down the vampire once and for all.

As the sound of her heels clicking lightly against the pavement echoed off the nearby buildings, disturbing the deathly silence and causing the encompassing darkness to ripple, Ryuko carefully



glanced around before leaning over and whispering, "Hey Senketsu, did you notice the bankai getting weaker?"

That question caused the Kamui to quickly divert his attention towards his wearer, **"Yes... I noticed something odd after our last escape."**

Ryuko subconsciously flexed her newly regenerated hand at Senketsu's comment. She didn't want to think about the second time the undead bastard pinned them down. Feeling his familiars tearing into her body while the shinigami took potshots was not something she enjoyed. A fierce grin breaking out across her face when an idea came to mind, Ryuko pulled the Scissor Blade off her shoulder and chuckled, "Heh... I figured it out, Senketsu. This stupid bankai is probably a one shot deal! Which means soon it won't be strong enough to stop us from destroying it!"

Senketsu's multicolored eye narrowed while an uneasy sensation rippled through his threads. Weakened or not, directly attacking the captain's bankai was dangerous. The only reason Ryuko hadn't yet died was because of her innate Life Fiber regeneration. And even that seemed to be gradually slowing down. It was foolish to charge headfirst against something so strong without a strategy. Yet despite his reservations the Kamui could feel Ryuko's determination bleeding across the synchronized connection, her desire to win overriding the fear causing her fingers to shake.

She believed their combined power was enough to defeat the shinigami. And with everything on the line, from Ichigo and Mugetsu to the innocent people still trapped in the city, the Kamui couldn't help but feel the same way.

**" Very well then!"** Senketsu shouted passionately as a burst of steam escaping from his form, **"Let's show this thing our true power, Ryuko!"**

A vicious smirk stretched across Ryuko's face as she bent her knees and leapt straight into the air, the force from her ascent shattering

the surrounding landscape. Pushing off the edge of a rooftop with her heel right before a burst of crimson light enveloped her body, Senketsu seamlessly shifting into Shippu without a word, Ryuko tightened her grip on the Scissor Blade when the bankai turned around and unleashed an unearthly groan. So this thing was already waiting for her, huh? Well, that's just what she wanted! Spinning tightly through the air as thin trails of superheated ash sublimed directly from her body, Ryuko twisted sideways and angled down into a nearby street before chuckling.

"It looks like I was right, Senketsu," Ryuko ignored the not-so-subtle crimson glow from her Life Fibers as the eldritch threads repaired the relatively minor damage to her body, flesh and armor knitting back to perfection in a matter of seconds, "That thing really is getting weaker!"

Frowning as she quickly banked sideways almost enough for Senketsu's wing to scrape against the building to her left when the skeletal colossus's burning nodachi suddenly cleaved through the air, the phantasmal weapon crumpling the building behind her in a titanic explosion of fire and darkness, Ryuko looked over her shoulder and snarled. Like hell she would let something like that stop her! Grimacing in determination as she blasted upwards into the darkness of the night, trails of burning ash leaving her body as she continued flying higher and higher into the sky, Ryuko took a deep breath before shifting from Shippu into Senkou, the noises from the ruined city fading as she raised the Scissor Blade over her head.

Within seconds a vibrant crimson aura surrounded her body as the Life Fiber weapon was enveloped in a turbulent maelstrom of energy, the black and red lines covering the blade glowing brightly. Clenching her fingers tightly around the Scissor Blade as both her and Senketsu's Life Fibers synchronized with the weapon, the blade vanishing beneath the intense energy surrounding it, Ryuko shouted over the rushing wind, "Hey bitch! I've got something for you! NIBAN GENKAI!"

A burst of superheated steam blasted out of Senketsu's ventilation grills as Ryuko swung the Scissor Blade and everything simply *vanished* in crimson light.

Her eyes nearly forced shut as the chaotic energy enveloping the Scissor Blade temporarily turned night into day, bathing nearly half the city in a brilliant red light, Ryuko didn't react when gravity reasserted its unrelenting authority. Breathing heavily as the maelstrom of power flickered and quickly faded away, allowing her to view the nearly half a kilometer long trench cutting through the heart of London, Ryuko grimaced and refused to think about anyone that might have been trapped waiting for help that would never come.

This was why she had been so nervous about using Niban Genkai against the captain, especially with the Scissor Blade in Decapitation Mode. If it weren't for Ichigo's dad deflecting the technique with his freakish strength back in Karakura Town a lot of people could have died. Innocent people. Maybe even some of her friends. All because she had been too stupid to stop for a moment and think about the consequences of using something so obviously dangerous in the middle of a city. But thanks to the vampire bastard she didn't have to worry about any innocent people getting caught in the crossfire.

She hoped.

Grimacing tiredly as she freefell towards the earth, Senketsu shifting out of Senkou in a flash of crimson stars, Ryuko's eyes widened in shock when the charred visage of the bankai emerged from smoke. For a nightmarishly long second she watched as the skeletal construct reached towards her with its boney fingers, an unholy light blazing in its empty eyes, only for it to disintegrate feet from her body. Sighing in relief while Senketsu's concerned voice echoed within her mind, Ryuko never noticed the rapidly approaching ground before she crashed into it headfirst.

"Alright... that wasn't the best landing..."

Ryuko groaned as she opened her eyes. She hadn't expected Niban Genkai to use nearly all of her remaining energy. It painfully brought to mind the first time she used the technique against Sanageyama back at Honnouji Academy. But then again, she had pushed all of Senketsu's power into that attack just to make sure the bitch didn't survive. If she learned one thing from Satsuki's school it was that overkill was only a matter of perspective. Leaning on the Scissor Blade for support as she slowly picked herself off the ground and grimly saw the trail of destruction caused by her technique, Ryuko tried to take a step forward only to stumble when a wave of exhaustion hit her

Damn it! She hadn't felt this tired since fighting Junketsu! Constantly regenerating must have really taken a toll on her body!

"It looks like that did the trick, Senketsu," Ryuko's mouth curled into a tired but proud grin as she watched the last trace of the bankai disintegrate, "I guess even a freaking shinigami couldn't do squat against our power!"

**" Yes... but I feel lightheaded, Ryuko. The world won't stop spinning,"** Senketsu's multicolored eye swiveled dizzily around, **"I think I might need more of your blood."**

Ryuko gave a mocking snort at her Kamui's impetuous tone, "Hey, I thought you didn't need much blood anymore?"

**" That is correct. However using Niban Genkai used up most of the blood stored in my threads."**

Senketsu's eye narrowed in thought as he drank Ryuko's blood, the nourishing liquid filling his threads with energy. It was strange absorbing Ryuko's blood like this, especially when the initial donation from the Seki Tekko was usually more than enough to sustain him for hours, **"I should be fine in a few minutes. But more importantly, that was rather reckless. You should be more cautious in the future, Ryuko."**

"It's not like you were coming up with anything better."

Ryuko rolled her eyes and sighed when Senketsu bristled at the lighthearted comment. Giving her partner a reassuring smile while apologizing, Ryuko turned away from the smoke-filled trench and frowned. She could have sworn she felt Ichigo and Mugetsu's energy, which probably meant they were wrapping things up. Rubbing the back of her neck while stifling a yawn, the exhaustion plaguing her body already fading, any thoughts she had about tracking down Ichigo were brought to a violent halt when a bloodstained nodachi was thrust through her heart, skewering her from back to front.

"What... the... hell?"

Blood trailed down Ryuko's stomach in thick rivulets as she limply collapsed to her knees, a breathless gasp leaving her mouth as she stared at the zanpakuto impaled through her body with shaking eyes. When did the bitch get behind her? How the *hell* did she survive? Coughing harshly as she looked over her shoulder into the captain's dead and soulless eyes, the lower half of her body replaced with fiery darkness that constantly writhed and shifted, Ryuko lurched forward when the shinigami twisted her zanpakuto. Flecks of blood leaving her mouth when the captain began slowly removing her nodachi, Ryuko's expression of agony suddenly vanished as she reached up and grasped the blade stabbed through her heart.

"Did you forget?"

Ryuko ignored the zanpakuto cutting deeply into her fingers as she grinned, "I ain't exactly a normal human!"

A burst of crimson light pierced through the night as Ryuko twisted her impaled body around and swung the Scissor Blade. For a brief moment a look of genuine surprise crossed the undead captain's face at the sudden attack before her trained muscles automatically reacted. Fingers letting go of the zanpakuto impaled through the teenager while her knees tensed in preparation to use shunpo, the

shinigami was caught off guard when the hardened Life Fiber weapon transformed mid-swing, extending back into Decapitation Mode and severing her head in one fell swoop. Blood oozing onto the ground as the captain's body dissipated into tendrils of fiery darkness while the nodachi stabbed through her heart slowly shattered like glass, Ryuko bit her lower lip and coughed.

"Freaking bitch!"

Collapsing onto her back with a dull thud as the copious amount of blood coating the surrounding street transformed into Life Fibers, returning to her body while the normally lethal wound on her chest knitted shut slower than usual, Ryuko watched the last traces of the captain's zanpakuto vanish before grinning. She did it. She finally freaking did it! She kicked the ass of someone strong as hell without relying on anybody else. No Ichigo or Ururu save her at the last minute. She did it all by herself! The only way this moment could have been even better was if she didn't feel like she was just run over by a truck.

"Damn it..." Panting heavily as Senketsu returned to his normal uniform, Ryuko stared at the crimson moon hovering in the sky, "I can't move."

**" *T-The world is spinning again, Ryuko.*"**

Senketsu's multicolored eye swiveled around dizzily before closing. Fighting the captain must have taken more out of him than he originally thought if Ryuko's nourishing blood was no longer helping. Even they couldn't keep regenerating forever. His lapels and sleeves fluttering briefly as he tried mustering the energy to move only to fail, Senketsu quickly gave up and sighed tiredly, **"*I-I don't think I'll be able to transform anymore...*"**

The Scissor Blade slipped from Ryuko's fingers as she listened to Senketsu. She really wanted to kick the vampire bastard's ass, maybe break into that stupid zeppelin along the way, but she had literally nothing left. It was taking everything she had to not fall

unconscious. Closing her eyes as the bitter autumn wind caressed her face, Senketsu apologizing for being unable to help her, Ryuko sighed in exhaustion. She didn't like it but right now she had to leave it to Ichigo and Mugetsu to finish the fight.

She just hoped nothing bad happened to them.

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Pieces of loose asphalt stung harshly against Yumiko Takagi's bruised face as she violently stabbed her katana into the middle of the street.

Her strained fingers reflexively tightening around the hilt of the reinforced blessed weapon as it punctured through the asphalt like water, the repugnant smell of burning rubber filling the air as her boots scrapped against the ground, the paladin ignored the pain radiating up her legs when she finally managed to arrest her momentum. She couldn't remember the last time she felt this exhausted. Every muscle in her body screamed in protest. But she refused to let the vampire survive the night. Narrowed eyes glaring from within the shadows of her black hair, a thin trail of blood oozing down her face, Yumiko gnashed her teeth before blasting back down the street.

Tucking the faintly shimmering katana firmly against her waist as she approached the waiting Alucard, his tattered cape billowing in the bitter wind while his antediluvian broadsword reflected the crimson light from the full moon, Yumiko waited until she saw the amused glint in the undead creature's eyes before suddenly pivoting sharply on one foot. With a sharp metallic ringing reminiscent of cold steel her tightly coiled right arm exploded forth like a spring, flickers of blue light lagging behind the blessed weapon as it carved through the air faster than the speed of sound.

For a brief moment Yumiko was certain she finally managed to overwhelm Alucard's defense. But when her blade was less than an inch from his body, the supernaturally sharp edge poised to slice between the plates of his armor, she stiffened when he suddenly dispersed into shadows.

"What the hell?"

Yumiko was snapped back to reality when an increasingly familiar chill raced down her spine. Throwing herself forward right before Alucard's broadsword brutally cleaved her body in half from shoulder to hip, one hand planted firmly against the pavement as she spun around mid-flip, she barely glimpsed the burst of energy exploding from the vampire's weapon when it slammed into the ground before she was sent flying backwards through the air. Darkness tinting the edges of her vision as she painfully bounced several times off the ground before rolling to a stop, Yumiko's eyes widened when she staggered back onto her feet only to witness Alucard descending rapidly through the air, his face twisted into an expression of sadistic insanity as he swung his weapon at her neck.

The bitter wind tearing through the city lessened as the paladin realized avoiding Alucard's strike would be impossible, which left her with only one course of action. Off hand braced firmly against the sharpened blade of her katana as she raised it above her head, Yumiko tensed when the vampire's sword smashed into her weapon with enough force to nearly shatter the pavement underneath her feet.

From the moment her blade clashed against the vampire's in a shower of sparks it took every last scrap of willpower Yumiko possessed to not grimace at the pain radiating down her left arm. Forcing the excruciating pain to the back of her mind while she struggled against Alucard's advantageous strength, katana visibly shaking as her muscles screamed in protest, she gritted her teeth before abruptly pulling away. Immediately twisting to the side as her guard collapsed, Yumiko bent her knees and leapt backwards before Alucard's broadsword could carve into her body.



"Your skill is quite formidable, Iscariot."

Alucard's heavily accented voiced betrayed his growing admiration for the paladin as her labored breathing was replaced with stubborn determination. It was truly magnificent to find such a worthy adversary on this most meaningful of nights. Brutally pulling his broadsword out of the ground in a shower of debris while his mouth curled into an approving smirk at the intensity of the paladin's expression, Alucard did not hesitate as he rushed forward to once again meet the human in battle. Their blades clashing until only one was left standing!

He wasn't even halfway before the rapid stomping of boots against the ground drew his attention.

Crimson eyes narrowing while he shifted his weight forward, Alucard nimbly spun around the tailor bayonets clasped within Alexander Anderson's hands. The pavement crumpling underneath his boots as he avoiding the nudist's second attack before proceeding to counter with a thrust to the heart, the vampire's expression grew increasingly exhilarated when the human detonated a smoke grenade, vanishing into the expanding mist and barely avoiding getting skewered.

"Impressive, Alexander Anderson."

Respect permeated the vampire's words as the acrid smoke left in Anderson's tactical retreat covered the surrounding area in a thick cloud that made it nearly impossible to see. Any normal opponent would have been handicapped by such limiting visibility, blind to the paladin subtly maneuvering on his right in preparation for an attack, but to Alucard it might as well have not even existed. Easily tracking the injured nudist commander beyond the edges of the smoke, the vampire waited until Yumiko was nearly upon him before abruptly spinning around, parrying the paladin's katana with enough force to send her crashing into the side of a building.

Dispersing the already thinning cloud of smoke with another swing of his blade, Alucard's eyes narrowed when he glanced upwards and

saw Alexander Anderson silhouetted against the full moon. It was a bold but impressive feat to use one's allies in such a manner. Sparks dancing through the air as he raised his broadsword and blocked the nudist's attack with a single hand, Anderson's face twisted into an expression of righteous fury as he desperately tried to overwhelm him, Alucard chuckled maliciously when the former paladin kicked off his chest plate and landed several feet away.

"You are a worthy adversary," Alucard's body was enveloped by shadows as he loomed over the nudist commander, his eyes twin pinpricks of light in the darkness, "So come! Come Alexander Anderson! Try and pierce my heart with your bayonets!"

Anderson staggered backwards and spat out a wad of bloody saliva, the motion aggravating his cracked ribs. He couldn't die, not when a monster like Ragyo Kiryuin still walked the earth, "I'm not foolish enough to fall for yer taunts, vampire. But ye can rest assured that ye shall perish by my hands."

His expression darkening in morbid curiosity at the nudist commander's threat, the conviction in Anderson's voice at odds with the way he was subtly attempting to slowly back away from him, Alucard's train of thought was broken when he heard the barely audible clicking of a subsonic priming detonator. Eyes widening when he cast his gaze downwards and saw a circular metallic device attached to the front of his armor, a piercing red light pulsing rapidly upon its curved exterior, the vampire grimaced in annoyance when the Detergent Mine exploded in a massive inferno of multicolored flames.

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Integra Hellsing's stride did not falter as she marched through the bleak corridors of the *Deus Ex Machina* with a single purpose in mind. Tightening her grip upon the sheathed sword in her left hand when several muffled explosions rippled through the airship the

leader of the Hellsing Organization paused when her foot accidentally kicked the prone body of one of Millennium's vampirized soldats. Someone or something had killed the soldier before they arrived. An annoyed snort leaving her lips as she callously rolled the corpse over with the heel of her boot, Integra narrowed her eyes in disgust when she saw the state of the body.

The corpse, or rather what was left of it, was nothing more than a half-dissolved mass of flesh, thickly congealed blood pooled across the floor while the soldier's bones were nothing more than a liquefied organic sludge that caused her nose to wrinkle. Biting down on her cigar as she knelt and tore off the soldat's goggles and gasmask, accidentally peeling away the skin around his eyes in the process, Integra contemplated the expression of pure agony on what remained of the Quincy's face.

"These men died fairly recently."

Wiping her hand against the corpse's sleeve before standing back up, Integra stared at the dozen or so vampirized soldats splayed throughout the corridor. Each and every one of them appeared to have suffered the same cause of death. Taking a long drag from her cigar as she half-turned to face Seras, the recently ascended vampire's crimson eyes gazing pensively at the corpse in front of her, she exhaled a puff of smoke and stated, "I'd estimate these men died within the last ten minutes. And that death must have been excruciatingly painful."

Seras clenched her hand into a fist and snarled angrily, "It serves them right after everything they've done!"

Not finding anything at fault in her servant's passionate declaration, Integra turned her attention back to the various corpses and narrowed her eyes, "A most fitting end for cowardly and pathetic mockeries of men. Yet something troubles me. Seras... these soldiers did not fall in battle. Which begs the question of *what* killed them."

"It's master..."

Seras couldn't help but gasp when the strange sensation of familiarity emanating from the undead corpses gave way to realization. Suddenly everything made sense. Her crimson eyes glowing brightly from within the shadows created by her bangs of platinum blonde hair, the vampire snapped her head upwards and spat, "These men... *Quincy*... have master's power running through their veins. But it's like poison to them. Master's power is destroying them from the inside out. Eating away at their very soul until nothing remains. What's the point of becoming a damn vampire if you end up *melting* in the end?!"

"Not everyone is worthy of receiving His Majesty's gift. Some lesser souls must unfortunately make due with what's available around the house."

The intercoms built into the corridor whined momentarily before the Major continued speaking in the same jovial tone, "It's so good to hear your lovely voice again, fraulein. I hope my invitation wasn't too disrespectful. I didn't quite know how a woman of your stature would respond. So I decided to go with something a little... *flashy* . Sorry about that..."

Integra sneered at the smug arrogance permeating every single word spewing from the Major's mouth. That he had the audacity and gall to claim the concentrated artillery strike fired from his airship, which nearly killed her if not for Seras, was a personal invitation left no doubt in her mind about his sanity, "You insane, cowardly swine..."

"Yet here you are, searching for me much like the moth is drawn to the proverbial flame!"

Completely at ease despite Integra Hellsing and her pet vampire stalking through the *Deus Ex Machina* with only a single goal in their minds - his complete and utter destruction - the Major leaned back in his chair and chuckled deeply when an explosion caused the

command center to briefly shake, "But let us get back on topic. You were professing curiosity about the rather abysmal state of the soldats lying dead at your feet. Why their very souls have been scattered like dust on the wind. The answer, my dear fraulein, is quite simple. They were nothing but experiments! Failed attempts at combining the spiritual essence of the creature you call Alucard with that of a Quincy! Unfortunately the procedure inevitably results in a rather gruesome death for the test subject."

Integra's face scrunched in barely repressed annoyance as she was forced to listen to the Major's barbaric nonsense. Allowing Seras to take point when the corridor suddenly turned to the left, she calmly stepped over the half-dissolved corpse of yet another soldat before removing the cigar from her mouth and scoffing, "Experimenting on your own men? You truly are an insane little man, Quincy."

"I can assure you that I am of quite sound mind."

A deranged smirk adorned the Major's face as he animatedly clenched a single hand into a fist, "Those soldats lying dead at your feet were nothing more than *pawns* ! Used only to be discarded upon the completion of their task. All one thousand vampirized soldats of the Jahrtausendarmee were created for a single purpose - the slaughter of every living soul within London only to *fall* before the combined might of the Hellsing Organization and Vatican! Your little pet surviving Zorin's assault was not anticipated but such failures happen to even the best commanders from time to time."

With a nearly contemptuous flick of her wrist Integra tossed the half-smoked cigar to the ground when the corridor abruptly split in two. Translating the sign bolted to the wall in front of her from German into English, her eyes drawn to the Quincy Zeichen etched above it, she snorted and turned to the right before bluntly asking the Major, "Since you love to hear yourself speak, Quincy, perhaps you can say something relevant. Who is your leader, the man you refer to as your king? What is he planning?"

Another bout of smug laughter echoed throughout the nearly empty corridors as the Major passionately responded, "His Majesty is a man who detests meaningless conflicts. Why, the very thought of a protracted battle fills his heart with despair!"

Seras seethed at the Major's hypocritical answer. Hearing that fat bastard of a Quincy not only insult the men and women lying dead in the streets of London but also Mr. Bernadotte and the Wild Geese made her want to tear him apart limb from bloody limb. But before she could say anything the Sternritter jovially added, "I look forward to finally meeting you in person, fraulein. Auf Wiedersehen!"

A screech of feedback echoed irritatingly over the intercoms as the Major bid them a temporary farewell before the connection was completely severed. Her glasses glowing opaquely in what little ambient light existed in the corridor, Integra's fingers tightened around the sheathed blade in her left hand as she quickened her pace. The actions of the Quincy and his associates were beyond reprehension. How Nudist Beach could have allied with such an organization, even against a monster like Ragyo Kiryuin, bothered her but for the moment her focus was on the task at hand - ending the Major's pathetic existence.

It was the distant rhythmic sound of heavy boots steadily tapping against the floor that pulled Integra from her thoughts. Coming to a halt herself as Seras stepped protectively in front of her body, the vampire's crimson eyes piercing through the darkness while the shadows extruding from her shoulder morphed into a facsimile of an arm, the leader of the Hellsing Organization narrowed her gaze when a very familiar figure slowly came into sight.

"Go on ahead, Master Integra."

Seras could barely contain the anger building rapidly within her soul when the Captain came to a halt several meters away from them, his white Sternritter uniform standing in sharp contrast with the bleak colors of the corridor. When Integra incredulously protested her decision, the vampire clenched her hand into a fist and stepped

forward. Even with the blood-soaked bandages wrapped around his left arm, the Captain's power was as clear as day. This Quincy was far stronger than the *bitch* that killed Mr. Bernadotte, "Find that Quincy and kill him! Every word that spews from his mouth infuriates me! Make him pay for everything he's done!"

The silence that followed Seras' declaration continued for several seconds before Integra smirked and placed one of her last remaining cigars between her teeth. Savoring the familiar taste of tobacco before lighting the cigar, she opened her mouth to wish her servant the best of luck when something odd caused her to pause. With the edges of his overcoat fluttering around his body, the Captain slowly shook his head at the two women before stepping to the side and leaning against the wall with his arms folded.

"So the attack dog didn't come to play after all..."

Integra scowled when the Sternritter slowly blinked at the insult before raising his arm and pointing down the hallway, his expression never changing. Biting down on her cigar as she scoffed and marched around Seras, who had yet to take her eyes off the Captain, she exhaled a cloud of smoke before sneering, "I see... very well then. Leave him be, Seras. But if he should attempt anything... don't hesitate to destroy him."

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A ragged cough tore its way free from Alexander Anderson's lungs as the nudist commander returned from his brief foray into unconsciousness.

That was the last time he ignored the standard Nudist Bleach safety procedures when dealing with high-impact explosives. He should have damn well known better than detonating a Detergent Mine when he wasn't at least one hundred feet away. Fifty feet if you were behind cover. Cursing angrily at his stupidity Anderson snarled and

slowly staggered back onto his feet, the sharp ringing reverberating in his ears already tapering off. It would be a cold day in hell before he let a little explosion kill him. Not before sending both the vampire and the abomination of woman to their justly deserved fates in whatever damnation existed for their kind. The fingers on his left hand sporadically twitching due to the pain radiating from his injured shoulder, Anderson clenched his jaw and stared in annoyance at the inferno roaring a few dozen feet down the street.

"Is everything ready?"

With nary a sound Heinkel Wolfe emerged from the surrounding darkness, her tattered cassock fluttering gently as she landed next to the nudist commander with her pistol trained on the crackling flames. Her mouth twisted into a grimace, Heinkel narrowed her eyes and scowled, "It would have been helpful if you explained how the hell they worked, Anderson! I only managed to anchor one of the verdammt things!"

"They're not that hard to operate," Anderson scoffed under his breath. Nudist Beach technology was incredibly intuitive and easy to both learn and operate. It had to be if they were to have any chance of standing against a monster the likes of Ragyo Kiryuin and her personal execution squad. Spitting out a wad of bloody saliva, he twisted around and exclaimed, "So what are ye still doing here?! Go anchor the other one before - "

"HA! HA! HA!"

Bouts of manic laughter emanated from within the roaring inferno when a dark and foreboding wind swept out of nowhere, dispelling the flames and sending cold chills racing down Anderson and Heinkel's spines. Slowly clapping his hands in a mocking gesture as he emerged from the remaining smoke completely unscathed, red overcoat forming out of shadows when he rapidly shifted back to his familiar vampiric form, Alucard grinned at the nudist's infuriated expression. This was turning out to be a most interesting battle. Despite his best efforts it seemed he continued to underestimate



Alexander Anderson's ingenuity. To place an explosive upon his body not only without being detected but also in a manner that didn't draw attention? Risking life and limb simply to destroy him?

*Excellent...*

"I haven't felt this excited in *ages* !" Alucard chuckled darkly as he tilted his head slightly to the side, fang-filled mouth twisting menacingly in the night, "That was a most interesting display of tactics, Alexander Anderson. Any other monster would have been killed in an instant. Their flesh torn from bone! So congratulations! You have my *full* attention..."

Wisps of darkness flickered around Alucard's overcoat as he stood amongst the fading embers, daring the two humans to make the first move. His expression turning sadistic when a new pair of bayonets emerged from within Anderson's sleeves while Wolfe expertly placed another clip in her remaining pistol, the vampire grinned viciously as the shadows around his body writhed. Continuing to laugh psychotically as the Jackal and Casull slid fluidly into his outstretched hands, Alucard did not hesitate to snap his arms forward and open fire on the humans.

Anderson was already in motion before Alucard even raised his arms. Throwing himself sideways upon recognizing the shimmer of steel in the vampire's hands, the nudist ducked his head down as the building behind him disintegrated under a hail of high-caliber gunfire. A pained grunt involuntarily leaving his mouth when he landed on his injured shoulder behind the burnt remains of an overturned truck while pieces of concrete and rubble rained downwards, he gnashed his teeth and grimaced when the front of the vehicle, engine block and all, exploded. Blown apart by a single shot from the Jackal.

Which missed him by several feet.

The nudist didn't believe for a *second* that the vampire missed. There was not a chance in hell that the monster that demonstrated the ability to behead a moving target from over three hundred feet

away would actually miss hitting him, which meant the abomination was up to something. Mentally cursing as he rolled onto his back, rounds from the Casull constantly piercing through the carriage of the truck before continuing on through the building to his right, Anderson reached into one of his cassock's many pockets and frowned when he pulled out the last strand of detonation cord. Damn it! He barely had enough left for a single bayonet!

"That's just *perfect*..."

Pieces of shrapnel burned lightly against his cassock as he carefully wrapped the last detonation cord around his bayonet. Narrowing his eyes in concentration when the vampire fired another round from the Jackal, vaporizing part of the truck and the building behind him, Anderson subtly moved towards the rear end of the overturned truck only for his head to snap upwards when several shots pierced through the night. His free hand clenching into a fist when Heinkel exploded out of an adjoining alley with her pistol firing, the nudist commander felt his heart skip a beat when the abomination returned fire.

This was his chance!

Leaping back onto his feet before vaulting over the truck with the single tailor bayonet held tightly between his fingers, Anderson flexed his wrist and prepared to throw the weapon at the vampire only to stumble when intense pain wracked his body. Blood spewing from his mouth with every cough as the strain of battling an abomination against nature aggravated his injuries, the nudist commander ignored the pain and snapped his arm forward with all his remaining strength. Gnashing his teeth when the quivering in his arm caused the weapon to miss the vampire by several inches before detonating in a large explosion down the street, Anderson panted heavily from exhaustion as he landed on the ground.

"It looks like your wounds have finally started catching up with you... Alexander Anderson."

Derisive mockery dripped from the vampire's mouth as he turned his full attention back to the nudist commander. Leaning forward slightly while folding one arm against his back, he grinned excitedly at the furious expression on Anderson's face, "So what are you going to do? Will you give up? To die like a dog when your goal is nearly within reach? Or will you continue fighting until the bitter end... your body broken and shattered beyond all recognition!"

Anderson spat out blood while two new bayonets appeared in his hands, "Ye think I'm going to give up, vampire? I will not stop until ye lay dead at my feet!"

The vampire's eyes imperceptibly widened at Anderson's passionate declaration. Despite the wounds bleeding his life's blood upon the ground the human simply refused to surrender and die. Any normal man would have already succumbed to such debilitating injuries long ago, perishing like a dog in the streets, yet Alexander Anderson possessed the drive to keep fighting until the bitter end. To stand and fight until the last traces of life left his body. Such perseverance from one of his enemies excited the vampire down to the deepest recesses of his twisted and corrupted soul.

It was the barely audible fluttering of cloth descending through the autumn night that caused Alucard's expression to twist sadistically. He had been growing weary of waiting for the paladin to stop playing dead. Deftly twisting his body sideways while turning around, his eyes momentarily locking with Yumiko's as her blessed katana arced through the air towards the base of his neck, Alucard chuckled while raising the Casull before unloading several rounds into the woman. His smirk quickly vanishing upon realizing he only managed to shoot the paladin's outer garments, the vampire tore his attention away from the bullet-ridden nun robes as his right arm exploded into finely cut chunks of flesh and bone.

" *What?*"

Her upper body clad in a form-fitting long-sleeved black shirt as she landed in a soft crouch behind the vampire with her blessed katana

held tightly at her waist, Yumiko snarled and ignored both the pain from her left arm and the copious amount of blood spraying through the air. Furiously narrowing her eyes while spinning around on her heel, she took advantage of Alucard's momentarily injured condition to drive her weapon directly towards his heart.

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Integra Hellsing's coat fluttered gently around her body as the blast-proof doors of the *Deus Ex Machina's* command center opened with a hiss of pressurized air. Almost immediately she was forced to scrunch her nose in disgust at the pervading scent of decaying flesh. Strewn throughout the chamber with some still in their seats were the half-dissolved corpses of soldiers, their expressions betraying the painful agony that had been their death. Her boots stomping against the metal plating of the floor as she marched forward, the stylized Quincy Zeichen on the ground briefly drawing her notice, she came to a stop alongside Seras when her eyes fell upon the chair facing the wall of screens on the opposite side of the chamber.

Strutting forward while Seras narrowed her eyes in preparation for whatever may come, the writhing darkness emerging from the severed stump of her left shoulder twisting back into a clawed facsimile of an arm, the leader of the Hellsing Organization reached into her coat and snarled, "Show yourself!"

"Ah... it's so good to finally meet you in the flesh, fraulein."

A half-cocked smirk was plastered upon the Major's face as the chair slowly spun around with a metallic whine. His expression growing increasingly amused at the twin looks of rage and hatred, he leaned backwards and sighed, "I've been expecting you for quite some time."

The sound of gunshots echoed throughout the chamber as Integra removed the Sig-Sauer pistol from the holster hidden within her

trench coat and opened fire on the Quincy. She did not care about whatever garbage the man had to say. All that mattered was ending his pathetic excuse for a life before he dragged them all through the mud. Snarling when she noticed that the Sternritter was completely unaffected by the bullets, she narrowed her eyes when the last round in the clip ricocheted off his face, exposing a briefly visible dark pattern on his skin.

"Blut Vene..." Integra spat out the vile words while releasing the empty clip from her pistol, causing the Quincy to chuckle lightly.

"This is quite correct," the Major casually swept several bullet casings off his uniform while his yellow eyes narrowed mirthfully, "However I'm afraid it will require something with a bit more firepower to pierce the blut His Majesty bestowed upon me."

"Is that right?" Integra holstered her pistol and took a step backwards, "Seras... kill him."

"Right!"

The Major watched with veiled amusement as the shadows emerging from the vampire's left shoulder twisted and contorted. His expression remaining unchanged when the darkness suddenly tore into the floor, steel plating and wiring breaking under the force, his eyes lit up in surprise when the vampire literally *pulled* one of the airship's eighty-eight millimeter cannons from the storage bay below. The corners of his mouth tightening into a smirk as he leaned forward, yellow eyes focused on the shadows controlling the weapon like a well-trained orchestra, the Major did not move an inch when Seras fired the weapon.

Hands politely folded across his lap as the shell spiraled through the air towards him accompanied by an explosive blast of noise, the Major chuckled lowly when a translucent barrier spun into existence feet away from his body. The leather in his chair crackling as he watched the shell literally disintegrate against the spiritual shield, brass dissolving away before his very eyes, the Sternritter noticed

the shocked expression on his guests' faces and raised a finger, "Oh... my apologies. I should have warned you about the barrier."

Integra stared as the barrier cutting halfway through the chamber, pulses of light shimmering across its faintly blue surface, "Barrier?"

"I'm sure you're aware of the technique my late comrade Tubalcain Alhambra used against Alucard," the Major absorbed the look of shock on the vampire's face before reaching for the remote on the nearby table. Raising it over his shoulder before clicking one of the buttons, causing the wall of screens to burst into life and show part of the battle between Alucard and Alhambra, he cocked his head slightly to the side and grinned, "This, however, is nothing like that! It is as different as night is from day! It is the culmination of nearly a century of experimentation, the result of the esteemed Doktor mixing Alucard's essence with that of a Quincy and shinigami's!"

A loud thump echoed throughout the chamber as Seras angrily shouted and fired the flak cannon a second time only for the shell to dissolve once more upon making contact with the barrier. Raising his hand in a placating gesture at the infuriated vampire, the Sternritter jovially added, "I'm afraid this barrier is quite impenetrable, impervious to all but a select few beings. However it does possess a singular weakness. Due to the contrasting spiritual energy woven throughout its structure it is rather unstable. Thus in approximately fifteen minutes it will shatter, allowing you to kill me to your heart's content!"

Integra clenched the sheathed blade in her hand at the Sternritter's words while Seras unceremoniously dropped the flak cannon onto the ground, the metal plating buckling under the weight of the weapon. Marching forward until she was standing only a few inches from the barrier, she bit the inside of her cheek and scoffed, "What are you planning, Quincy? What is the point of telling us the weakness of your technique?"

"Because I am in possession of certain knowledge. Information that I believe you will be quite interested in hearing," the Major smirked at

Integra's furious expression before turning around halfway in his chair and pressing another button on the remote. As the images on the screens shifted to the currently ongoing battle between Yumiko and Alucard, the vampire transformed back into his original form, he briefly watched the paladin desperately struggle against the ancient vampire's monstrous strength before leaning backwards and mirthfully asking, "Have you ever wondered about the magnificent existence that is Alucard? What sort of eldritch creature the vampire truly is?"

An explosion rocked the zeppelin, causing the lights to temporarily flicker, before Integra scoffed in disgust, "Such an inane question."

The smirk adorning the Major's face widened as he turned away from the battle raging on the screen, "It is common knowledge that Alucard is a vampire... much like our friends in Nudist Beach know that Ragyo Kiryuin is a Life Fiber Hybrid. But such titles are meaningless! Proverbial garbage that carries no weight! Completely and utterly *useless* in the grand scheme of things! What I wish to know is rather simple - whether you are aware of Alucard's true position upon the corrupted hierarchy that governs the world!"

As the Major finished speaking Integra was forced to narrow her eyes when every screen in the chamber exploded into brilliant light, the Wandenreich's sensors and cameras rendered temporarily useless as the Detergent Mine placed upon Alucard by Alexander Anderson detonated. Clapping his hands together in genuine appreciation at the display of raw power by the nudist commander, the Major's face was shadowed in various shades of white and black as he enthusiastically announced, "It would seem our mutual friend from Nudist Beach is putting up quite the impressive fight. The paladins from Iscariot are quite strong but they lack the instinct, the determination to win at all costs against an unimaginable monster, that Alexander Anderson obtained after years of fighting against Ragyo Kiryuin. But it seems they are still putting up a greater challenge against the vampire than the shinigami from four hundred years ago."

Integra stared at the Sternritter with absolute contempt, "I'm well aware of the Soul Society's attempt to kill Alucard. They sent three of their captains after my servant but he proved too strong. Two were killed during the battle while the third was devoured. Who if I'm not mistaken is the shinigami currently fighting Ryuko Matoi. And in the aftermath the Soul Society deemed Alucard the most dangerous supernatural creature in existence."

"A most succinct assumption... but incorrect, fraulein."

The Major smiled at the surprised expression on Integra's face while the intense light on the screens faded showing Alucard in his normal form. Ignoring the shadows writhing around Seras as the Harkonnen visibly shook, the vampire's restraint at killing him barely kept in check, he raised a hand into the air before curling his fingers into a fist, "Alucard is quite the dangerous adversary but he is not the *most* dangerous. That title belongs to the creature masquerading as a human being... the illustrious emissary of the being known as the Original Life Fiber! I am speaking, of course, about Ragyo Kiryuin. The woman who betrayed the world!"

A tense silence permeated the room for several seconds after the Sternritter's declaration, broken only by the occasional explosion. Both hands clasped across his chest while the *Deus Ex Machina* momentarily struggled to remain airborne, the Major's glasses shimmered as he asked, "Tell me... do you believe the puppet that arrived at Parliament, that pale facsimile of a monster, possessed Ragyo Kiryuin's full strength?"

"No," Integra forced her voice to remain detached while she mentally counted the seconds until the barrier dissolved, "I've seen Ragyo Kiryuin's capabilities. Nudist Beach was quite forthcoming about what happened at Honnouji Academy."

"Ragyo Kiryuin is a woman who has only fought seriously twice in her existence," the Major's smug voice echoed slightly around the chamber as he cocked his head to the side, "But a battle against Alucard? Both monsters giving their all in order to wipe the other



from existence? I'm afraid such an engagement would leave most of London in ruins. Crushed under the overwhelming power of two creatures that defy human logic! And when the dust settles, exposing the lifeless corpses of those unfortunately caught in the whirlwind, both vampire and Life Fiber *beast* will both still be standing."

"How pathetic."

There was no hiding the derision in Integra's voice. Ignoring the live feed of Yumiko severing Alucard's arm in a flash of motion, blood spraying through the air, she stared into the Major's soulless eyes and sneered, "Is that it, Quincy? Sixty years of planning... countless millions killed... all so that you and that cowardly king you follow can have a shot at killing Alucard."

"When did I ever say I wanted to *kill* Alucard?"

Integra stiffened in shock at the sheer inanity of the question, "What?!"

The Major's chair creaked softly as he gripped the armrests and slowly stood up. Marching forward until his face was nearly pressed against the barrier opposite of Integra, his yellow eyes shimmered with barely repressed glee, "The purpose of this glorious night... the Schatten Ausrufung... was never to kill Alucard. Such a feat lies beyond even the unfathomable power of His Majesty. The objective of the Schatten Ausrufung has always been to force Alucard into a situation where the release of his full power was the only logical choice! That has not changed! But I'm sorry to say the tragic events that transpired on October 21st has caused His Majesty to add a second act..."

A bead of sweat trickled down Integra's face at the date, "You don't mean..."

"All of this..." the Major accentuated each syllable with a dramatic sweeping of his arm, "... was to limit Ragyo Kiryuin's power! To force her into the light by slaughtering all three million, one hundred and

fifteen thousand, eight hundred and seventy five inhabitants of London!"

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Thick streams of blood oozed onto the ground when Alucard twisted sideways a moment before Yumiko's katana pierced his heart, the blade instead puncturing through his right lung from back to front. Gurgling as his flesh began burning from contact with the blessed weapon, visceral darkness evaporating out of the wound, the vampire lurched forward before his expression shifted. Bloody lips stretching into a fang-filled grin before his form suddenly dispersed into darkness, his entire body vanishing in a flourish of shadows, Alucard's insane laughter filled the air as the bewildered paladin took a cautious step backwards.

"Impressive, Iscariot..."

Alucard's voice echoed from the very shadows covering the city as he reappeared some distance down the street. The dozens of misshapen crimson eyes blinking across the surface of the writhing darkness swiveling as he fully reformed himself, the vampire ignored the torrents of blood spilling from his wounds and stared at the swordswoman, "Your speed is quite remarkable. That substitution caught me off guard. It's rather impressive for something that can only be used once..."

The faint sounds of battle carried over the bitter wind winding through the streets as the vampire trailed off, copious amounts of blood dripping from both his ragged stump of an arm and destroyed lung. Yet the anger on the swordswoman's face continued to amuse him. From the way she held her weapon, blade shaking under her grip, the paladin seemed ready to correct her mistake. Such bravado filled his twisted heart with anticipation. But it was nothing more than empty bluster. Her left arm was fractured from their earlier exchange, which meant every movement had to be causing her intense pain.

He couldn't wait to see how she would overcome such a debilitating injury.

"You've been quiet, Wolfe. Surely you don't think the battle's over?"

Alucard couldn't suppress the mocking grin stretching across his face when Heinkel appeared behind him, mouth pulled into a contemptuous scowl as she pointed her pistol directly at his head. Did she think the mere *threat* of a bullet would be enough to stop him? How insulting. Stepping callously in the blood pooling throughout the street as he deliberately turned away from the swordswoman, Alucard chuckled at Wolfe before adding, "Do you believe the insignificant loss of an ARM means anything? That this battle could *possibly* be decided *without* one of us dying?"

The vampire's condescending laughter echoed loudly through the night as darkness burst forth from his body. Dozens of inhuman crimson eyes blinked into existence across his body as shadows spewed from the bloody stump of a shoulder before coalescing into an arm. Smirking at the shock and fury etched upon Wolfe's face when he stepped forward, the pools of blood covering the street streaming into his body, Alucard held the newly reconstructed hand in front of his face and grinned, "Even in this state my regeneration remains as strong as ever! You've blown your greatest chance to kill me, Iscariot!"

Yumiko ignored the slight trembling of her left hand and snarled, "My next strike won't miss your neck, vampire!"

There was a momentary silence following her declaration before Alucard turned around, his attention focused fully upon the injured Anderson to the paladin's left, "How does it feel, Alexander Anderson, to know that all your efforts were for naught? That you risked life and limb only for your partner to flinch away at the very last second! It must be disappointing to know that the renowned paladins of Iscariot have fallen so far..."

"Shut yer mouth, vampire!"

Spittle flew through the air when Anderson suddenly interrupted the vampire's speech, crimson moonlight shimmering across the surface of the tailor bayonets as he crossed them in front of his body. His expression unchanging despite the nudist commander's unsubtle threat, Alucard laughed arrogantly as fiery shadows slowly oozed from the darkness composing his body before exclaiming, "The truth hurts, doesn't it Anderson? If it weren't for your arrival Wolfe would have cast aside her humanity for a scrap of miracle! Becoming little more than a monster devoid of both intelligence and reason! The antithesis of humanity! And this swordswoman... at the first sign of danger she flinches away! Cowering at the prospect of dying in battle!"

"And how does any of that matter?"

Anderson briefly coughed as he stared into the dark pits of corruption that were Alucard's soulless eyes before growling, "A true warrior of Iscariot does whatever it takes to destroy a threat to humanity. It does not matter if it's a vampire, hollow, Quincy or Life Fiber abomination. They fight until the bitter end, until their blood flows in rivers upon the ground. But ye cannot expect children to overcome their instincts."

Ignoring the slight tensing from the two paladins at his last comment, Anderson spat a wad of blood onto the ground and sneered, "It takes years of fighting against monsters before ye can repress that overwhelming fear of death! I have spent decades slaughtering monsters that could devour my very soul! Death does not frighten me, vampire! But for all their power, neither Heinkel nor Yumiko has ever *struggled* against monsters that could tear them asunder! They have never fought against an abomination so dark and vile that the afterlife flees in its presence!"

"So speak your lies, vampire," Anderson grimaced at the pain radiating down his left arm before gnashing his teeth and finishing, "Because these children will be the ones that finally end yer existence once and for all!"

The barest trace of a pleased smirk appeared on Alucard's face at the human's passionate declaration. Alexander Anderson was truly a remarkable man to instill such confidence in his allies. To encounter such an opponent upon such a night, when his very existence was on the line, filled his heart with exhilaration. Shadows covering his face when he sensed Wolfe shift her aim towards his heart, the vampire momentarily stiffened before he reared his head backwards and laughed. As the humans shared tense looks of confusion at his sudden shift in personality, they were caught completely off guard when an enormous eruption of crimson spiritual energy exploded in the distance. Sharpened fangs glistening in the multicolored light as a fierce wind tore through the streets courtesy of Ryuko's Niban Genkai, Alucard continued laughing at the monster girl's energy.

She truly was an interesting creature...

"Verdammt!"

Heinkel stared over her shoulder in astonishment at the crimson energy spiking upwards into the moonlit sky, "What the hell was that?"

"HA! HA! HA! That monster girl continues to surprise me!"

Alucard's mouth twisted into a condescending smirk at the way the three humans tensed at his mentioning of the creature calling herself Ryuko Matoi. There was no question that the girl was powerful, perhaps even stronger than the boy fighting the two Quincy he devoured. But it was pathetic the way the monster girl still claimed to be clinging onto the remnants of her humanity. The progeny of Ragyo Kiryuin, that monster in the guise of a woman, could not be anything less than such a monster themselves. The very notion that creatures such as they still professed their humanity was a grave insult to those who truly possessed the right to make that claim. Ryuko Matoi was a monster in the truest sense.

"Life Fibers are truly fascinating. No matter how much you wound these creatures... whether it be tearing out their heart or turning

them into dust... the Life Fibers inside their bodies will always regenerate the damage," Alucard's footsteps echoed against the pavement as he slowly stalked towards Wolfe, his voice continuously growing louder, "That monster girl and her Kamui accomplished a feat I deemed all but impossible! They destroyed that shinigami's bankai with a single swing of her blade! There isn't a doubt in my mind - she is truly the daughter of that one of a kind monster, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

An overwhelming pulse of spiritual energy exploded from the vampire's body as he finished shouting, his overcoat dissipating into shadows and leaving him clad in a full-body black straightjacket. His mouth stretched into an insane and bloody grin when Anderson's two bayonets screamed through the air towards his heart, Alucard deftly twisted counterclockwise around the projectiles before rushing straight at Wolfe. Wisps of shadows clinging to his arm as he cocked it back, darkness wrapped around his fingers as they straightened to a sharp point, the vampire couldn't restrain his expression of pleasure when his attack missed Wolfe and instead pierced through the building behind her.

"Scheiße!"

Heinkel ignored the new hole in her already tattered cassock as she frantically leapt backwards, determined to put as much distance between herself and the crazed vampire. Sneering lightly while pieces of mortar and concrete rained upon the ground from the vampire's attack, she snapped her arm upwards and took a moment to steady her aim before firing directly at Alucard's black heart.

Blood sprayed across the ground as the blessed rounds tore through the vampire's undead flesh. Snarling when she witnessed Alucard moving in such a way that her bullets hit every part of his body except his heart and neck, Heinkel didn't stop firing until the clicking of an empty clip drew her full attention. Eyes widening when the Casull and Jackal appeared in the vampire's hands, she didn't hesitate before leaping through the broken window of the restaurant

to her left, rolling across the glass-covered floor seconds before a deluge of armor-piercing rounds shot through the air.

"Damn it... Maxwell was right," Heinkel grunted when her back slammed against a table. Grumbling lightly in annoyance when a pitcher of cold water rolled off the table, soaking her head and shoulders in the process, the paladin placed a new clip in her pistol and sneered, "I should have gone for the larger magazine."

Heinkel scoffed as she cautiously stood back on her feet. Ignoring the streams of water dripping from her chin onto the floor when Yumiko went flying past the restaurant's shattered windows, katana held tightly against her waist, she shook her head at the explosion that followed her partner's attack against the vampire. Something was wrong here. The abilities Alucard possessed nearly half an hour ago weren't nearly this powerful, which meant the vampire was growing stronger the longer the battle continued. She needed to find a way to kill the vampire before he became too powerful to destroy.

As she moved to help Yumiko against the vampire Heinkel stiffened when Anderson sprinted through her line of sight a few seconds later. The fingers on her left hand subconsciously reaching towards the pocket of her cassock at the look in the nudist's head, she watched the nudist vanish to the left before scoffing, "This better damn well work, Anderson."

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The Major watched with detached aplomb as he allowed the full weight of the revelation to sink into Integra Hellsing's mind. It was quite obvious from the unsubtle clenching of her hand, the grinding of her teeth in anger, that she viewed his words with the same mixture of revulsion and hatred reserved for only the most evil of men in the world. Men who would gladly sell out humanity for nothing more than fun and profit. Yet that could not be further from the truth.

"One should not underestimate the deviousness... the intelligence... of Ragyo Kiryuin."

Lowering his arm as he broke the tense silence following his previous revelation, the Major's mouth curled into an amused smirk when a wavering aura of spiritual energy surrounded the vampire. From the expression of rage permeating her inhumanly glowing crimson eyes it would seem she didn't quite like what he was saying. A faint chuckle escaping his lips as he turned away from the women, hands clasped tightly behind his back, the Sternritzer stared at the screens illuminating half the chamber before pleasantly continuing, "Ever since the events that transpired at Honnouji Academy she has stayed within her daughter's former bastion, protected by a barrier that neither His Majesty nor Alucard can penetrate! But she is not staying idle, fraulein. With each passing day she mentally orders that *thing* to weave thousands of new COVERS! Every hour that she draws breath allows the Grand Couturiers to place the final touches upon the garment that would envelop the world in Life Fibers!"

"How would I accelerate Kiske Urahara's research into destroying the barrier? What method could I use to pierce through the protective veil surrounding her? These were among the questions that plagued my every waking moment. And do you know what method, what course of action, I devised to take down that illustrious woman?"

His white uniformed fluttering slightly when he abruptly twisted around towards the two women, the Major held a clenched fist in front of his face and smugly sneered, "Nothing! Not one thing! There is nothing that can be done to destroy the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier before Ragyo Kiryuin begins the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet!"

"That's foolish coming from you, Quincy," Integra's voice contained more than a hint of derision as she glared contemptuously at the Major, "Nothing is impenetrable. Even the most impregnable barriers eventually shatter. But you and that coward you call a king didn't even bother trying."



"His Majesty is not a man to leave anything to chance. Even if there existed the slightest possibility his power could penetrate the barrier surrounding Honnouji Academy he wouldn't be in any condition to stop Ragyo Kiryuin," an ominous shimmer of artificial light reflected off the Major's thick glasses as he calmly turned his back on Integra Hellsing and her pet vampire. Once more grabbing the remote from his chair and pressing a button, he sighed contently when the screens shifted from a laughing Alucard to a map of the world, "Which is the reason we decided to force her hand."

Integra gasped in dawning horror when her gaze was drawn to the flickering number at the top of the screens, "You didn't..."

"By slaughtering every living soul in London I have tipped the scales in Ragyo Kiryuin's favor! I have granted her the one thing she required to begin her masterstroke - the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet! And by doing so... *limited* the forces she is able to bring onto the battlefield!"

"For you see... despite Ragyo Kiryuin's vaunted intelligence it is her sole desire, that ephemeral goal she has worked endlessly towards making a reality these past twenty years, that shall be her downfall," there was barely a moment's pause in the Sternritter's speech before he dramatically swept one arm through the air and passionately exclaimed, "She will be so *enraptured* that her grand plan can finally commence that she will throw caution to the wind! So devoted is she to that *thing* beneath her manor that she will leave the protection of her bastion to carry out its unholy will! By giving her exactly what she wants I have granted Nudist Beach the chance to defeat her! To cast her down into the dust!"

A cold feeling coursed down Integra's spine at the passion behind the Quincy's words. Something about the phrasing of his answer, the way he spoke, bothered her tremendously and yet she could not understand what it was, "How do you know all this?"

His mouth curling into a pleased smile as he walked back to his chair, the Major sat down and folded his hands together before

answering, "Because, fraulein, we leaked the outcome of this little skirmish to Revocs nearly ninety minutes ago."

Several rapid bursts of light emanated from the oscillating barrier when Integra angrily snapped her arm upwards and emptied her Sig-Sauer's full clip at the Major, each bullet aimed at the Quincy's forehead, "You despicable, vile Quincy! You and your coward of a king are truly the lowest of the low! Soulless men who would throw humanity to the dogs for some ill-conceived plot to take down Ragyo Kiryuin!"

"... Oh? Cowards, are we? The lowest of the low?"

A slight frown momentary adorned the Major features before he smirked and raised a hand into the air, "Tell me, fraulein, as you stand here due in no small part to the support of your pet vampire... what does that make *you* ? Those that died tonight were nothing more than casualties of His Majesty's glorious *will* ! Victims of the eternal struggle between humans and monsters! I do not deny what I did! You, on the other hand, did so... much... *worse* . I killed over three million people. But it was YOU that unleashed Alucard upon them!"

"How *dare* you claim Alucard would lay a finger on my countrymen!" Integra angrily retorted while subtly aware of the way Seras was tensing next to her, "I gave him strict orders to deal with all assaulting forces - both Quincy and the Vatican. He would never dare go against my instructions!"

"You are thinking far too *literally*, Integra Hellsing," the Major leaned forward in his chair moments before an enormous explosion rocked the zeppelin, causing the aircraft to visibly shake under the intense deluge of wind, "What you should have considered from the very start was *what* Alucard would do at night's end. You know better than anyone how Alucard sustains his unholy power. So tell me - what do you think will happen to the blood of three million souls laying about London? He will absorb them! Sentencing them to an eternity of painful agony! And you have the nerve to question my morality?"

The corners of the Sternritter's mouth pulled into a pleased smirk as the *Deus Ex Machina* slowly stabilized from the power unleashed by Ryuko Matoi. Already he could see dawning realization in both Integra Hellsing and her pet vampire's eyes. It would seem they indeed failed to comprehend, to understand beyond more than a cursory glance, the sinister power of the creature known as Alucard. Even the vampire's sole protégé, the only other being since his first steps in undeath that fully embraced the same eldritch power, appeared perturbed by the news.

"But I'm afraid I'm not here to debate the question of morality," the Sternritter mused, folding his hands together and leaning backwards in the chair, "For as we speak Ragyo Kiryuin is undoubtedly leading the attack against those opposing her plans - the trained soldiers of Nudist Beach, the spiritually aware inhabitants of Karakura Town, shinigami or otherwise, but most importantly Isshin Kurosaki. The only man on earth that possesses the ability to defeat the illustrious Ragyo Kiryuin once and for all!"

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"I see your injuries haven't slowed you down at all, Iscariot!"

Alucard's accented voice betrayed the exhilaration coursing through his veins when the swordswoman parried his onslaught without fail, showers of sparks illuminating the darkened streets as her blade clashed multiple times against his own weapon. The corner of his mouth curling into a half-smirk when he was forced to twist sideways to avoid Yumiko's sudden counterattack, her sword coming precariously close to piercing his throat, Alucard's smirk widened when a wet sensation trailed down his cheek, a small rivulet of blood oozing from the freshly opened wound. It would seem Alexander Anderson's speech bolstered the swordswoman's spirits, eliminating the last traces of doubt in her mind.

"Yes..."

Wisps of burning shadows flickered from the edges of the vampire's tattered cloak as he leapt backwards to avoid Yumiko's continued assault, blue trails of light arcing inches behind the katana in her hands. The confident smirk stretching across his face growing when the paladin darted forward faster than he anticipated and slammed her weapon against his sword with enough force to send a metallic echo reverberating through the hollow streets, Alucard's eyes widened in unparalleled excitement at the way her arms trembled, "Despite your wounds you continue to challenge me! To drive your blade through my heart!"

Dark torrents of spiritual energy burst from Alucard's broadsword following his exuberant proclamation. Gripping the handle of his blade tightly with both hands as he swung against Yumiko's katana with enough power to send her skidding several meters backwards, her guard momentarily broken from the sheer strength behind the strike, the vampire was stopped from pressing the advantage when several smoke bombs detonated at his feet. Ah... so it seemed Alexander Anderson finally decided to strike. His smirk widening in amusement right before he vanished into shadows, avoiding the bayonets poised to pierce through the separation in his armor's plating, Alucard could not help but laugh excitedly upon rematerializing in the air above the nudist commander.

With his crimson eyes glowing ominously in the shadows he swung his blade downwards at the former paladin, intent on vertically cleaving the man in half. As thick fissures rippled down the heavily damaged street, causing dust and smoke to rise upwards into the night, Alucard felt his pulse quicken at the lack of blood and visceral coating the ground. Anderson had actually managed to avoid the attack. In his grievously wounded state no less. Despite his weakening condition, which continued growing worse by the minute, the man somehow tracked his movements and avoided the attack.

*Excellent .*

"You continue to impress me, Alexander Anderson," Alucard commented, dust clinging to the broadsword as he pulled it out of the

ground. Turning his attention to the swordswoman and nudist commander standing quite some distance away, their labored breathing audible to his ears, the vampire's mouth slowly curled into a sly smirk, "I was under the impression that a man of your stature would be above such dishonorable tactics."

Anderson's breath came out in nearly ragged pants, a thin trail of blood oozing from his hairline, as his boots scrapped to a halt against the pavement. The numbness slowly spreading throughout his body was growing worse. He was already having difficulty feeling his fingers. Soon, perhaps in only a few minutes, the loss of sensation will travel the rest of the way up his arm, ending at the wound he received from the Quincy. Once he finished dealing with the vampire, sending his blackened soul to the pits of hell and denying that cowardly king of the Quincy whatever he was planning, he would seek medical attention.

He *almost* smirked at the notion of Orihime Inoue using her miraculous powers to heal his wounds.

The trembling plaguing his fingers vanished at the vampire's word, "A monster has no right to talk about honor. I am a commander of Nudist Beach, a sworn member of the bulwark standing firm against Ragyo Kiryuin and her eldritch ilk."

"With that being said..." Anderson's voice trailed off as he slowly crossed the tailor bayonets in front of his body, "Let us have a fair and cowardly battle."

Standing several feet to the right of the former paladin, fingers subconsciously tightening around the blessed katana, Yumiko felt a shiver ripple down her spine. She hadn't heard that phrase for over three years. Not since that *fiend* personally visited Harobaro House.

At the Kobe Orphanage, before Ragyo Kiryuin's monstrous actions twisted him into a murderer, Anderson had constantly regaled them with stories of his exploits in Iscariot. He went into great detail about the various abominations he'd slain throughout the years, ranging

from masked creatures to eldritch monsters residing in the darkest corners of reality that could drive men insane with but a glance. Although he'd heavily sanitized his stories to prevent the younger children from having nightmares there was one important tenet Anderson drove into their minds. An idea a few of her fellow orphans took to heart more than others.

There was no such thing as honorable combat.

It was a fallacy. A well-wrapped lie created by men who had never stood on the front lines against the monsters relentlessly seeking to destroy humanity. The only point of battle was making sure you were the only one standing at the end. Even if that meant stabbing your opponent when his back was turned or using an equally cowardly tactic, as long as you didn't betray your comrades or endangered innocent lives everything was fair game.

"Follow my lead, Anderson," Yumiko scoffed while sliding her right foot backwards, darkened eyes glaring venomously at the vampire, "You *know* how many centuries the Vatican has waited to kill Alucard!"

Anderson nodded in acknowledgement at Yumiko before turning his undivided attention onto the waiting vampire. He knew better than perhaps anyone how long the Catholic Church has striven to kill the undead monster, to wipe the soul-devouring abomination off the face of the earth. At one time he would have gladly allowed Yumiko to strike the finishing blow against the vampire. But this was no time for such courtesies against a monster like Alucard. Especially since he was all but certain Ragyo Kiryuin was waiting in the wings.

"Well said..."

An aura of constantly flickering darkness surrounded Alucard as he tightly gripped his broadsword with both hands and raised it skyward, the ancient blade shimmering in the crimson moonlight. Yes... it was here, in this dead and forsaken city, where the heavy weight of his past will finally shatter under his rapidly oncoming future. Not even

that *man* a century ago filled his black heart with such exhilaration. He could feel it down in the depths of his expansive soul - these humans would be the ones who finally granted him that which he sought after for all this time.

"Now..." the vampire's voice deepened as he swept his arm outwards, mouth twisted into an amused smirk, "... allow me to return the favor!"

The former paladin barely had a moment to register the meaning behind Alucard's words before spiritual energy exploded from the vampire, disintegrating the ground beneath his feet in burning darkness. Hunched over slightly as he struggled to remain upright under the heavy but intangible weight pressing down upon his shoulders, Anderson's eyes widened when the vampire took a single deliberate step forward before promptly vanishing. Instinctively throwing himself to the side less than a second before Alucard's blade crashed into the spot he'd just been standing, sending up an eruption of dirt and pulverized asphalt into the air, the nudist commander quickly leapt back onto his feet and summoned two new bayonets into his clenched hands.

It was greatly concerning that something like Alucard, who was capable of subsuming an entire city with naught but their own power, could have missed. But that was not what truly bothered Anderson at the moment. He was effectively blind in the wake of the vampire's attack, the dust floating in the air burning his throat and causing his vision to blur. It would be the perfect opportunity for the vampire to kill him. So for Alucard to forego taking the initiative, especially when he was already halfway to death's door, could mean only one thing.

He wasn't the vampire's target.

Alucard's expression betrayed the overwhelming insanity lingering just beneath the surface when he emerged from the smokescreen enveloping the nudist commander, wisps of dust clinging to his tattered cloak. His crimson eyes narrowing when he noticed the swordswoman was only a few feet away, her blessed blade gleaming

brightly in the crimson moonlight as she thrust it straight towards his heart, the vampire waited until the weapon was nearly pressed against his chest before vanishing in a flourish of shadows. Grinning madly when he reappeared behind the paladin, darkness wafting from his broadsword as he tightly gripped it with a single hand, Alucard didn't hesitate before swinging it towards Yumiko's neck.

A metallic screeching echoed loudly through the streets, shattering whatever windows still remained intact, when Alucard found his broadsword halted by the swordswoman's hastily raised blade. Surprise turning into adulation at the paladin's quick reaction to his attack, the vampire chuckled and pushed down upon her faintly glowing blade with just a little more power and *shattered* it.

Shards of specially forged metal shimmered brightly in the crimson moonlight around a heavily shocked Yumiko before the darkness wrapped around Alucard's broadsword exploded inches from her body. Violently launched backwards through the air by the overwhelming force of the spiritual explosion, parts of her uniform torn while burning wounds covered her arms, she was saved from slamming into the ground when Anderson threw himself into her path. Bayonets lying forgotten upon the street as he protectively wrapped his arms around the unconscious paladin, boots skidding dozens of meters before sliding to a halt, he stared melancholically at Yumiko's current condition.

"Damn it..."

Anderson seethed out a rare curse as he gently laid Yumiko down upon the ground before quickly checking her pulse. It was strong and steady, which meant she wasn't suffering from any unseen injuries. His breath growing increasingly ragged as he struggled back onto his feet, beads of sweat trickling down his face, Anderson ignored the blood still oozing from his injured shoulder and turned around. Despite the nearly complete numbness throughout his left arm, any residual feelings he might have lost under the pain, he still managed to flex his fingers and summon a new pair of tailor bayonets. But it



was nothing more than a feint. He no longer had the strength necessary to engage the vampire in combat.

Which meant the outcome of this battle rested entirely upon Heinkel doing what needed to be done.

"You still wish to fight?"

Alucard couldn't help but proudly smirk at the exhausted nudist commander's determination to continue fighting despite the growing odds. It was obvious the man could barely stand under his own power. Any normal human would have long succumbed to such debilitating wounds. Their minds unable to resist the tantalizing embrace of death. Yet this man refused to surrender, to lay down his arms and die like a dog. Yes... Alexander Anderson was a man worthy of respect! A paragon of humanity whose iron will never once faltered during this long and arduous battle.

"Or perhaps you are waiting upon Wolfe?"

There it was - the subtle stiffening of Anderson's shoulders upon his mentioning of the missing paladin. It was arrogant of the humans to believe he would not notice one of them was absent for nearly half the battle. And while Wolfe's constant vanishing acts had greatly piqued his interest, the point of their plan eluded him. What purpose would a surprise attack be at this point when the swordswoman was lying unconscious on the ground, her body nearly broken, and Anderson was barely able to stand?

"Yes... your plan was dependent on Wolfe doing something. Was it not?"

The vampire's antiquated armor clanked softly with every step as he slowly marched towards Anderson, broadsword held lazily to his side. Crimson eyes narrowing slightly in veiled interest while faint screams could be heard on the horizon, Alucard's cloak billowed ominously as he added, "Perhaps she is still waiting for a signal? Go

ahead, Anderson. Muster up your last dredges of energy and summon her! Make your final stand!"

Anderson's expression remained completely passive as the darkness enveloping the edges of his vision receded. He refused to give the vampire what he wanted. Deliberately glancing at the surrounding buildings, which undoubtedly garnered the vampire's attention, his breathing steadied as he replied in a polite tone, "Yer offer is tempting, vampire. So allow me to respond with two pieces of information. One - do not presume ye have the power to order me around. I would rather die than listen to the filth that spews from yer mouth."

An amused expression pulled at the edges of Alucard's mouth, "And the second?"

"Two..." the nudist commander's tattered cassock fluttered lightly in the breeze as the barest trace of a smirk appeared on his face, "... fighting ye to the death was never the plan."

Alucard's eyes narrowed at Anderson's threat before something on the edge of his vision caught his attention. Dawning realization cross his features when he spotted a strange device anchored upon the building directly to his right, clawed metallic talons digging sharply into the concrete, the vampire's already pleased smirk grew rapturously at the ingenuity of his opponents before the Anti-Life Fiber Laser Tripwires Mark 2.9 on either side of the street sensed an obstruction blocking their connection. In the following instant an intense beam of blue light burst from the devices and Alucard, who was standing between them, *vanished*, vaporized under temperatures far in excess of the sun's surface.

Fingers tightly clenching his furiously bleeding shoulder as he cautiously watched what remained of the legendary vampire blow away in the breeze, Anderson sighed in relief when it became apparent Alucard was not coming back. Heh... the abomination actually fell for their trap without any provocation. For a moment he had been convinced the vampire wouldn't trigger the weapon, that all

of their effort had been for naught. But there was no point worrying about hypothetical situations. The plan had gone off without a hitch.

Even in the paranoid depths of his mind Anderson didn't see Alucard regenerating from *nothing* .

"Anderson!"

The nudist commander was pulled from his thoughts when Heinkel Wolfe shouted out his name before leaping from the second floor of a nearby building. Landing in a crouch only a few feet away from Anderson, boots crunching against shattered glass, the paladin grunted as she stood up and looked at the now-smoking devices with newfound respect. These were *standard issue* Nudist Beach weaponry? She didn't think even Iscariot, who had access to the billions of dollars locked away in the Vatican's coffers, could develop such devastating technology. If they did, she was damn sure Maxwell would have arrogantly flaunted such designs in front of Integra Hellsing.

Looking away when the device spontaneously exploded in a shower of blinding sparks, the acrid smell of burning chemicals faintly reminding her of laundry, Heinkel stiffened when she saw Yumiko lying unconscious on the ground with burns covering most of her upper body. Verdammt! She spent too much time setting up Anderson's weapons and allowed the vampire to nearly kill her partner. It was fortunate for Anderson the plan worked otherwise she would have killed the man herself, Alucard be damned.

"God damn it, Anderson," Heinkel rushed over to the former paladin when he knees suddenly buckled from exhaustion. Managing to catch Anderson right before he could collapse to the ground, she wrapped his good arm around her shoulders and scoffed, "Just what the hell kind of weapon was that?"

"Nudist Beach technology at its finest."

The bayonets in Anderson's hands clattered against the pavement as the last of his strength left him. Breathing heavily as he reluctantly relied upon Heinkel for support, he frowned before grunting, "The Anti-Life Fiber Laser Tripwire Mark 2.9. Designed by Aikuro to emit a Calcium Hypochlorite beam, disintegrating anything in their path. The name might be a mouthful but they get the job done..."

Anderson paused and spat out some more blood. He didn't mention that Aikuro's invention had a few kinks that needed to be worked out. While violently exploding in a flash of light after a single use was the most noticeable defect, a far more serious limitation was that the beam was quite narrow. Which meant the target would need to stand in a very specific place for the weapon to work. And experience has demonstrated that Ragyo Kiryuin was anything but stupid. Monster or not, she would never walk into such an obvious trap.

With more strength than a man in his condition should be capable of achieving Anderson pulled his arm away from Heinkel's shoulders, his footsteps momentarily faltering before he managed to regain his balance. Cutting off the paladin's protests with nothing more than a slight scowl, upon which she nodded and quickly went to check on Yumiko, he turned away and glowered at what little ash remained on the street. It was strange. Although not a trace remained of the vampire's terrible presence, the constant sense of subdued dread gone, the unnatural darkness plaguing the city, including the crimson moon in the sky, remained. Perhaps they were simply effects that would dissipate over time, slowly dissipating until things returned to relative normalcy.

"Ye needn't worry about Yumiko," Anderson didn't need to turn around to know Heinkel's concern over her fallen friend, "She was merely caught upon the edge of an explosion. Her wounds aren't nearly as severe as they appear."

Heinkel didn't acknowledge Anderson's comment as she knelt next to Yumiko and carefully examined her friend's injuries, the copious burns covering the swordswoman's chest and arms rather concerning. Sighing in relief when she didn't find anything worse

than several broken bones and second-degree burns, which are easily treatable by the Vatican's medical division, she ran a hand through her straw-blonde hair while suppressing an exhausted yawn. Now wasn't the time for rest. Alucard might have finally been destroyed after more than five centuries of terror but there were still a few things they needed to address.

But before any of that they needed to deal with the Quincy.

"Destroying the Quincy will be difficult, Anderson," Heinkel reluctantly confessed while turning towards the nudist, "And there's still the matter of what happened to Maxwell..."

Anderson briefly stiffened before replying, "Ryuko and Ichigo are more than powerful enough to deal with the Quincy."

It was fortunate he witnessed Integra Hellsing's departure alongside her other pet vampire after the Quincy's aerial bombardment leveled several city blocks. While the children might be powerful thanks to the unholy Life Fibers composing their bodies and Kamui, they refused to kill. Integra Hellsing, on the other hand, possessed no such moral compunctions. She would order her vampires to slaughter the Quincy, violently massacring their entire army, without the slightest hint of hesitation. With any luck she's already butchered that Sternritzer and begun helping Ichigo and Ryuko finish off the rest of the Jahrtausendarmee.

"As for Maxwell... for the time being we should consider the Vatican lost," Anderson ignored Heinkel's astonishment to his supposedly blasphemous statement as he slowly marched forward. Coughing up blood while his vision briefly swam, he clenched his teeth tightly and continued, "The only way to safely liberate those who have been enslaved by Life Fibers is to kill the one responsible for ensnaring their minds. We need to eliminate the very source of the corruption."

Heinkel's straw-blonde hair shifted slightly in the breeze as she contemplated the former paladin's words. It seemed her initial assumptions in the wake of Maxwell's inglorious death were correct

after all. The only way to save those controlled by Life Fibers, whose bodies have become nothing more than puppets dancing on strings, was to kill Ragyo Kiryuin. But with Maxwell gone she was now the highest-ranking officer in Iscariot aside from Father Renaldo. It fell upon her shoulders to gather those that survived the battle and bring the fight directly to Revocs.

Grimacing at the notion of fighting yet another eldritch abomination, one much worse than Alucard in some regards, she silently reached into her cassock when she noticed Anderson walking away, "I'm sorry, Anderson, but I can't let you leave."

As the former paladin turned slightly and looked over his shoulder, gaze steady and defiant despite his deteriorating condition, Heinkel sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. Did he actually think she would drag him back to the Vatican in chains now of all times? Grumbling angrily into the palm of her hand while hastily removing a cell phone from the depths of her cassock, the casing slightly dented from the battle but still useable, she huffed, "Verdammt! Don't be so damn stubborn, Anderson! You're *literally* dying! At least let Iscariot's medical division look at your wounds!"

Anderson's frown lessened as he wiped a hand against his bloody mouth, "There's a GPS chip woven into my collar. And it shouldn't be long before Aikuro's done informing Olivier about the Quincy. Once he's finished, we'll rendezvous with Batou and the children before heading back to Karakura Town."

Heinkel arched a single eyebrow in confusion, "Karakura Town?"

"There's a young woman that possesses quite the unique ability," Anderson momentarily paused at the memory of Orihime Inoue's true abilities, which he personally observed in the aftermath of the Great Culture and Sports Festival. Healing the wounds from during his scuffle with Armstrong was one thing, but regenerating the gaping wound in Satsuki Kiryuin's abdomen in seconds was entirely different, "She can heal even the most grievous of injuries, flesh knitting back together in seconds. Now grab Yumiko and follow me.

Bethnal Green is only a few blocks from here. Let's just hope someone managed to force Aikuro to wear pants."

Heinkel's eyes widened in disbelief when Anderson scoffed under his breath and began marching away, his boots crunching against the scattered debris. She didn't think people were even capable of possessing such miraculous powers. Frowning in thought as she carefully wrapped an arm underneath Yumiko's neck, the paladin carefully picked her partner off the ground before asking, "Hang on, Anderson. What is this girl's -"

The rest of her question died as nothing more than a strangled gasp when an enormous burst of dense spiritual energy exploded throughout the city. Nearly brought to her knees by the eruption of power while Anderson was forced to stab a bayonet into the ground for support, Heinkel grimaced as she struggled to stand under the phantasmal weight pressing down on every inch of her body. As beads of sweat dripped freely down her face, muscles quivering under the increasing pressure, she could only watch in abject horror as shadows swirled out of nothing, mind completely blank when the writhing darkness rapidly coalesced into a familiar form.

Reappearing in the middle of the street with a single ominous step, darkness clinging to his tattered cloak, Alucard's face twisted into a disappointed scowl, "It seems your trump card did not work, Alexander Anderson."

The permeating silence that followed his declaration, the expressions of utter disbelief etched upon Anderson and Wolfe's faces at his continuing survival, caused the vampire to gaze suspiciously at the humans. Did the failings of a single weapon completely destroy their motivation to bring about his demise? Instead of staring in confusion they should be charging forward! Intent on resuming the battle! Sneering contemptuously at the notion that his nemeses were unable to grant him the one thing he desired above all else, that their strength was still not enough, Alucard narrowed his eyes before vanishing in a burst of speed, crimson

moonlight reflecting off his broadsword as he rushed towards Anderson without abandon.

In the blink of an eye the vampire easily tore through the nudist commander's hastily constructed defenses, the man's token resistance shattering into shards of metal under the intense assault. Shadows dancing across the ground as he relentlessly pressed forward while the broken remains of Anderson's bayonet rained downwards around him, Alucard could not help but feel cheated. Where was the agility the nudist displayed only a few minutes ago? Even in his wounded state the man had been able to dodge his attacks with impunity. Yet now he faltered under such a trivial strike?

A hiss of annoyance escaped from between Alucard's lips at the answer. With an arm tucked inside the billowing folds of his tattered cloak while he angrily shifted one foot outwards, the vampire did not hesitate in the slightest when he thrust forward and impaled his opponent upon his tarnished blade.

"ANDERSON!"

"Your weapon did not work," Alucard's voice was strained as he watched the life quickly drain from Anderson, Wolfe's shouting fading into the background. There was an emptiness building within his soul, a sensation colder than the touch of death. The man dying upon his weapon had been a worthy adversary, someone possessing the willpower to fight until the bitter end without compromising his humanity.

"Do you understand, Anderson? Iscariot?!"

The vampire's frustration was made apparent when he ignobly pulled his weapon from Anderson's body, the nudist lurching before limply collapsing onto the street. With his mouth twisting into a sneer at the hollow victory, the notion that even a man such as Alexander Anderson could not kill him, Alucard turned his gaze towards Wolfe only to find the paladin aiming her pistol at his heart, an expression of pure rage etched onto her face.



His form wavering as he slowly marched towards the paladin, antiquated armor bleeding into shadows until he was once more in his normal state, Alucard quirked a single eyebrow at Wolfe's determination. Boots echoing loudly while the Casull and Jackal slid into his waiting hands, the vampire's tone shifted when he spoke, "How interesting. Even after watching Anderson bleed to death, impaled upon my blade, you still wish to fight me, Wolfe?"

For several seconds Alucard's full attention was solely focused upon Wolfe's weapon aimed squarely at his heart. It would take little more than a simple squeeze of her finger to send the blessed round into his body. Yet she stayed her hand, refraining herself from attacking. He couldn't understand her reasoning, the logic behind such an insane choice. Frowning at Wolfe's strange behavior, the late autumn wind blowing through the street causing his overcoat to rustle slightly, Alucard narrowed his eyes when he noticed an extremely subtle shift in the paladin's expression. Quickly becoming aware of a presence rising behind him, weapons snapping upwards to deal with the threat, the vampire gasped in genuine surprise when an intimately familiar nail was thrust straight into his heart.

"Go to... Hell ye... undead... bastard..."

Blood spewed from the gaping hole in Anderson's chest as he weakly collapsed backwards onto the ground, fingers slowly slipping away from the holy artifact. As darkness tinted the edges of his vision, the sound of Alucard's demented voice distant and faint, the former paladin began chuckling. Although he was dying, his life slipping further away with every passing second, the nudist managed to get the last laugh. With his final breaths, he made sure the children would be safe from the vampire.

The Nail of Helena was perhaps the most dangerous artifact in the Vatican's possession, obtained through methods and rites nobody quite remembered. In the hands of the righteous it was a weapon of last resort. Only to be used in the direst of circumstances, when all other options had failed. But in the wrong hands, if something like Ragyo Kiryuin's servant were waiting in the shadows, it would

undoubtedly lead to humanity's destruction. There would be no telling what a foul abomination like that woman could achieve with it.

Which is why he had snuck back in the midst of the battle and recovered it.

He'd originally planned to give the artifact to Kisuke Urahara upon their return to Karakura Town. Maxwell's ultimate fate was far more than a tragedy. It was proof positive that the Vatican had been compromised to its highest levels. His Holiness and the conclave subsumed by Life Fibers. And since Heinkel had willingly broken the seal placed upon the Nail of Helena, returning it to Section III would be the same as directly handing it to Ragyo Kiryuin, an unacceptable risk. However, it was Alucard's recovery from nothingness that inspired him to come up with a different use for it instead.

Perhaps it was fitting that a monstrous weapon be used to defeat a monstrous existence like Alucard.

"One... down..." Anderson's voice was barely above a whisper as the light faded from his eyes, "Two... to... go..."

Seething angrily at the fallen nudist commander, frustration and contempt building upon his face, Alucard snarled as he gripped the artifact lodged firmly in his heart. Fangs grinding against each other as he removed it in a shower of visceral and blood, the *thing* continuing to emit its detestable spiritual energy the entire time, the vampire stared at the nail in confusion before shattering it out of existence. Alexander Anderson's effort, the culmination of his indomitable human will condensed into one final unpredictable strike, should have killed him. The nail's power should have burned his body from the inside out, rendering him nothing more than an empty husk. Yet it had been just as ineffective as a wooden stake - futile and useless.

"You... you FOOL!"

An unmistakably *human* agony permeated Alucard's voice as he stood angrily over Anderson's body, crimson eyes burning with barely controlled rage, "Even with the Nail of Helena you couldn't kill me! You achieved NOTHING! All of this was completely POINTLESS! All of your planning led to nothing more than an early death, Alexander Anderson!"

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"And thus the tale of Alexander Anderson comes to its inevitable end..."

The conniving smirk never left the Major's face as he watched the nudist commander perish. Turning away from the screens when the battle moved onto the final act, the disappointed look upon Alucard's face sickening, he chuckled at Integra Hellsing's shifting expression before continuing, "Even after throwing everything he possessed at the vampire, pulling out plan after plan, the concept of victory eluded him! Forever out of his reach! For he was merely human... and no human could ever hope to destroy a monster like Alucard!"

A series of cascading explosions in the distance physically shook the *Deus Ex Machina* moments after the Sternritter dramatically finished speaking, the aircraft immediately listing to the right as it began losing altitude. Hands clasped tightly behind his back as he turned away from the woman and her pet vampire, the dozens of empty monitoring stations throughout the command center displaying countless errors and warnings, the Major dramatically held his arms outwards and declared, "But such power! One cannot help but stand in awe at the power of such a marvelous weapon! The pinnacle of human technology clashing against a creature so inhuman that his mere presence disrupts the barrier between life and death! And yet... it failed. Do you know why, fraulein?"

Integra Hellsing tried to ignore the image of Alexander Anderson's broken body displayed upon the screens. While troubling, the nudist

had been an unfortunate casualty of Alucard's orders to purge London of invading forces. She did not understand why he'd eagerly thrown himself headfirst against her servant, especially after nearly dying against a Quincy back at the manor. Yet Anderson had shown no hesitation in rushing into battle alongside those paladins from Iscariot the moment he returned to the city.

"I'm through playing this little game."

A few strands of platinum blonde hair fell in front of Integra's eyes as she angrily stepped forward, the previous train of thought pushed to the back of her mind for the moment. It was obvious the Major was stalling. Yet his reason for doing so eluded her. The only ones who could possibly benefit from such a tactic were Seras and herself. Narrowing her eyes while standing only inches from the barrier, the spiritual energy faintly reflecting her image, Integra tightened her grip around the sheathed sword in her hand and barked at the Quincy, "In less than six minutes this barrier will fall, and with it your life. Your stalling is pointless, Quincy."

"Oh, I wouldn't call it *stalling*..."

Chuckling in amusement at Integra's responding snarl, the Major's glasses shone opaquely as he raised a single hand into the air, "Stalling would imply I had an ulterior motive. That there is another plan in the wings, waiting for the right moment to strike! Let me assure you that I have no such thing! My only purpose at this point is to tell you everything you need to know about the Schatten Ausrufung. So sit back and relax, fraulein. After all, you have the best seat in the house for when the sun dawns upon Alucard for the final time!"

"With that said..."

The Sternritzer trailed off when most of the command center was suddenly cast into darkness, shards of broken glass raining down around them as a surge of electricity shattered more than half of the light fixtures. Brushing some debris from his sleeve before calmly

turning off the blaring alarm with a simple click of the remote, the Major clapped his hands together before finishing, "... let us talk about *Alucard* ."

Fully aware of how the constantly writhing shadows emanating from the vampire's left shoulder twisted at his words, contorting angrily in response to their host's emotional state, he chuckled before sweeping an arm through the air, "During that moment when he seemed defeated... when his corporeal form vanished into dust... you were concerned! Shocked! And why wouldn't you be? Witnessing one of the most powerful beings in all of existence, your vaunted family servant, disintegrate into nothingness would render even a hardened soldier speechless! Yet that girl standing to your right wasn't worried in the slightest..."

Seras stiffened when the Quincy shifted the focus of the conversation onto her shoulders before clenching her remaining hand and answering, "It's hard to explain, Master Integra. But when Master disappeared I felt in the depths of my soul that he was unharmed. That Mister Anderson's weapon failed to kill him."

"Such an *interesting* conundrum. How could Seras Victoria have known Alucard did not perish?"

Arrogance dripped from the Major's every word as he pointed a finger at Integra and exclaimed, "The answer is simple, fraulein! She and Alucard are cast from the same mold! Two beings linked to the same source!"

With the press of a single button the wall of screens flashed before shifting to Alucard standing injured but victorious over Heinkel Wolfe, the paladin gasping for breath while blood streamed down her face. Sweeping his arms outwards, yellow eyes shimmering with manic glee, the Sternritter stared directly into Integra's eyes before continuing, "It is insufficient to call these beings *vampires* ! By consuming both blood and soul they increase their power! Growing stronger with every fallen opponent!"

Integra refrained herself from shooting the barrier as she angrily spat, "What is the point of all this?"

"The point, you say?"

The Quincy's smug laughter reverberated throughout the chamber as he sat back down, hands folded neatly across his chest, "The point, my dear fraulein, is that when Seras Victoria absorbed a single soul, her power nearly doubled! Enabling her to overwhelm Zorin Blitz's Vollständig through nothing more than brute force! Just *one soul* placed her upon the same pedestal as His Majesty's greatest soldiers! So tell me..."

An unnatural silence enveloped the entire chamber when the Major leaned forward and asked, "Why is it that Alucard, whose body still contains over one million souls, appears to be fighting at the level of a mere *human* ?"

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"Stand and fight, Wolfe!"

The Casull and Jackal quivered in Alucard's fingers as the vampire loomed over the heavily injured paladin, his body silhouetted in shadows against the crimson moon hovering lazily in the darkened sky. A strangled snarl tearing its way out of his throat when Wolfe showed no desire to stand, seemingly content to continue kneeling at his feet, Alucard released his weapons into the surrounding darkness before harshly grabbing the paladin's cassock. Furiously pulling Wolfe back onto her feet, the vampire growled, "Will you let a few broken bones and a punctured lung stop you from fighting? Do you intend to *die* like a dog, praying to God for another scrap of miracle, or will you stand on your feet once more?!"

With a contemptuous sneer the vampire released his grip upon the paladin. His face immediately twisting in disappointment when Wolfe

staggered backwards before barely managing to regain her balance, blood dripping from the corner of her mouth, Alucard clenched his teeth when he noticed the pistol held limply in the paladin's heavily burnt fingers. How *dare* she admit defeat! Her injuries were NOTHING compared to the brutality inflicted upon Anderson! She had yet to be skewered upon a sword, her organs increasingly failing with each passing second! Anderson might have foolishly thrown away his life but he never stopped fighting until his very last breath!

And Wolfe had the *audacity* to barely stand upon her feet after suffering the *mere* loss of an arm?

"What are you waiting for?!"

Leaning forward while holding a hand directly over his heart, Alucard's crimson eyes shone brightly in the darkness, "Your greatest chance is at hand! Gather your strength and raise your arm! Regain your conviction, Wolfe, and send a bullet through my heart! Hurry! Do it!"

An expression of unbridled frustration etched itself upon the vampire's face when nearly a full minute passed with Wolfe doing little more than weakly glaring at him. The corners of his mouth twisted into a snarl when she started retching pathetically upon the ground, blood and spittle spewing forth with very ragged breath, Alucard furiously grabbed her cassock once more before bitterly shouting, "Anderson is DEAD! Slain by my VERY HANDS! Iscariot lies scattered in pieces across London! Do you intend to stand around and do nothing, Wolfe? Take vengeance for your fallen comrades! Or do you wish for their souls to become twisted until they're little more than unthinking monsters?"

Heinkel briefly managed to focus at the vampire's last remark, "Why the hell... does it matter... to something like you... *vampire* ?"

Shadows flickered across the darkened landscape as Alucard's eyes widened in disbelief, Wolfe's confused response causing his anger and frustration to slowly bleed away until there remained nothing but

a cold emptiness. Fingers momentarily tightening around the paladin's cassock before he abruptly released her from his grasp, the sudden lack of support nearly causing her to collapse to the ground, conflicting emotions crossed the vampire's face as he melancholically asked, "Wolfe, will you allow this duel... this dance of ours... to end when victory was so nearly within reach? Don't give up. Don't succumb to death when that which you sought for so long stands before you..."

An eternity of time seemed to pass as the vampire waited for Wolfe to recover her strength and step forward, to push herself beyond the point of human limitations and gain the power necessary to finally destroy him. Briefly relieved when the paladin appeared to regain some of her determination, shoulders tensing and eyes refocusing, Alucard's expression quickly twisted in fury when the pistol in Wolfe's hands clattered loudly against the ground.

"Y-You..."

Nauseating waves of spiritual energy oozed from Alucard's body as the true significance of the paladin's actions sunk into his mind. For a brief moment in his eternal existence, when the weight of his immortality had begun pressing down upon his soul once more, he'd thought that humanity had finally produced a warrior with the conviction and willpower to end his torment. Not since that fateful dawn over a hundred years ago, when *that man* and his associates bested him, had he'd seen even a glimmer of such a human. When he encountered Wolfe and Anderson in rapid succession, both possessing the quantities he respected in abundance, the vampire thought the day he'd awaited for so long was fast approaching.

"You've FAILED, Wolfe!"

Alucard's voice reverberated loudly as he seethed at the paladin, shadows rising from the hem of his overcoat, "YOUR GREATEST CHANCE IS GONE! Vanished like the morning dew upon dawn's approach! You will never be able to kill me! To end my existence once and for all!"



With an animalistic sneer the vampire turned away from Wolfe, unwilling to look upon the human that shattered his long-awaited hopes. As he angrily marched away from the broken woman, the surrounding shadows growing thicker with every footstep, Alucard took solace in the singular notion that Wolfe and Anderson had come closer than even *that man* did to achieving the impossible. In barely a century humanity managed to produce warriors capable of fighting him at his strongest, to stand before his might without faltering. It was only a matter of time, perhaps even decades, before another group of humans rose to challenge him once again.

Perhaps *they* would succeed where their predecessors failed.

Trudging slowly through the streets, his boots stepping through blood and visceral dripping from the hundreds of impaled vampirized soldats and crusaders, Alucard's mind focused upon those two children. They had defeated his most powerful souls, inadvertently destroying a large portion of his familiars in the process. The monster girl had utterly destroyed the shinigami's bankai with nothing more than an overpowered variation of the interesting technique she used against him all those nights ago. And the boy, his foolish words still ringing in his ears, had eviscerated the Quincy, his blade vertically bisecting the Sternritter before she could even scream.

An ominous wind tore through the destroyed city as Alucard stomped to a halt in the middle of a blood-soaked intersection. Letting out a deep sigh while slowly raising his right hand, the intricate seal etched upon the back of his glove glowing with a disturbing crimson light, the vampire's solemn voice echoed through the darkness as rivulets of blood slowly began flowing through the streets towards him.

"Now... I shall fulfill the last of your orders, my Master..."

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"How disappointing..."

Quilge Opie frowned thoughtfully while slowly lowering the pair of binoculars. Brushing several strands of hair away from his eyes when the biting autumn wind gusting through the belfry suddenly increased, the Sternritter calmly adjusted his spectacles and sighed, "I find myself rather upset with your death, Alexander Anderson. Now far be it for me to hand out criticism, but I assumed a man such as yourself had enough common sense to *avoid* fighting a monster like Alucard."

Although Nudist Beach's continued military presence within London had come as a surprise to the Jahrtausendarmee, forcing His Majesty to activate several contingencies created for such an unlikely event, Anderson's willingness to engage Alucard made perfect sense. Thanks to Zorin's Täuschung Kaskade backfiring in the most spectacular way imaginable, the nudist commander had gained access to what little information his fellow Sternritter knew about the Schatten Ausrufung's objective. If Anderson had indeed learned enough about the Schatten Ausrufung to piece everything together, his question about Alucard gave credibility to that assumption, dealing with him would have been rather annoying.

His Majesty had been quite specific in his orders - they were *not* to harm nor kill anyone from Nudist Beach. If he had dealt with the risk posed by Anderson in his usual fashion, any short-term benefits would have been outweighed by the consequences. The knowledge that a Quincy killed the former paladin would have undoubtedly filtered back to Japan. Which would have gained the unwanted attention of Isshin Kurosaki, a man equally as dangerous as Ragyo Kiryuin.

"But you have my sincerest apologies for dying at the hands of such a brutal and atrocious creature..."

The Sternritter trailed off when the repugnant aroma permeating the city suddenly intensified, the smell of decaying flesh almost enough to make even a hardened soldier like himself queasy. His mouth

pursed tightly in disgust at the rivers of the blood gushing through the streets, the foul liquid carrying the souls of over three million humans, Quilge turned around while doing his best to ignore Alucard's feeding habits. But before he could head back inside the belfry the Quincy paused when a curious pinprick of crimson light suddenly flickered in the distance. The putrid smell of rotten blood all but forgotten as he raised the binoculars towards the source, he saw to his surprise Ryuko Matoi flying above the city in her Kamui, the garment's nauseating power still detectable despite its weakened condition.

It would seem the extensive Daten gathered on the teenager was woefully antiquated. But considering how quickly Life Fibers were able to evolve in response to stress and dangerous stimuli, such as fighting Alucard for example, he should have expected as much. In any case, Quilge needed to inform His Majesty about this new development upon returning to the Silbern.

Ryuko Matoi should not have been strong enough to defeat that captain.

"Things are proceeding rather smoothly, aren't they?"

Quilge found the binoculars harshly torn from his grasp when Schrodinger emerged from the shadows at his side, the cat-like Quincy grinning mischievously as he tauntingly held the stolen object in front of his face. Not reacting in the slightest when his compatriot laughed before marching to the edge of the belfry, his ears twitching every few seconds as he stared through the binoculars at Ryuko Matoi, Quilge found his attention drawn to the spiritual wings hovering just over Schrodinger's shoulders, the ephemeral appendages flickering every few seconds. How peculiar. He could have sworn Schrodinger hadn't been in Vollständig but a moment ago.

"Let us not get ahead of ourselves."

Carefully smoothing out a rather persistent crease on his sleeve, Quilge took a moment to adjust his spectacles before calmly lecturing, "Although the Schatten Ausrufung is rapidly nearing completion, we mustn't forget that His Majesty cannot predict the actions of creatures like Life Fiber Hybrids."

"I already knew that," Schrodinger interrupted, mildly annoyed when Ryuko vanished from view, "Besides, at this point what could possibly go wrong?"

Quilge couldn't help but frown at his fellow Quincy's particular choice of words, "Ryuko Matoi might have exhausted most of her strength but Ichigo Kurosaki is an entirely different matter. Even after fighting both Bazz-B and our reanimated colleagues he still poses a threat. So it would be wise to remain silent and keep such tempting statements to yourself. We wouldn't want Ichigo to miraculously stumbling upon our location..."

"Ugh!"

The cat-like Sternritter sighed childishly and ran a hand down his face when Quilge continued talking about things he really didn't care about in the slightest. Now that Anderson was dead it was virtually impossible for anyone to stop His Majesty's plans. So why should he worry about Ichigo managing to track his spiritual energy? He was probably too busy trying to find his girlfriend after killing Alhambra and Rip Van Winkle. Besides, it wasn't like anyone could *sense* him when he wanted to remain hidden. Well, except for -

One of Schrodinger's ears began twitching when he accidentally reminded himself on the single creature that proved capable of doing just that. An annoyed growl leaving his throat as Nui Harime's laughter echoed in his mind like nails on a chalkboard, he huffed before tossing the binoculars over his shoulder. Scratching his cheek in boredom, uncaring of Quilge's responding comment, Schrodinger quickly perked in excitement when the overwhelming spiritual energy enveloping London suddenly shifted, "Heh... it looks like it's almost time!"

Quirking an eyebrow at the excitement in Schrodinger's voice, Quilge frowned when the short-wave radio built into his glasses flared to life accompanied by a burst of static. Pressing a finger against his ear as the voice on the other end informed him that the last preparations were complete, he waited until the connection was severed before clapping his hands and jovially exclaiming, "You are indeed correct! Both Ryuko Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki are outside the range of interference while Integra Hellsing and Seras Victoria are busy speaking with the Major! The fate of the Schatten Ausrufung rests entirely upon your shoulders! But I must say, you're rather excited about this..."

"Of course! Why wouldn't I be?"

Schrodinger's mouth twisted into a deranged caricature of a smile when a spiritual knife formed between his fingers. Taking a second to marvel at the weapon, the edge sharp enough to cut through flesh and bone, the Sternritzer chuckled darkly and widened his eyes, "After all, this is the only reason His Majesty created me."

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The faint whirring of dying machinery lightly echoed throughout the *Deus Ex Machina's* command center as the Major watched the seemingly infinite rivers of blood gush across the cracked screens. Slowly turning around just as the monitors cycled to Alucard, the vampire's form contorting into an inhuman shape, he motioned politely at the two women patiently standing upon the other side of the barrier, "You must be quite curious about the true purpose of the Schatten Ausrufung. Deny it all you want, fraulein, but I can see the thirst in your eyes. You are *craving* to know about our plans."

Seemingly content with the responding silence from the young woman, her venomous gaze attempting to bore a hole through his skull, he chuckled lightly and continued, "It all starts with Alucard's

most frightening characteristic - his insatiable appetite for human souls. Taking what was once theirs and making it his own."

A series of explosions rippled throughout the aircraft when one of the engines burst into flames. His increasingly elated expression remaining completely unchanged as klaxons blared in the background, the Major clapped his hands and grinned at the woman, "Alucard grows stronger with every soul. And over the course of centuries, through both conflict and wars, he has become one of the most powerful beings in existence, capable of fighting against the likes of Ragyo Kiryuin. However, this seemingly invincible technique possesses a singular weakness..."

"You're referring to his regeneration."

Even though she was internally boiling with rage, the desire to eviscerate the Quincy growing stronger with every passing second, Integra Hellsing made a considerable effort to keep her voice perfectly level. She would *not* allow this deranged madman the pleasure. Glaring venomously at the Sternritzer hiding like a coward on the other side of the barrier, her mind counting down the seconds until the damnable wall shattered, she narrowed her eyes and derisively scoffed, "Do not take me for a fool, Quincy. I am fully aware of what you refer to as my servant's weakness. But you must truly be insane if you think you can destroy all of Alucard's familiars."

"It would seem you are not quite as well informed as you believe, fraulein."

The Major leaned forward just enough for the ambient lighting to reflect ominously off his glasses, "Alucard's regeneration has *nothing* to do with his familiars..."

Ah... and there was what he had waited so long to witness. The expression of unadulterated shock spreading across Integra Hellsing's features, the way her pet vampire stiffened while her mind tried making sense of his words. Dramatically clutching both hands tightly in front of his face, the Major's ecstatic voice was full of

passion when he finally continued, "For over four hundred years Alucard has been playing the world for a fool! Convincing humanity that he possesses several weaknesses! That a human can defeat him! Utter nonsense! It is a charade played against both victim and perpetrator! Alucard's familiars are nothing more than fuel for his unholy power!"

An ear-wrenching screech punctuated the Major's words as the *Deus Ex Machina* scraped against several buildings, the impact cutting a jagged gash in the aircraft before it managed to regain some altitude. Turning around while the command center continued to shake, a simple press of the remote shifting the images on the screens to Alucard, the Major stared at the solemn expression etched onto the vampire's face and smirked, "Every time Alucard sacrifices a soul he loses access to its stolen power. And therein lies the inherent beauty of his weakness, my dear fraulein. But in *normal circumstances* such knowledge is useless! For what are a few dozen souls compared to over a million? Even if one possessed a power akin to that of a god, it would be impossible to destroy every single one of Alucard's familiars!"

Integra did not miss the emphasis the Quincy put upon his words, "So your plan was to force my hand? To give the order for Alucard to remove the last of his restraints?"

"By ordering Alucard to slaughter your enemies, granting him the authority to do whatever he wished, *you* exposed his weakness to the world," the Sternritzer's smirk widened when Integra furiously gnashed her teeth, the realization that she played into his hands breaking through her last bastions of self-control. His attention momentarily drawn to Seras Victoria as a miasma of spiritual energy radiated from her body, the aura threatening to swallow his very soul, he spread his arms outwards and announced, "And for that I thank you! For your actions led to Alucard's three most powerful souls falling upon the battlefield!"

A reverberating eruption of power echoed throughout the chamber as Seras Victoria, growing sick and tired of the Major, vanished in a

burst of speed before slamming her clawed left hand against the barrier. Her mouth twisting into an angry sneer upon failing to break through the technique, the mere contact enough to cause the darkness composing the facsimile of a limb to evaporate. Seras growled at the smirk on the Quincy's face. She couldn't stand hearing his damnable voice any longer! She didn't care if he was telling the truth or not about Master. All that mattered was making him pay for every life he took!

"That's enough, Seras..."

The Sternritter couldn't help but watch in veiled amusement when Integra Hellsing managed to bring her servant to heel with only three words. Calmly reaching into the pocket of his uniform as the vampire's anger dissipated, her missing arm rapidly regenerating from tendrils of darkness, the Major's glasses shimmered opaquely when he pulled out the remote and pressed a button, causing Alucard to flicker before shifting into two new images. On the right was Ichigo flying through the skies over London, a conflicted expression clearly visible on his face, while on the left Ryuko sat with her back against a rooftop, her chest rising and falling with exhaustion.

"Those children might have bested Alucard's greatest soldiers but I'm afraid the vampire is still *far* too powerful to defeat."

Folding his hands together as he sat down, the chair creaking under his weight, the Major tilted his head slightly to the side before continuing, "Even with the decimation of his army, reduced to a mere third of its former glory, defeating Alucard is impossible! He is not some wild beast or Hollow, a simple creature that functions solely upon instinct! For Alucard is able to see through his familiars, allowing him to witness the destruction of his army! Alucard... *learns*... from his mistakes! Rendering the most powerful attacks ineffective after but a single strike! This insurmountable challenge has kept me awake for many nights. For how would one go about defeating such an inhuman monster?"



Without saying another word the Sternritter leaned backwards in the chair and pressed another button on the remote. Hands clasped across his chest when Schrodinger appeared on the wall of screens behind him, the cat-like Quincy grinning madly while holding a spiritual knife against his throat, the Major showed no outward reaction when his compatriot suddenly sliced into his own flesh. Faintly amused by the horrified gasp that emanated from the vampire when Schrodinger severed his own head, blood spraying through the air while his body collapsed like a puppet without strings, he chuckled quietly and turned his attention to Integra Hellsing.

For in just a few moments the *real* show would begin.

The moment Schrodinger's headless corpse vanished underneath the chaotic darkness and shadows, the blue-white light of his Vollständig disappearing as the Quincy was subsumed by the ocean of blood, an unnatural sensation pulsed across London. Beginning as nothing more than a flickering spot only a few inches in diameter, the roiling liquid surrounding the Sternritter's final descent grew increasingly transparent before fading completely out of existence.

"You..." Integra's voice nearly failed as she watched the corruption the corruption spreading through the ruined city, her eyes widening in abject horror, "What have you done?!"

"It all starts with a Sternritter named Schrodinger..."

Purposely ignoring the world-shattering events transpiring across the screens at his back, the Major shrugged his shoulders before continuing, "Every Sternritter in His Majesty's army must prove themselves worthy of the position. Some soldats prove themselves upon the battlefield. Others possess a certain degree of skill or talent. His Majesty considers all possible criteria. However, Schrodinger was none of those things! For unlike you and I, he was not born but *created* ! Crafted from His Majesty's very soul! He was a homunculus in the guise of a Quincy! For a normal soul could never withstand the glorious power that is "The Uncertainary!"

Snarling impotently as she watched the corruption reach her servant, hundreds of eyes rapidly blinking into existence upon his form, Integra growled, "The Uncertainary?"

"You sound confused, fraulein. Surely you don't need me to spell it out for you..."

The Major leaned backwards as he patiently waited for Integra Hellsing's rather brilliant mind to piece together the overarching scope of his words. Smirking when realization finally dawned upon his adversary, the anger and frustration quickly replaced by horror, he sighed in contentment before continuing, "Schrodinger lived in a superposition between 'existence and nonexistence.' He was the paradoxical cat! Both everywhere and nowhere! For as long as he retained his sense of self... his individuality... Schrodinger's soul would reject reality, reverting to a previous state upon death! A most glorious power... but it is only in Vollständig that 'The Uncertainary' reaches its logical evolution!"

"MASTER!"

The loud snap of the Major's fingers reverberated ominously across the command center as Seras Victoria watched her master stumble forward, waves of darkness oozing forth from his body. Staring proudly at the end result of decades of planning, the countless sacrifices made by His Majesty over the years finally bearing fruit, the Sternritzer smirked maliciously and chuckled, "Reality is nothing more than an illusion, callously thrown away upon our deaths. Schrodinger's Vollständig takes this singular notion to the extreme, twisting the focus of 'The Uncertainary' from himself onto others. Alucard's existence might be immutable, an unchanging variable of the world, but his familiars are a different story. By throwing his dying essence into the mouth of the beast, Schrodinger has infected the vampire with a quantum paradox!"

"And that, my dear fraulein, was the purpose of the Schatten Ausrufung!"

Dramatically throwing his arms outwards as he stood up, a muffled explosion causing the room to violently shake, the Major's eyes gleamed with a sadistic glint, "In a single motion I have rendered all of Alucard's familiars nonexistent! Destroying all the power he has stolen over the centuries! For the first time in four hundred years, since those shinigami failed to slay him, the vampire is at his weakest! For only a brief instant in time Alucard is *himself* !"

Integra's boiling anger slowly settled into disturbed confusion when Alucard stopped flickering, the hundreds of crimson eyes protruding from the writhing darkness swiveling around before vanishing. Watching as her servant knelt upon the ground, his breath ragged but otherwise fine, she ignored the cold feeling seeping through her soul and asked, "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because telling you about the Schatten Ausrufung was *my* part of the plan..."

The Major chuckled as the shadows on the screens twisted, a form slowly rising from the darkness, "Every Sternritzer that took part in the Schatten Ausrufung had a specific role. But it was only Zorin Blitz who failed to achieve her objective - killing Seras Victoria. My role, on the other hand, was to tell you everything, from beginning to end. Making sure you did not possess even the slightest chance of stopping him."

Integra could feel her fingers going numb as she stared at the shadows on the screens, "Him?"

Smugly grinning at the young woman, the Major swept an arm through the air and answered, "Why... His Majesty of course..."

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"Ha... ha... such interesting abilities..."

Alucard's fingers clawed at the pavement as he tore apart what little remained of Schrodinger's flickering soul, the Quincy's powers and memories vanishing upon the cessation of his existence. Beads of sweat trickling down his pale face as he knelt upon the ground, an extremely rare feeling of exhaustion permeating every fiber of his being, the vampire could not remember the last time he felt this weak. Not even his battle against *that man* weakened him to such an extent. It brought an amused grin to his face to think that a lowly Quincy could achieve what no one else managed in his five centuries of undeath - the destruction of his familiars.

"But your plan was a complete failure, Major! I'm still alive!"

Laughing wildly at his perceived victory over the Sternritter, Alucard's mouth stretched into a psychotic smirk as he slowly pushed himself back onto his feet. Darkness reforming the rest of his body as he stared at the *Deus Ex Machina* in the distance, torrents of smoke gushing from the falling aircraft, he reared his head back and exclaimed, "Was erasing me from existence your plan all along? It was a good effort... but you Quincy could never hope to defeat me!"

The mere thought of confronting the Major, ripping the smug Quincy limb from limb before gorging on the man's blood, excited Alucard and caused the darkness flickering along the edges of his overcoat to grow more prominent. Yet upon closer inspection he could sense both his Master and Seras in close proximity to the Quincy. Yes, that would work. Allowing them to slaughter that man would be the ultimate insult, denying the Sternritter the pleasure of dying at his hands. And besides, with nearly every soul in London erased from the face of existence his strength was at its minimum. But from what scattered memories still remained, he knew the Vatican had a few hundred men stationed across the Strait of Dover.

Excellent... the Quincy's efforts had left him quite famished...

As he turned his attention towards the crusaders waiting to the south, their fear and apprehension already reaching across the vast waters separating them, Alucard stopped after only a single step

when an enormous pillar of spiritual energy exploded upwards only a few blocks away. Eyes narrowed at the familiar feeling of the energy, the symbol adorning the top of the column causing the corners of his mouth to curl upwards, he silently watched as dozens of heilig pfeil shot through the air towards him. Grinning as the arrows rapidly surrounded his location, merging together in thick ethereal constructs, Alucard chuckled lightly and examined his new 'prison.'

"How amusing..."

Snapping his arm upwards, the Jackal appearing in a burst of shadows, Alucard frowned when the bullet ricocheted off the barrier without causing damage. It appeared the Major still had a few more tricks up his sleeve. Whichever Quincy created this prison was rather skilled, in his current state it would take him almost a minute to tear through it. But that would have to wait. After all, there were more pressing matters to deal with for the moment.

"I was starting to wonder when you would show up. Your little soldiers had such fond memories of you... Yhwach."

The vampire's mocking tone died upon the dawn breeze as a figure stepped forth from the darkness that had once been his own. Shadows dripping like water from his white double-breasted trench coat, the disinterested look in his eyes never changing, the Quincy King beheld the vampire standing before him with caution. Even with his power diminished to such an extent, his vast army of familiars torn away by Schrodinger's valiant sacrifice, the undead being was not someone to be underestimated. Alucard's battle against Ryuko Matoi was proof enough of the dark power lurking within his soul.

"Such an audacious name," Alucard's arm snapped towards the Quincy King without hesitation, his crimson eyes narrowing as he mockingly asked, "Do you claim to be a god?"

Yhwach ignored the vampire's question as he glanced at the spiritual prison surrounding their location. It appeared Quilge managed to accomplish his part of the Schatten Ausrufung without issue. That

was good. It always burdened his heart when one of his Sternritter failed to accomplish what should have been a trivial task. He had expected more discipline from Zorin Blitz, one of his original Sternritter. And while the data she managed to obtain on Nudist Beach's military capabilities alleviated some of his disappointment, it did not change the fact that she still failed to kill Seras Victoria.

Coming to a halt when Alucard raised his weapon, Yhwach pointed at the vampire and asked, "And just what do you intend to do with that?"

Without any further warnings the Jackal abruptly shattered like glass, shards of burning metal shimmering through the air. His face contorting into a frustrated sneer, the vampire angrily tossed aside the destroyed remains of his weapon as a thick miasma of spiritual energy exploded from his body. Emerging from the raging torrent of power shifted once more into his original appearance, shadowy flames enveloping the broadsword in his hand, Alucard scowled when Yhwach smirked.

"Impressive... to think you still possessed this much power."

Holding out his right hand as he backhandedly complimented the vampire, the Quincy King's tone never faltered when five spheres of concentrated spiritual energy formed above the tips of his fingers. As the energy merged together and formed a Quincy Zeichen, Yhwach grinned and calmly stated, "Farewell... Prince of Wallachia. Schatten Ausrufung."

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## **Kamui Tales [Alternate Weave #2 - Blumenkranz]**

"Well now..." Ragyo smirked as the COVERS descended over Honnouji Academy, thin strands of Life Fibers weaving through the air towards the humans, "What shall I do first?"

As she thoughtfully strummed her fingers against the inside of her wrist, several promising ideas coming to mind, the Kiryuin matriarch sighed in mild irritation when she felt a rather familiar annoyance perched on the highest corners of Satsuki's academy. C'est la vie... some people just never seemed to learn their lessons. With an almost casual indifference Ragyo leaned sideways and allowed the spiritual bullet to shoot harmlessly past her head. Ignoring the subsequent destruction and devastation as the spiraling bullet pierced through the wall of the stadium and out into Honnou City, the Kiryuin matriarch looked over her shoulder and grinned. Yes... she knew *exactly* what to do first.

Effortlessly catching a second bullet as she turned around, Ragyo chuckled at the shock etched upon the Sternritter's face when she gently squeezed her fingers and shattered it, "C'est ca... I think I will start with you, Quincy."

Lille Barro stiffened at Ragyo Kiryuin's threat, the words reaching his ears even across the vast distance between them, before quickly regaining his composure. Gripping the stock of his rifle while leaping backwards through the air using Hirenkyaku, all pretense of hiding gone, the Sternritter frowned when the woman took a single step towards him before promptly vanishing in a burst of speed. This was troubling. While the ease with which he could sense the woman's repugnant Life Fibers gave him a slight advantage, it would be extremely difficult to counter even a straightforward attack.

"And just *where* do you think you're going?"

The amused voice nearly whispering into his ear caused the Sternritter's single eye to widen in shock. Glancing over his shoulder at the woman standing directly behind him, the glow from her hair growing increasingly brilliant, Lille Barro grimaced before instinctively twisting sideways, his attention drawn to the rainbow Needle Blade arcing through the air. What was going on? He hadn't sensed her Life Fibers before she appeared behind him. In fact, he *still* couldn't sense them.

Faint streams of blue energy clinging to his feet when he vaulted over the rainbow Needle Blade, a pained hiss leaving his mouth when the weapon suddenly shifted directions and cut deeply into his shoulder, Lille Barro used the split second it took Ragyo Kiryuin to recoil her arm to retreat. He couldn't afford to fight the woman in direct combat. Even as the leader of His Majesty's Schutzstaffel, his power superior to any shinigami's, fighting such a monstrous opponent was suicidal. He needed to stall for time, force Ragyo Kiryuin to chase him across Honnou Town long enough for Isshin Kurosaki to -

"Still running away?"

Spittle spewed from Lille Barro's mouth when he found a fist lodged deeply in his abdomen, Ragyo Kiryuin having closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye. Gasping in pain when the woman's other hand reach forward and grabbed the front of his uniform, the corners of her mouth curling into a sadistic smirk, the Sternritter lurched forward as she thrust the Needle Blade straight into his heart, "I-Impossible..."

"Impossible, you say?"

Ragyo chuckled maliciously at the dying terror in the dark skinned Quincy's eye, "I'm afraid you'll find that nothing is impossible, Quincy. You tried your best but it just wasn't good enough. So please be sure to give my regards to your leader when you meet him... in the deepest bowels of hell..."

"This is the third time... that I have been forced to open both eyes..."

The Kiryuin matriarch's eyes subtly widened in genuine surprise as the Sternritter began phasing around the Needle Blade. Now *this* was an unexpected development. She never knew Quincy possessed such abilities. Well... that *woman* hadn't used anything of the sort seventeen years ago. Carefully observing the way Lille Barro's body stitched itself back together once he pulled free of her weapon, Ragyo lowered her arm and mused, "Your technique is



interesting, Quincy, but I simply don't have the time to wonder about such things..."

Her arm blurring into motion as she swung the Needle Blade at the Quincy's neck, intent on beheading the insufferable man and ending this charade of a fight, Ragyo frowned in mild irritation when the attack simply phased through his body. How dreadful... she didn't have the time to deal with something as annoying as intangibility. Sighing wistfully as she turned towards the deceptively calm Sternritter, Ragyo folded one arm under her bosom when Lille Barro began speaking, "It is only with both eyes open that I am able to use the true power of the X-Axis. However, His Majesty has forbidden the Sternritter from using their full power. It would be dangerous to use such things in close proximity of our allies..."

The nonplussed expression on Ragyo's face didn't falter in the slightest when the tattoo surrounding the Quincy's left eye transformed into a pentacle of light. Quirking an eyebrow at the power radiating from the man, the Kiryuin matriarch absentmindedly fixed a strand of silver hair as Lille Barro angrily shouted, "But I am His Majesty's greatest creation! That a creature like you has the nerve to injure me is unforgivable!"

Ragyo couldn't help but sigh in annoyance when the Sternritter was surrounded by an enormous torrent of energy. At the rate things were progressing Isshin would arrive in Karakura Town, deal with her assassin and make it back by the time she was finished. And she *hated* wasting time, especially when someone simply didn't know when to give up. Her maroon eyes narrowed as she raised a single finger, rainbow light rapidly gathering just above the perfectly manicured fingernail, Ragyo asked, "Do you expect me to just let you trans- "

The rest of her question would go unsaid when several circular holes pierced through her body, the suddenness of the unexpected attack managing to catch the Kiryuin matriarch fully off guard. Staring at the wound penetrating through her heart as it rapidly wove itself shut, the radiance of her Life Fibers vanishing in moments, any traces of

humor that remained on Ragyo's face disappeared when Lille Barro emerged wearing the *ugliest* piece of clothing she had ever seen. Covering nearly every inch of his body in a white robe, which actually made Satsuki's Goku Uniforms seem like Kamui in comparison, she looked at the four sets of wings around the Sternritter before resting a hand against her cheek and sighing.

"Tacky as it may be... I cannot deny that your new form is quite powerful. However..."

Ragyo purposely trailed off as she raised the Needle Blade and *blocked* Lille Barro's second salvo, the beams of unblockable light briefly clashing for dominance against the hardened Life Fiber weapon before deflecting upwards into the afternoon sky. Wisps of rainbow smoke drifting off the unique blade as she strutted towards the Quincy, the rainbow glow of her silver hair growing brighter with every step, she purposely flashed her opponent a condescending smirk before vanishing in a burst of speed once more.

"I already told you..." Lille Barro's voice echoed slightly when Ragyo appeared above him, the Needle Blade arcing towards his recently healed shoulder, "In this state I cannot be -"

A fountain of blood gushed from the Quincy's shoulder as the Life Fiber blade cut deeply into his body without any issues. As he teleported several dozen meters away in shock, his eyes wide at the notion that he could still be injured even in Vollständig, Ragyo dismissed the Needle Blade in a flash of rainbow light before raising her left hand, "The simple fact of the matter is that you're a *Quincy* . And as much as I would love to continue this amusing... *fight*... I am a rather busy woman..."

Lille Barro didn't wait for his opponent to finish speaking before attempting to teleport away, fear and animalistic panic overriding his higher reasoning, only for several rainbow Life Fibers to wind their way through the air from Ragyo's extended fingers. Gasping when the threads tightened painfully around his body, thin rivulets of blood oozing down his robe as they cut into his skin, the Sternritter had just

enough time to realize his opponent was gone before his head exploded into a fine red mist.

"With that out of the way..."

Gracefully lowering her hand as she walked away from the Quincy, blood raining through the air as his headless corpse fell towards the ground far below, Ragyo pursed her mouth in thought when she couldn't sense the Grand Couturier. It would appear fighting her other daughters was too much for dearest Nui, especially with Twin Life Fiber Entanglement fully in effect. Not to mention that with Hououmaru lying unconscious somewhere in the stands, her raiment torn to pieces, Satsuki and Ichigo were free to assist the other Quincy and their allies against Xcution. Or at least they would be... if they weren't currently staring upwards in disbelief. Normally the look of suppressed fear and apprehension in her daughter's eyes would bring a smile to her face.

Unfortunately she wasn't quite finished with a rather persistent problem.

"This is starting to grow stale, Quincy."

The sight of Lille Barro's monstrous form nearly caused Ragyo to roll her eyes in disgust. His head, which she could have sworn was sprayed across the ground below as a fine mist, had regenerated into something resembling a cross between an owl and a man. The tacky robe he once wore now resembled armor, covering every facet of his body only to stop at his elongated neck. Did he think turning into such an *ugly* form would change anything? It was pathetic watching the Quincy desperately clinging to the delusional notion that he stood a chance against her. Clicking a heel against the air as she turned around, an expression of annoyance on her face, Ragyo didn't display any reaction when the Quincy started shouting.

"Did you believe this fight to be over? Did you think you truly killed me?!"

Sparks of light gathered upon Lille Barro's long fingers as his head twisted back and forth, misshapen eyes blinking strangely at the abomination before him. It was inconceivable that a monster such as Ragyo Kiryuin forced him into using his full power, "I am an envoy of God! A monstrous demon like you could never hope to defeat me!"

A tense silence permeated the battlefield in the moments immediately following the Quincy's passionate declaration before Ragyo threw her head backwards and laughed, "You... an envoy of *god* ?! La vie est drôle! I don't know what's more pathetic. Your delusional notion of grandeur or the imagination your leader possesses to think such a form is even remotely intimidating!"

The corners of her mouth twisting in amusement when the Sternritter responded with the emotional maturity of a child and swung his arm downwards, a thin beam of energy erupting from his fingers, Ragyo closed her eyes and chuckled smugly before deflecting the 'unstoppable' technique with the palm of her hand. Silver hair whipping around her face when the Quincy's attack slammed into Honnou City before exploding, the Kiryuin matriarch decided it was time to end this farce of a battle. It had been initially amusing to watch the Quincy desperately attempt to survive, fear and panic slowly dawning upon him, but she was a rather busy woman.

And wasting time against such a pathetic creature was *not* on her schedule.

Maroon eyes narrowing in subtle annoyance when the man... or rather creature... declared her actions to be a 'grave sin' and curled a hand in front of his mouth, the action summoning an intricate facsimile of a trumpet over his head, Ragyo loudly clicked her heel against the air before raising a single finger, "Lumière Divine."

There was no rapid building of spiritual energy or sudden feeling of foreboding in the atmosphere. In the single moment it took Lille Barro's inhuman eyes to blink in confusion at the foreign words, his hand tightening in preparation to fire the Trompette, the energy condensed just above Ragyo Kiryuin's perfectly manicured finger

exploded forward in a cacophony of rainbow light. His beak-like mouth shouting a curse at the woman before he was enveloped by the technique, the nauseous energy filling him with never-ending pain, the Sternritter couldn't even scream before his body exploded into shards of shimmering light.

"How drôle..."

Ragyo didn't lower her arm even after Sternritter's body disintegrated into shards of light, rainbow energy continuing to erupt from her extended finger for several more seconds. The man's inability to die had been rather irritating. So instead of severing his head or cutting his body into pieces she decided on a more pragmatic approach - erasing him from the face of the earth. After all, it was hard to regenerate when there was *nothing* left.

"Now then..."

With her first step the Kiryuin matriarch disappeared in a burst of speed, descending hundreds of feet to the ground before anyone noticed she was gone. Her heels clicking against the stairs of the stadium as she took another step, dozens of COVERS falling into line behind her, Ragyo's maroon eyes swiveled sideways towards Yukio Hans Vorarlberna. Smirking at the terrified look upon his opponent's face, the utter evisceration of her compatriot having momentarily paralyzed the Quincy, she chuckled when Ichigo and Satsuki landed in front of her in twin bursts of light.

"I certainly won't dampen your enthusiasm if you two wish to fight me."

Ragyo rested a hand against her cheek when the teenager's responded to her comment by raising their blades. Mentally ordering the surrounding COVERS to leave, the thought of the Life Fibers beings getting destroyed rather displeasing, she let out an exaggerated sigh before holding out her hand and summoning the Needle Blade, "But as that Quincy so helpfully demonstrated, you'll find defeating me quite the insurmountable goal."

# Don't Let the Sun Go Down On

*So here is the long awaited conclusion to the Hellsing Arc. I know it's been a long time but I worked diligently to make sure this chapter was written to the best of my ability, which is a never-ending process. Just compare my earlier chapters to the last 15 or so! I strive to constantly give you the best story/writing possible. So if that requires a week or two delay because some part of the chapter, a piece of dialogue for instance, wasn't working, than so be it. But anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it. Because writing the conclusion to such a long and tense arc was immensely satisfying.*

*Anyway... next chapter (52 for those of you keeping count) begins the long awaited, and highly anticipated, Karakura Invasion Arc. I went through roughly ten names before settling on that. And yes, I know it sounds similar to the Karakura Raid Trip but it's an accurate title.*

*Enjoy!*

***La vie est drôle...***

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## Chapter 51 - Don't Let the Sun Go Down On Me

"I have finished releasing the kirchenlied around SHI. It is ready to be transported upon your discretion."

Walter C. Dornez spoke with a slightly strained tone as the spiritual runes etched into the air surrounding his fingers dissipated. Frowning briefly when the Doktor continued to ignore his presence, the man's attention completely focused on some random papers

strewn across his desk, the Sternritter turned towards the laboratory's exist before dryly commenting, "I shall be departing for the Silbern momentarily. Please make sure to turn off the lights before you leave."

The Doktor snorted derisively at the Sternritter's *pathetic* attempt to hold a conversation as he continued stuffing several important documents on his research into the briefcase on the desk. He didn't have time to waste talking to an inferior mind! It did not matter that Walter was one of His Majesty's chosen Sternritter, able to eviscerate him with nothing more than a twitch of his finger. Any Neanderthal could fight. But it took a genius to push the boundaries of science to their limits! In the entirety of the Wandenreich there were only two other Quincy that could comprehend even the most basic tenants of his research, let alone hold an intelligent discussion about it, and the former butler was *not* one of them.

Frowning slightly when Walter finally left his laboratory, the blissful sound of the door slamming shut bringing peace of mind, the Doktor blatantly ignored the explosions rocking the *Deus Ex Machina* to focus on something exponentially more important, "Now... where did I put my findings on vampirization decay correlations? Ah! There they are..."

As he removed a thick journal from the bookshelf over his desk, dozens of hastily written bookmarks sticking out from between slightly creased pages, the Quincy momentarily stared at the culmination of years of research before tossing it into the briefcase. This wasn't the time for sentimentality. As much as he wanted to spend countless hours reading through the hundreds of trials involving the effects of Alucard's spiritual energy on soldats, including the average length of time before their souls decayed, he still needed to properly prepare SHI for transport, a task easier said than done even with the kirchenlied released.

Resisting the nervous impulse to bite his finger, the Doktor snapped the briefcase shut when an intimately familiar spiritual energy enveloped London. His mood abruptly changing in response to the

newly arrived presence, the Quincy adjusted his multi-lensed spectacles before politely musing, "Oh? It seems His Majesty has finally arrived."

However, despite his tone the Doktor's shoulders nevertheless slumped dejectedly at the missed opportunity. What he would have done to personally witness Alucard's full power, to observe and collect countless quantities of daten about the ancient vampire. The knowledge would have been enough to push the boundaries of science and spiritual studies into a new golden age! Yet such thoughts were mere fantasy. For a Quincy of his strength would be utterly crushed beneath the clashing spiritual energies, his soul shattered into nothingness by powers far beyond anything he could imagine. But as a scientist it was his job to figure out the impossible! Especially when challenged with such dangerous conditions!

But alas, asking Quilge would have to wait until after returning to the Silbern.

After mentally reminding himself to follow through on such important inquiries when he had the time, the Doktor callously removed his bloodstained gloves as he marched across the laboratory. One can never be too careful when dealing with something like SHI. It might be contained within specially designed soul-synthesized glass, sealed with dozens of His Majesty's finest techniques, but it was still eternally bound to Alucard. A *single* drop of blood would be enough to not only shatter the chamber but lead to several other consequences he would rather *not* face.

Not to mention how *Alucard* would react if the seals containing SHI's spiritual energy failed. He would not allow a single moment of utter stupidity to jeopardize everything that His Majesty worked to accomplish! Pressing his thumb against the keypad built into the wall next to the container, the custom-built device emitting an electronic ping when it recognized his spiritual energy, the Doktor grimaced as the chamber opened with a pressurized hiss. There was not much time. He needed to start right away on sending -



A loud thump from outside the laboratory, but more specifically the single window to his left, cut off the Quincy's train of thought.

Instinctively twisting away from SHI as the sudden noise, spiritual particles rapidly coalescing around his left hand into a compound bow, the Doktor frowned in confusion as he held the bowstring taut. Any being that could successfully infiltrate the *Deus Ex Machina* had to be incredibly dangerous, a threat of the highest order. Yet he could not sense any spiritual energy. There was neither the nauseous sensation of Life Fibers nor the terrifying aura of Alucard and his progeny, which begged the question of who, or rather *what*, had managed to sneak onto the airship without being detected.

Given his admittedly inferior fighting capabilities, the wise decision would be asking Walter to deal with the potential threat. As a Sternritter he was more than capable of dealing with anything aside from Life Fibers. But what if this was nothing more than a false alarm or the assailant used his moment of distraction to take him by surprise?

"Verdammt..."

Cursing at his unfortunate luck, the Doktor swallowed the nervous lump in his throat while cautiously walking towards the window. Fingers tightening around the spiritual weapon as he quickly flipped the switch to open the metallic shutter, a bead of sweat trickling down the side of his face, the Quincy didn't have to wait long before he was finally able to glimpse what was outside. And it was enough for his mouth to drop in complete and utter shock.

Perched on the exterior of the *Deus Ex Machina* with an equally confused look in his eyes, one hand holding onto the already unlocked window, Batou stared at the Doktor for several seconds before his face stretched into a wide grin, "Hi!"

"Gah!"

That single gasp of disbelief was all the Doktor managed to say before the nudist commander's fist slammed into his nose, cartilage shattering in a spray of blood under the surprising amount of force. Staggering backwards as his spiritual weapon dissipated into its composite energy, the Quincy's hand slipped against his desk before he collapsed unconscious onto the floor.

"Damn... I can't believe that actually worked."

Batou ignored the flaring pain in his fingers as he quickly pulled himself through the window. That Quincy's blut had been something. It almost felt like he punched a rather stubborn wall... or got roped into another one of Armstrong's friendly spars. Grunting lightly as he landed in the room, one hand reaching towards the tailor knife strapped to his leg, the nudist commander stared at the Doktor's unconscious form before giving the man an unceremonious kick to the abdomen. Just to make sure he wasn't faking, of course. You could never be too careful with Quincy, especially when they've proven themselves capable of fighting after tanking a full salvo from the DTR Model Ray.

"Huh... out cold after only one punch. I'm guessing you're one of those scientist types.."

Callously flipping the Doktor onto his stomach, uncaring of the blood pooling beneath the man's face, Batou briefly shook his sore fingers before reaching into the satchel strapped to the small of his back. As he pulled out a length of black wire and began tying the scientist's hands together, weaving the thread in such a way that the man wouldn't be able to move a finger, the nudist commander couldn't help but appreciate his luck. Out of all the Quincy, he stumbled upon the only one he could actually beat in a fight. Chuckling at the irony as he double-checked the Doktor's condition... just to make sure the man was still unconscious... Batou's eyes narrowed when something rather obvious caught his attention.

"What the hell?"

There was something disturbingly *off-putting* about the way the desiccated corpse was bound and gagged. The nudist commander had seen his fair share of strange shit throughout his life, most of it while working for Ragyo Kiryuin, but this caused a shiver to race down his spine. While there was no question that it was creepy as hell, the way the shadows appeared to writhe around its contorted limbs reminded Batou of a certain *other* vampire. Reaching for the M-15 Anti-Life Fiber Assault Rifle strapped to his back as he cautiously approached the open container, the silence permeating the laboratory ringing in his ears, the nudist commander stiffened at the words etched on the steel plate above the corpse.

"MINA HARKER"

"THE SHI"

Batou liked to consider himself well versed in the finer arts of philosophy and religion. But it was his vested interest in classical literature that caused him to break out in a cold sweat upon reading the name. This thing was Mina Harker from Bram Stoker's novel, which raised a lot of disturbing questions. While Alucard's existence suggested the book was more of a historical biography instead of a work of fiction, several things didn't add up. For starts, *how* did the Quincy get their hands on her remains? She must have still been a vampire after Alucard was defeated. And considering Seras Victoria was stronger than Satsuki Kiryuin's Elite Four before drinking Pip's blood, it begged the question of *how* she died.

How long had the Quincy been planning this?

"I don't suppose you're going to wake up and brag about your master plan?"

Sighing when the Doktor didn't answer the question, on account of still being unconscious, Batou scratched his chin and grimaced. He couldn't allow Mina Harker's corpse to remain under Quincy control. Aside from denying them access to something so insanely terrifying, not to mention powerful, he had a strong feeling that it was the

source of those vampirized soldiers they fought earlier. Letting Millennium keep her corpse was just begging for trouble in the future. Luckily there was a rather obvious solution to this problem.

In a matter of seconds every explosive and Anti-Life Fiber armament in his satchel was strewn across the floor. Five pounds in total, which was everything he managed to grab before leaving the safe house. After he finished assembling the crude improvised device, and giving it a quick once-over to make sure it wouldn't literally blow up in his face, Batou stuck it directly onto SHI's chest and set the timer. In less than five minutes the laboratory would go up in flames. And he didn't want to stick around for the fireworks.

"Humph... and Anderson claims *I'm* paranoid."

Frowning as he grabbed the satchel and hurried towards the window, Batou paused when he remembered the Doktor lying unconscious on the floor. Thanks to all the commotion he'd nearly forgotten Olivier's orders to capture a Quincy. Great... carrying the guy down was going to be a pain in the ass. He should have set the damn timer for ten minutes. Groaning at the new inconvenience, the nudist commander sighed and hefted the Doktor onto his shoulder. After making sure his prisoner was still out cold, mostly by jabbing him in the stomach a second time, Batou turned to leave only to notice a briefcase on the nearby desk.

That could come in handy.

Marching towards the open window with both prisoner and briefcase in tow, the nudist commander looked at the rapidly approaching London skyline and groaned, "Damn it, I'm too old for this parkour crap."

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Yhwach grimaced as his boots ground against the air for purchase, faint traces of spiritual energy still clinging to the ornate sword in his hand.

Glancing in mild consternation at the thin line of crimson rapidly staining his sleeve, the Quincy King flexed his fingers and frowned. It appeared the daten on Alucard's strength was slightly inaccurate, an annoyance he would need to personally address upon his return to the Silbern. Reddish-brown eyes narrowing when parts of the vampire's form dissolved into fiery darkness, the shadows collecting around the undead being's feet before surging forward in a tidal wave that obscured the blood-red moon, the Quincy King showed not a hint of concern as he calmly held out a hand.

"Kirchenlied: Sankt Schild."

A countless number of interlocking pillars, each bearing a Quincy Zeichen, shimmered into existence at Yhwach's command. Holding his hand parallel to the ground when Alucard's darkness violently slammed into the barrier, the impact sending a massive shockwave scattering across the ruined city, the Quincy King's brief moment of elation was cut short when he noticed cracks of dark light slowly spreading across the spiritual barricade. Several glowing ribbons of roman-numerals stretching from his fingers as he bolstered the technique to counteract the corrosive nature of Alucard's power, his eyes imperceptibly widened upon realizing they were *feeding* on his energy.

Callously clenching his fist, the Quincy King severed his link to the Kirchenlied: Sankt Schild and allowed the technique to shatter. Retreating backwards when the shadows abruptly shifted into dozens of fanged maws, each bearing the same soul-devouring ability of the Baskerville Hound, Yhwach calmly observed the familiars instinctively giving pursuit before flaring his spiritual energy. The look of complete apathy never leaving his eyes when the beasts began dissolving under the force of his presence, the living darkness composing their misshapen forms evaporating into nothingness, the

Quincy King grimaced when he felt something flickering in the shadows.

That was quicker than anticipated.

Soul-crushing darkness exploded over the ruined streets of London as Yhwach parried Alucard's broadsword away from his neck only to be caught off guard by the unstable spiritual energy circulating around the weapon. Acrid smoke clinging to his body as he used Hirenkyaku to escape the attack, most of his cloak destroyed but otherwise uninjured, the Quincy King frowned when Alucard leapt from the smoke, broadsword hefted over his head while his laughter echoed in the darkness. Narrowing his eyes while slowly raising his own blade in preparation for the attack, Yhwach couldn't help but notice something was wrong. Superior strength or not, the vampire should have been smart enough to avoid such a predictable attack.

So why would he try it a *second* time?

It was only when the broadsword touched his blade *and kept going* that the Quincy King understood the vampire's logic. Instinctively using Hirenkyaku to bolster his movement as he leapt away from the phantasmal weapon, Yhwach's face creased in mild disdain at the thin line of crimson cutting diagonally across his chest. He should have anticipated the vampire would be able to shift his weapon into a non-physical state.

"You look surprised, Quincy King."

Alucard tightened his grip upon the broadsword as it finished reforming, darkness solidifying into flawless metal, "Did you believe even with your servant's help you could best me in combat? ME?! Even now I am still your equal... no, your *better*... Yhwach!"

"Surprised?"

A hint of amusement filled the emperor's voice as he stood at his full height, the vampire's arrogant boasting about his power bringing a

cold but calculating smirk to his face, "No... I am not surprised. In fact, I expected no less from you, Prince of Wallachia. It would be foolish to believe you would not use everything at your disposal against me. Therefore, I must once more give thanks to Schrodinger. For without his noble sacrifice, defeating you would have been nearly impossible!"

His smirk turning increasingly sinister as he raised a finger towards the vampire, Yhwach gave no indication of his next action before a veritable deluge of Heilig Pfeil exploded from the extended digit. It made no difference if Alucard's physical strength proved slightly superior to his own. Such notions were meaningless, for he fully expected the vampire to dodge the barrage. Individually the Heilig Pfeil were not strong enough to harm the vampire, but the sheer number of arrows possessed the capacity to momentarily overwhelm his inhuman regeneration and leaving him briefly vulnerable.

What he did not expect was for the vampire to madly rush him, shadows pulsing from his broadsword as it cleaved through the barrage of holy arrows.

Yhwach's expression shifted into an annoyed grimace at the sight. He had hoped to defeat the vampire without resorting to such tactics but it seemed it was necessary to step things up a bit. Removing the tattered remains of his cloak while reaching for the sword at his waist, the Quincy King opened his mouth only to be cut off when an armored hand clasped firmly around his face.

"Is this the extent of your power, Quincy King?"

Alucard snarled in disappointment as he adjusted his grip and sent Yhwach rocketing towards the ground, the impact and subsequent explosion releasing a large cloud of smoke. This was the Quincy King, whose spiritual essence placed him upon the same pedestal as the Captain Commander of the Thirteen Court Guard Squads? The centuries-old vampire couldn't help but scoff at such a notion. His power might surpass those two Sternritzer and Ragyo Kiryuin's COVERS Clone, but he found it hard to believe this was the same

man who nearly conquered the Soul Society one thousand years ago.

The pavement audibly shattered when the vampire landed near the Quincy King, who was still holding a hand against his face. Shadows evaporating from his broadsword as he slowly stalked towards his downed opponent, Alucard sneered derisively before boasting, "Do you believe I was not aware of your true power? From the very start I understood the source of your strength! But such tricks will not work on me! You shall never gain my power, Yhwach!"

"I am fully aware I cannot make your power my own."

A throaty chuckle echoed loudly through the streets as Yhwach lowered his hand, a sadistic expression on his face, "But tell me something, Prince of Wallachia. Just how many times have we crossed blades?"

Alucard did not bother thinking about the question. The moment he saw the victorious expression on the Quincy King's face he lurched forward, fully intent on killing the man before he could enact whatever he was planning. But when he stomped to a halt several feet from the crouching emperor, hand stabbing through the air towards his opponent's ancient heart, the vampire suddenly found himself unable to move, every muscle in his body unresponsive. Surprised crimson eyes widening at the Quincy Zeichen encircling his body, shimmering tendrils of dark light shackling his limbs, Alucard snarled impotently, "What is this?"

"This is the *true* Schatten Ausrufung."

The surrounding shadows contorted ominously as the Quincy King pressed a hand against the ground and resumed his full stature, all pretenses of being injured gone. An increasingly pleased expression etched across his features as he watched the ephemeral shadows slowly rising from beneath the bound vampire, the darkness wrapping around his paralyzed limbs, Yhwach disregarded his adversary's soul-crushing glare. It was fortunate Alucard was never



aware of the Schatten Ausrufung's final requirement, for such damning knowledge would have rendered the technique impotent. Even in his current condition, stripped of his unholy source of power, it would have been difficult to defeat the vampire if he had been aware of such things.

Calmly raising a hand over his shoulder when he detected Quilge Opie land on a nearby building, the gesture informing the Sternritter his presence was not required, Yhwach stared at the ensnared vampire before speaking, "You disappoint me, Prince of Wallachia."

"Four hundred years ago you consumed one of the original captains of the Gotei 13, granting you all that was needed to destroy the Soul Society Yet you stayed your hand. Content to let them simply fear your power. To always wonder when you would attack."

Yhwach's tone gradually shifted as he addressed the vampire, derision slowly permeating his every word, "You are content to remain nothing more than a false servant, a lapdog to an organization blind to the world at large. At the peak of your power you were a creature to be feared, a being I would have never dared assault. The unfathomable strength of your soul was respectable, but such respect died once you obtained the foolish desire of perishing at the hands of humanity."

"Is that what you think?"

Mocking laughter punctuated the question as Alucard finished listening to the Quincy King, the menacing grin on his face widening with each passing second. His form rippling when the shadows lurched upwards, a black leather straight jacket replacing antiquated armor, the vampire's eyes widened madly as he continued, "Did you figure that out all on your own? Perhaps you spent the last century spying on me, desperately searching for a weakness that did not exist. Or maybe it has something to do with your *special* little eyes..."

"I see..."

The bound vampire's insinuation caused Yhwach's mouth to crinkle in slight annoyance, "When I sent Tubalcain Alhambra and Rip Van Winkle against you, I anticipated you would assimilate their memories. It was foolish to believe a creature of your power would not notice the small shard of my spirit buried within their souls."

"That's *quite* the interesting theory... but I'm afraid you're wrong."

Despite the shadows wrapped tightly around his shoulders, causing him to lurch forward, Alucard's menacing grin never faltered. Even as the ground beneath his feet liquefied, pools of restless darkness inexorably pulling him downwards, the vampire continued laughing, "It was your homunculus... that artificial Quincy... that told me everything about your special eyes! They are indeed powerful, something truly befitting a *divine* monster. But do your followers know about its weakness? That's why you started this little game! Sacrificing your pawns without the slightest hint of regret! It's because those vaunted eyes of yours cannot see me!"

The faintest trace of a frown etched itself upon the Quincy King's features before vanishing just as quickly. Calmly turning around and marching away from the bound vampire as the shadows increased their pace, pulling Alucard further into the ground with each passing second, he paused after several steps before looking over his shoulder, "You are indeed one of the few beings my eyes cannot see, Prince of Wallachia. However, know that I defeated you without opening my eyes. For despite the unpredictable nature of both you and those Life Fiber children, I have achieved victory on this Walpurgis Dawn. Everything that was yours shall be mine."

"HA! HA! HA! Is that right?!"

Only the vampire's face still remained uncovered as he grinned sadistically at the Quincy King, "Well then... I look forward to seeing how things play out, Yhwach. It should prove to be quite entertaining watching your empire crumble! Brought down by those children! Because when I get free I will hunt you down... and *tear* out your heart with my own hands!"

Alucard's unrelenting laughter was harshly severed when he was pulled completely into the darkness, the Quincy Zeichen sealing his movements briefly flashing with a brilliant white light before vanishing. Stoically staring down the empty street as the crimson moon hovering lazily overhead returned to its usual pallor, the nightmarish atmosphere permeating every inch of London slowly lifting, Yhwach dismissed the vampire's threat from his mind without a second thought. Did the vampire believe he had not taken precautions to prevent such a scenario?

"Quilge," Yhwach did not need to raise his voice to gain his subordinate's attention. He was quite aware the Sternritzer could hear his every word, "Order the Jahrtausendarmee to fall back to the Silbern. We're done - "

An intense explosion of sapphire light immediately followed by Quilge's signature technique shattering harshly cut off the Quincy King before he could finish giving the order. Eyes widening in interest when something soared through the darkened heavens before crashing into the street in front of him, the powerful impact splintering the pavement and sending up a large column of smoke and dust, Yhwach's mouth curled into a smirk as the sensation of Life Fibers assaulted his senses. Of course Quilge's jail failed so miserably. It could never have hindered someone like them.

And he had truly hoped to depart for the Silbern peacefully and without further bloodshed.

"You dealt with my former subordinates quite ruthlessly... Ichigo Kurosaki."

Jets of superheated steam erupted from Mugetsu's ventilation grills as Ichigo silently swung Tournesol in front of his body, the accompanying pulse of sapphire energy dispersing the residual smoke. The top half of his face silhouetted in darkness as he glared angrily at the man who ordered millions of innocent people killed, Mugetsu tightening around his body in response to his fluctuating

emotions, Ichigo did not say a word as he calmly raised his weapon, aware of the growing sense of familiarity in the back of his mind.

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"You've become rather sullen, fraulein."

Small bursts of glowing sparks cascaded downwards through the *Deus Ex Machina's* command center as the already faint lighting abruptly died, leaving the broken wall of screens as the only source of illumination. Yellow eyes narrowing slightly in amusement while the corners of his mouth twisted into an increasingly conceited smirk, the Major calmly pressed a single button on the remote in his hand, dismissing the image of Ichigo Kurosaki standing before His Majesty in a flash of static. There was really no point in continuing to watch such an interesting confrontation. After all, the results were already set in stone. Alucard was captured and there was nothing the youth or his marvelous Kamui could do to stop them.

"Perhaps Alucard's defeat has left you momentarily speechless, unable to articulate the thoughts running rampant through your disbelieving mind?"

The stout Sternritter's shoulders shook as he lightly chuckled at his own rhetorical question. He, of course, already knew the answer. But watching Integra Hellsing's expressions shift between seething anger and tranquil fury was quite worth the trouble. Sighing wistfully as he slowly stood back on his feet, the intensity of the young vampire's furious glare causing the hair on the back of his neck to stiffen, he swept a hand through the air before commenting, "But I'm afraid I won't be around to hear your answer. The curtain has fallen upon the stage and the actors are preparing to leave the theater. So please accept my sincerest appreciation, my dear fraulein. For this Walpurgis Dawn could never have happened without your wonderful performance!"

"You think you can just *leave* ?!"

Seras Victoria's voice reverberated loudly across the darkened room, the fiery shadows mimicking her missing arm writhing angrily with every word, "Once this damned barrier falls I'm going to tear you apart! You'll pay for everyone you murdered!"

Despite the cold fury coursing through her veins, thoughts of ordering Seras to leave the Major alive long enough to drown in a pool of his own blood becoming more tolerable by the second, Integra's well-trained mind latched onto the peculiarities of her servant's remark. Something wasn't *right* . She had mentally counted down every second until the Sternritter's barrier was supposed to shatter, give or take several minutes. Yet that time has passed without so much as a crack upon its translucent surface. Which could only mean one thing.

"It's been over twenty minutes, *Quincy* ."

Integra's expression twisted in disgust as she venomously spat the word, the mere utterance of the title seeming to stain her very soul, "When did you intend to announce that you lied about your technique's stability? Or did the thought simply slip your mind?"

"I consider myself a man of my word, fraulein. And as such, I absolutely detest the concept of lying in any form. So you can rest assured that without further sustenance His Majesty's barrier *will* shatter in just under fifteen minutes."

The Sternritter punctuated his disarming response by tightly clenching his raised hand into a fist, yellow eyes gleaming mischievously as Integra's confused expression rapidly shifted into bitter realization. Ah... it was wonderful to see she understood the absolute truth behind his words, "After all, one can always delay such an event by feeding their spiritual energy through special conduits built into the floor. Granted, such an invention undoubtedly would require a large sacrifice of energy, which only a Sternritter such as myself could provide."

"Now please allow me to apologize for my earlier rudeness."

The reactions from Integra Hellsing and her pet vampire to his abrupt changing of the subject, confusion subconsciously dawning upon their faces, greatly amused the Major. Walking forward as the young leader of the Hellsing Organization grimaced, the dim lighting enveloping the command center causing his glasses to glow opaquely, the Sternritter clapped his hands together before announcing, "For you see, the tragic fate of your loyal butler has left me in a rather joyous mood."

"What?"

Integra's chest constricted painfully at the Quincy's admission, her breath rapidly hitching in her throat and causing her fingers to grow numb. Chuckling lowly at the woman's fearful expression, the Major held out his arms and sadistically grinned, "After my dear colleague introduced himself to the lovely Ryuko Matoi, taking her on a scenic tour of London, I took the opportunity to greet my old adversary."

"Where is Walter?!"

Marching towards the impervious barrier, fingers tightly gripping the sword in her hand, Integra snarled, "What the hell did you do to him?!"

"I did not lay a finger on your precious butler," the Quincy leaned forward as he answered, a combination of mirth of mock outrage evident upon his smirking façade, "But that wasn't the answer you were looking for, was it? So allow me to skip the unnecessary details. The man known as Walter C. Dornez, former vampire hunter and butler of the Hellsing estate, is dead! Ground into dust beneath His Majesty's grand will! For he was nothing more than an insect, *unworthy* of my respect!"

"You, on the other hand, are an adversary worthy of some modicum of respect..."

The Major's smirk momentarily widened before he promptly turned away from the two women. Subtly impressed when he didn't hear the standard clashing of spiritual energy, Seras Victoria having obviously learned her lesson from her first attempts to shatter the barrier, he clasped his hands behind his back and explained, "There is something special about your soul... perhaps an innate strength of character or iron will born from experience... that gained the undying loyalty of a creature such as Alucard. He could have broken free of the seals placed upon his soul whenever he wished, slaughtering his way out of London! Yet he remained your devoted servant, following your orders without question! The ability to not only command such a monster, but gain his absolute loyalty as well, is deserving of a gift! Therefore, Integra Hellsing, I shall bestow upon you my *true* name! Would you care to hear it?"

The sheer inanity of the Sternritter's question threw Integra off balance, "Your name?"

"Have you ever wondered why I'm called the Major?"

Faint loathing permeated the Quincy's voice as he stared at the empty wall of screens, his body silhouetted against the encroaching darkness, "The rank of 'Major' was given to me by those Nazi fools! A meaningless title from a worthless organization! Yet I cannot deny that it worked out to His Majesty's benefit. For there is a certain form of freedom in concealing one's name. In hiding one's true identity behind the shroud of anonymity. A notion of... opportunity... one might be so bold as to say. But with the Schatten Ausrufung complete I can finally discard that *disgusting* moniker!"

With an exaggerated flourishing motion, the Major turned around and bowed deeply, "I am Montana Max, Sternritter M and Captain of the Jahrtausendarmee! It's a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance."

A miasma of shadowy energy enveloped Seras as the vampire furiously glared at the Major with as much hatred as she could muster. She *vividly* remembered Zorin Blitz taunting her with an

eerily similar phrase. 'The Illusionary,' the bitch called herself, right before dredging up every nightmare and terrifying memory from her childhood, "What the hell does that mean?!"

"As my dear comrade Quilge would say - silence is golden. And besides, it would be unsporting to *spoil* the surprise."

Darkness oozed from the Sternritter's white uniform, the unnatural blackness taking on a silhouette of his form, as he chuckled mirthfully, yellow eyes gleaming with barely contained anticipation. Bowing once more as the shadows completely surrounded his body, the Major cheerfully added, "And with that, I bid you a fond auf wiedersehen."

"Oh no you don't!"

Tendrils of burning shadows tore through the atmosphere as Seras burst into motion the instant the barrier shattered, her rapid departure powerful enough to crumple the steel plating underneath her feet. What currently functioned as her left arm wrapping around the previously discarded eighty-eight millimeter cannon along the way, crimson eyes burning brightly at repaying the Quincy for all the pain he caused, Seras snarled when she fired the weapon only for the shell to pass through nothing but empty space. Clawed fingers digging into the floor as she spun around while skidding to a halt, the sudden rush of cold autumn air from the new hole in the side of the room rustling her platinum blonde hair, the vampire's mood rapidly soured when she tried sensing for the Major's presence only to find absolutely nothing.

He was gone. And she let him escape.

Slamming her hand into the ground hard enough to puncture the steel plating, Seras shouted, "Damn it!"

"Calm down, Seras."



Integra's resigned tone instantly drew her servant's undivided attention as she slowly marched through the shattered remains of the barrier, shards of spiritual energy crunching loudly with every step. An annoyed frown marring her features as anger rapidly succumbed to general frustration and trepidation, the Sternritter's departing words weighing heavily upon her mind, she stared thoughtfully at the ground before continuing, "It's obvious the Quincy planned this confrontation long before our arrival. Nothing else explains his knowledge of our tactics and manpower. They set a trap and like a fool I walked into it without a second thought."

"He didn't expect to see *me*," Seras sharply corrected, an ear-wrenching crash echoing throughout the command center as she harshly dropped the cannon onto the ground.

A pregnant silence filled the darkened room as Integra frowned in thought. There was no logic or strategic reason behind the Quincy sending someone to kill Seras, who until only an hour ago possessed merely above average strength and speed for a vampire. That they wasted considerable manpower and resources on such a mission suggested there was something about her servant, and by proxy Alucard, the Quincy feared.

And then there was Walter...

"It pains me to admit it, but we must press forward without Alucard... or Walter."

Integra stubbornly refused to believe the nonsense that spewed from the Major's mouth about Walter. The sadistic pleasure the Sternritter displayed when he mentioned the fate of her butler was suspicious but the abrupt way he brought up the subject felt artificial, almost as if he was deflecting her attention away from an entirely different matter. And until she saw her oldest friend's corpse with her own eyes, once Seras or Alucard enthusiastically eviscerated the one responsible, she would refrain from preparing the standard Hellsing funeral.

"The Quincy and their damned king might have won this battle but stopping Ragyo Kiryuin cannot wait!"

The pallor of the full moon filtered through the jagged hole in the command center as Integra turned to Seras, renewed determination filling her voice, "Rest assured, they *will* pay for everything they've done. But we must put aside thoughts of revenge and focus on the task at hand! It will not matter if we destroy the Quincy down to the last man if that monster of a woman succeeds in feeding humanity to Life Fibers!"

Seras smiled in appreciation at her master's orders, the gnawing guilt she felt at allowing the Quincy to escape slowly abating. However, the relatively peaceful moment was violently shattered when a series of cascading explosions rippled through the *Deus Ex Machina*, the scale of which caused the ridged airship to lurch forward while descending rapidly towards the burning streets below.

"Master!"

Reacting instinctively when the floor abruptly tilted sideways, metal plating and electronics raining dangerously through the air around them, Seras reached out and grabbed Integra's outstretched hand just before she lost her balance. Shadows twisting protectively around her master as the vampire bent her knees and *jumped*, the angle of ascent taking them through the jagged hole in the side of the command center, Seras narrowed her eyes upon noticing the flames engulfing the zeppelin's exterior. Momentarily frowning at the barely noticeable heat before the shadows comprising her left arm clawed outward and easily dispelled the nearby conflagration, she tightened her grip around her master's coat before spinning around and disappearing into the darkness of the predawn twilight.

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"Are you the Quincy's leader?"

Muffled explosions tore across the ruined landscape that was London as Ichigo calmly addressed the Quincy King. Silhouetted against the full moon beginning to descend lazily to the west, the shimmering sapphire light from Mugetsu's Life Fibers clashing vibrantly with the encompassing white pallor, the teenager's voice lacked any inflection beyond tranquil rage as he stared at the man directly responsible for the surrounding death and destruction.

Yhwach's amused smirk shifted into a thoughtful frown as he ignored the question, his attention focused on Mugetsu's barely dirtied appearance, "How strange. I did not foresee you defeating my former subordinates so easily."

Ichigo narrowed his eyes at the comment, "What are you talking about?"

"I'm certain you noticed the composition of their spiritual energies."

The Quincy King subtly noted the possessive narrowing of Mugetsu's multicolored eyes when he stepped closer to her wearer, the Kamui's armored form rippling slightly in response to the motion. Unconcerned when Ichigo threateningly raised Tournesol, the hardened Life Fiber blade gleaming with a deep blue shimmer in the moonlight, Yhwach held out an arm before continuing, "They were nothing more than extensions of Alucard's will, their souls twisted until they could no longer be considered Quincy. By devouring their souls, Alucard should have removed their weakness to Life Fiber, allowing their abilities to possess full effectiveness. Destroying them should have required significant effort, comparable to Ryuko Matoi's battle against the first captain of the Gotei 13's Third Division."

A gust of wind whipped through the empty streets, rustling Ichigo's hair as he scowled, "Are you surprised I defeated them?"

"No... I anticipated their destruction. If not by your hands, than either Ryuko Matoi's or Iscariot's."

Yhwach's callous dismissal concerning the fate of his former Sternritter conflicted with the thoughtful frown etched along the contours of his face. Things were starting to make sense to him. From the slightly scuffed appearance of his Kamui to the increased potency of his spiritual energy, it seemed that Ichigo Kurosaki's power had grown considerably throughout his time in London. An evolution no doubt fueled by the teenager's constant interactions with Alucard and the Jahrtausendarmee. Yet the spiritual energy thrumming through Ichigo's Life Fibers did not excuse the abject foolishness of confronting him without first transforming his Kamui into its advanced configuration.

In any other situation, if he weren't feeling quite so magnanimous towards those allied against Life Fibers, he would have used such a lapse in judgment against the youth.

"Do you intend to fight me in your current state, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

It was regrettably clear to the Quincy King from the suffocating silence immediately following his question that the teenager had already made up his mind on the matter, "You do not wish to answer? That is understandable. Such a decision must not have been made lightly... but I must give my thanks for destroying Tubalcain Alhambra and Rip Van Winkle. For it saved me the effort of killing them myself."

**" He doesn't care about his own soldiers?"**

Mugetsu was incensed, her Life Fibers bristling in barely restrained anger. She might be a Kamui, her understanding and comprehension of human emotions slightly warped from *not* being human, but Yhwach's complete lack of empathy greatly disturbed her, **"Alucard devoured his soldiers and he doesn't even care? There's something seriously wrong with this man, Ichigo."**

"You never answered my question."

Ichigo mentally noted Mugetsu's worry as he slowly raised Tournesol, "Are you the Quincy's leader?"

"Indeed I am..."

Yhwach's expression twisted into something that only superficially resembled remorse as he explained, "I am indeed the leader of the Jahrtausendarmee or, as you've come to call it, Millennium. The destruction of London, the massacre of its population, was done under my orders. But while I do not take any satisfaction from tonight's events, neither do I feel any remorse. Those that perished were unavoidable casualties, necessary sacrifices to pave a path to the future."

"Necessary?!"

Tournesol trembled within Ichigo's clenched fingers, wisps of sapphire spiritual energy beginning to surround the blade, as he furiously shouted, "How the *hell* was this necessary?!"

"The answer should be obvious," Yhwach purposely motioned towards the desolate ruins of London, the beginnings of a sadistic smirk pulling at the corners of his mouth, "It was all to free this world from Life Fibers!"

"Mugetsu Zangetsu!"

Amused chuckling pierced through the ensuing silence as the Quincy King fervently watched Ichigo's Kamui transform into its advanced configuration, his once immaculate uniform rustling in the resulting burst of spiritual energy. Yet despite the nauseating sensation prickling at the back of his mind, the nearly tangible power repulsing the surrounding darkness, Yhwach's menacing smirk did not falter, "I see... you've already made up your mind. It is unfortunate that words have failed, for conflict is always such a bitter affair. But tell me, do you believe your current power is enough to defeat me?"

"I know how strong you are..."

Ichigo swept Tournesol through the air as he spoke, the motion kicking up another gust of wind, "And maybe I don't stand a chance of stopping you. But don't you dare tell me all of this was to stop Satsuki's mother! Because from where I'm standing... you're the one that killed millions of people!"

For a brief moment Yhwach's hand instinctively moved towards the weapon sheathed at his waist, the entertaining thought of observing Ichigo Kurosaki's power temporarily crossing his mind, before frowning in disdain when Quilge's spiritual energy vanished. It seemed his time in the World of the Living was reaching its limit, far sooner than he anticipated. With Alucard defeated, the eldritch hold he possessed over London gone, it was only a matter of time before certain parties grew aware of the events that transpired. Yet there was only one being that garnered his attention - Ragyo Kiryuin.

Despite her unyielding devotion to the Original Life Fiber, her every waking moment dedicated to completing the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet, the Quincy King could not overstate the Kiryuin matriarch's intelligence and cunning. No, it would be prudent to return to the Silbern before the Jahrtausendarmee's success in isolating London from the rest of the world finally unraveled. For he did not doubt Ragyo Kiryuin or her assistant were highly interested in the truth behind the night's events.

"That is true."

Ichigo tensed when Yhwach continued reaching towards the sword strapped to his waist. Curling his fingers tightly around Tournesol even after the Quincy King paused and lowered his hand, a contemplative frown slowly replacing the sociopathic smirk, he didn't loosen his grip when the man stoically added, "Over three million souls were erased from existence, destroyed to weaken Alucard's monstrous power. But if you still wish to fight, you should focus your effort upon Ragyo Kiryuin. For it was her desire to feed humanity to Life Fibers that forced my hand."

Clouds of steam erupted from Mugetsu at the Quincy King's cold indifference, her multicolored eyes narrowing furiously as Ichigo shouted, "Don't give me that crap! How does any of this have to do with stopping Satsuki's mother?!"

Yhwach momentarily stared at the teenager, completely unconcerned by the nearly tangible spiritual energy, before calmly answering, "There is no need to tell you. It will all become clear once Montana finishes his mission."

"Montana?"

Spiritual energy pulsed chaotically around Tournesol as Ichigo slid one foot backwards, his brow furrowing at the strange name, "Who are you -"

**" Be careful, Ichigo!"**

Mugetsu's warning emerged in the form of a deep, feminine growl as she cut her wearer off mid-sentence, multicolored eyes staring at the Quincy King. Over the last few minutes her Life Fibers had been twitching strangely, an unsettling sensation that reminded the Kamui of Nui Harime's disturbingly cold touch. While the disconcerting sensation rippling through her threads was *nothing* like the Grand Couturier tracing patterns across her uniform, fingers lightly plucking at her Banshi, it still worried the Kamui, **"This man defeated Alucard, who overpowered Senketsu and Ryuko even in Senkou. We shouldn't rush into battle without a plan."**

"Your Kamui is quite intelligent, Ichigo Kurosaki. It would be wise to heed her advice."

Tournesol nearly fell from Ichigo's suddenly numb fingers at the Quincy King's comment, the unadulterated shock almost enough to knock Mugetsu out of Zangetsu. Beads of sweat trickling down his face as he steadied his hands, the normally weightless blade growing increasingly heavy, the teenager stared in disbelief at the Father of the Quincy. The man could *hear* Mugetsu! He had been

able to hear her this entire time! But that was impossible! Ignoring Kon and the other Mod Souls, only Life Fiber Hybrids like Ryuko or his dad should be able to hear Kamui. Yet Yhwach didn't have a single Life Fiber in his body. He was *damn* sure of that.

What hell was going on?

Snapping back to reality when the shadows behind the Quincy King surged upwards, forming a rapidly solidifying portal composed of darkness, Ichigo gnashed his teeth and sprinted towards Yhwach, "Do you think I'm just going to let you leave?!"

Already halfway through the gateway when the emotional outburst reached his ears, Yhwach briefly paused before looking over his shoulder and asking a single question that stopped Ichigo cold, "Why are you so focused on preventing my departure when Ragyo Kiryuin is moving upon Karakura Town at this very moment?"

"What?!"

Ichigo's breath hitched in his throat, the question coming out as little more than a strangled gasp of air. Satsuki's mother was attacking Karakura Town? Only subconsciously aware of the foreign spiritual energies scattered throughout London rapidly vanishing, disappearing from the World of the Living one after another, Ichigo stiffened in growing shock when the Quincy King turned to leave, imparting one final comment before the darkness swallowed him.

"Farewell, Ichigo Kurosaki. Gather your strength and allies and destroy Ragyo Kiryuin... my lost son born in the dark."

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6:15 AM London Standard Time



The somber atmosphere enveloping Richmond Park grew increasingly thick when several medics disembarked from the helicopter hovering only a few inches above the frost-covered grass, the insignia of the Scottish Ambulance Service visible underneath the aircraft's rapidly spinning rotors. Hurrying across the impromptu airfield towards the field hospital set up on the other side of the tree line, cases of medical supplies held tightly within their arms, none of the trained men and women uttered a single word, their attention focused on assisting those that survived Millennium's unforeseen assault.

And standing at the side of this procession, her gaze focused on the small patch of dirt between her feet, was Ryuko Matoi.

***" You're thinking about that shinigami again."***

Ryuko huffed loudly at her Kamui's blunt, but accurate, comment. Folding her arms tightly across Senketsu as she slowly meandered through the recently transformed park, the single highlight of crimson hair falling gently over her eye, she bit the inside of her cheek before snarling, "Yeah... I could have helped Ichigo fight those freaking Quincy if it wasn't for that bitch's pain in the ass bankai!"

***" You shouldn't blame yourself, Ryuko."***

Senketsu trailed off as he paused in thought. Although they weren't currently synchronized he could still feel Ryuko's anger and frustration bleeding across their connection. It was a rather unpleasant experience. One that he no longer wished to have, ***"For starters, whenever you are upset your blood develops a bitter aftertaste. It's even worse than when you eat Mrs. Mankanshoku's strange home-made cooking."***

Her eye twitching at Senketsu's criticism of Mrs. Mankanshoku's Mystery Croquettes, which were far better than any of the crappy food at Honnouji Academy, there was an awkward silence as Ryuko's mind slowly wrapped around *his* first comment about her blood, "Hey!"

Ignoring the embarrassed outburst from his wearer, Senketsu's neckerchief fluttered lightly as he calmly continued, ***"More importantly, there was no way we could have expected to fight an army of undead Quincy... not to mention Alucard."***

Ryuko briefly stiffened at her Kamui's answer before relaxing, the frustrated guilt that had been building throughout the night dissipating. Senketsu was right. There was no reason for her to feel guilty, at least about this. Nobody has expected her to fight against both Millennium and the undead bastard's army of familiars. That was freaking insane. Even though she wished she could have done more, like beating the crap out of a Sternritter or two, she still managed to kick a lot of Quincy ass. Not to mention taking down that shinigami bitch even with her stupid bankai. Still... if it wasn't for that bitch she could have helped Ichigo by going straight after the Quincy's boss from the start.

Yawning loudly as exhaustion finally reared its ugly head, Senketsu reciprocating the gesture with the Kamui equivalent, Ryuko rubbed a hand against the back of her neck and lazily grumbled, "You're right, Senketsu. But what the hell was with that undead bastard anyway?"

***" I don't know."***

Confusion laced the Kamui's voice as he mulled over the question, his eye glancing sideways before swiveling upwards, ***"It is rather strange he sent his familiars to attack us when we both had a common enemy."***

"It's because the bastard's a freaking psychopath," Ryuko scoffed derisively, "He tried drinking my blood, remember?"

Senketsu shuddered at the reminder of their ill-fated fight against the vampire, ***"D-Don't remind me of that! I can still taste traces of his disgusting blood in my Life Fibers, Ryuko!"***

Ryuko's amusement at her Kamui's reaction vanished, dissipating as quickly as it arrived, when two medics marched across her path, a

heavily bleeding man lying unconscious on the stretcher. Somberly noticing that the man's right leg was missing below the knee, a not-so-subtle reminder of what the undead bastard did to her own leg, she clenched her hands into fists. Nui Harime and her bitch of a mom might be monsters but this was different. Millions of innocent people were dead because some asshole decided he had nothing better to do.

Millennium was going to pay for this.

"Hey... how are you holding up?"

Ryuko didn't bother turning around at the sound of Ichigo's voice, instead collapsing onto the grass with an exhausted grunt. Propping a hand under her chin as another yawn escaped from her mouth, she sat pensively for several long seconds before replying, "Alright... but Batou told me to 'stay put and not activate Senketsu.' Apparently he thinks walking around in Senketsu will make people nervous, which is a load of crap! They have freaking *vampires* for crying out loud!"

" ***I don't blame them,***" Mugetsu smugly quipped, her condescending tone earning an annoyed growl from Senketsu.

Ichigo barely rolled his eyes when Mugetsu started laughing at Senketsu, the melodious sound causing Ryuko's Kamui to bristle angrily around her body. As the verbal confrontation building between the Kamui abruptly ended when an increasingly annoyed Ryuko pulled Senketsu's lapel, threatening to throw him into a washing machine if he *dared* trying to jump off her body, Ichigo found his thoughts drifting back to Yhwach's departing comment. There was something familiar about the Quincy King, a sense of nostalgia that didn't make any sense.

"Hey!"

Leaning backwards when Ichigo didn't chastise Mugetsu for starting the fight, an annoyed frown quickly developing at his solemn

expression, Ryuko huffed before jabbing her elbow into his leg, "Still thinking about that asshole you fought?"

"It's something he said..."

"Why the hell do you care?!"

Ryuko didn't bother waiting for Ichigo to finish before interrupting him with an angry snort. Easily leaping back onto her feet, arms folded tightly across Senketsu, she spat to the side and scoffed, "I don't know what the bastard said but it's obvious he was lying! He's a Quincy, right? That means he was probably scared of Mugetsu since all of his stupid techniques are crap against us! I bet he was talking of his ass to stop you from attacking before he could run away!"

" ***There was something unsettling about that man,***" Mugetsu's eyes narrowed at the recollection of Yhwach's presence, "***Despite not having a single Life Fiber in his body, he was able to hear my voice.***"

A nervous shiver visibly rippled across Senketsu's uniform, "***He could hear you? How is that possible?***"

"I don't know," Ichigo admitted in place of Mugetsu, "But even if he was lying, we can't let Ragyo attack Karakura Town."

Ryuko tightened her grip on Senketsu's sleeves, an irritated growl leaving her throat, at the mention of her 'dear old mom.' Damn it! Even thinking about that rainbow bitch made her want to throw up! There was nothing she wanted more than to use Senketsu's full power to beat the living crap out of Ragyo Kiryuin, to make her pay for everyone she's hurt, but she wasn't stupid enough to think it would be that simple. What happened at Honnouji Academy *personally* demonstrated her mom's inhuman strength. Ragyo would kick their ass if they didn't have a foolproof plan, something that would have taken the undead bastard by surprise.

But even if she wasn't anywhere close to the bitch's level, it would be a cold day in hell before she let Ragyo Kiryuin feed humanity to Life Fibers!

Nearly gagging on the taste of bile when she remembered that Nui Harime, the psychotic bitch who brutally murdered her dad, was also her sister, Ryuko opened her mouth to address her annoyance only for Senketsu to suddenly shiver in visible disgust. Her eyebrow immediately twitching in mounting irritation when she smelled the familiar bitter odor, she slowly began reaching towards the small pouch on her hip when Aikuro Mikisugi appeared out of nowhere with two cups of freshly brewed coffee in his hands.

"Coffee?"

The nudist commander's smirk slowly faltered, eventually disappearing entirely, at the tense silence that followed his admittedly biased question. Shrugging at the heated glare Ryuko sent his way, his pants somehow unbuckling themselves as he sauntered between the teenagers, Aikuro casually tossed one coffee over his shoulder into a nearby trashcan, "I couldn't help but overhear your private conversation. You took down dozens of Quincy. Not only that, you confronted their leader, which saved thousands of lives."

Ichigo's gaze fell at the comment, "But we didn't save everyone."

An uneasy silence fell over the area before Aikuro sighed, "Details about Anderson's death are still rather... sketchy."

Ryuko found her annoyance for the exhibitionist reaching its breaking point as she stomped forward, fingers tightly gripping the front of the nudist's uniform, "What the hell do you mean sketchy?"

"The only ones who know what happened to Anderson are Iscariot..."

It was thanks to years of experience in the art of nudity and stripping that Aikuro managed to effortlessly free himself from Ryuko's supernaturally strong grip, the only casualty of his escape being the bulletproof vest in the bewildered teenager's hand. Taking a cautionary step backwards as Ryuko glanced around in confusion, the nudist commander subtly adjusted his uniform before continuing, "... and they're not exactly talking. But that trigger-happy paladin pacing outside the medical pavilion *did* ask to see you, Ryuko."

Pulling the Scissor Blade from her pocket, the crimson weapon expanding to its full size in just under a second, Ryuko sneered as she pointed the blade at the nudist's crotch. She had a pretty good idea what Iscariot wanted, but that didn't mean she liked it, "Why the hell would she want to see me?"

"I can't really say..."

Aikuro smirked mysteriously as he sidestepped the Scissor Blade, one hand held flamboyantly on his waist, "But since you seem to already know her, it could be a golden opportunity to find out how Anderson died."

The Scissor Blade momentarily inched closer to the nudist commander's crotch, a bead of sweat trickling down his forehead at Ryuko's annoyed grimace. Subtly expressing his relief when she reluctantly lowered her arm, the hardened Life Fiber weapon spinning around her wrist before coming to rest upon her shoulder, Aikuro pretended not to listen when Ryuko leaned towards Ichigo and whispered, "Keep an eye on the exhibitionist. It's time I got some answers without fighting a freaking vampire at the same time!"

With a defiant huff Ryuko marched around the nudist commander, her eyes narrowing with renewed determination as walked towards the field hospital across the park. Sipping at his coffee as he watched the teenager leave, the top button of his shirt miraculously popping open with a brief shimmer of purple light, Aikuro turned to Ichigo and asked, "Surprised I'm still wearing clothes?"

"Somewhat," Ichigo sarcastically muttered, refusing to look at the nudist commander.

"Contrary to popular belief I have a very good memory," Aikuro suavely admitted, the purple light above his nipples dimming as he ran a gloved hand through his hair, "For example, I still remember your threat from the last time I tried exposing my nude glory in front of your impressionable eyes."

Ichigo's eyebrow momentarily twitched at the nudist's shameless admission, an expression perfectly mimicked by his Kamui, before he decided to quickly change the subject, "By the way... didn't Batou manage to capture one of the Quincy?"

"Worried he might escape?"

Aikuro smirked at Ichigo's concern, which garnered an annoyed scowl from the teenager, "Let's just say we've taken every possible precaution to make sure our special guest remains safe until we get back to Osaka. And just to cover our bases, Miss Victoria is standing guard outside his cell. We wouldn't want any of his friends staging a breakout now, would we?"

There was also the Doktor's sheer, unadulterated terror when Seras Victoria walked into the repurposed police station. Watching the Quincy break down into a nervous fit, especially after Batou told the vampire what he found in the man's laboratory, had been very insightful into the inner workings of Millennium.

"You know, Ichigo..."

Muted purple light shone from the nudist commander's crotch and nipples as he stared off into the pre-dawn twilight, "Thanks to Ragyo Kiryuin's announcement at the Great Culture and Sports Festival, Miss Satsuki never managed to finalize my termination papers. That means I'm technically still your homeroom teacher."

**" *Ichigo, he's starting to strip again,*"** Mugetsu lightly growled, her multicolored eyes narrowing when Aikuro's hands began moving towards his pants.

"Which is how I can tell your battle against the Quincy's enigmatic leader didn't go as expected..."

The sudden change in Aikuro's personality, the shift from flamboyant exhibitionist to serious nudist, caught both Ichigo and his Kamui off guard. One hand propped on his waist as he turned back towards the teenager, the nudist commander scratched his chin before adding, "And from Mugetsu's glowing disposition it appears even her power has its limits. It's quite troubling to think a Quincy possesses the ability to overpower a Kamui..."

**" *Did he just call me inadequate?*"**

Ichigo tuned out Mugetsu's bristling annoyance at the perceived insult as he stared at the ground, his brow furrowing slightly, "He left before I had a chance to stop him."

Worried concern flashed across the nudist commander's expression. Thanks to Integra Hellsing's confrontation with the Major earlier in the night, they understood Millennium's goal with disturbing clarity. Knowing that the enigmatic and, quite frankly, insane leader of the Quincy not only personally ordered millions of innocent people murdered with the purpose of drawing Rago Kiryuin out of Honnouji Academy but was also strong enough to defeat Alucard sent a cold shiver racing down his spine. Whatever the Quincy were *truly* planning could not be good. If his phone hadn't been reduced to scrap metal after the Sternritter destroyed the DTR Model Ray he would have already informed Oliver of the dire situation.

Luckily Batou didn't have that problem.

Smoothing out a strand of unruly blue hair as two more buttons on his shirt spontaneously unfastened themselves, the subsequent eruption of purple light earning an annoyed murmur from both Ichigo



and Mugetsu, Aikuro abruptly stiffened when he became aware of a new presence. The scent of imported tobacco growing thicker as a feminine hand tightly gripped his shoulder, the digits squeezing the muscles like a vice, the nudist commander swallowed the nervous lump in his throat when an aristocratic voice directly addressed him.

"I've been looking for you, Mister Mikisugi..."

It took Aikuro's well-trained mind just over a second to effectively weigh all of his options. Escaping from Integra Hellsing's hold in a burst of motion that even Mugetsu had trouble following, which also had the unfortunate side effect of leaving him completely naked from the waist up, the nudist took a moment to analyze the rapidly deteriorating situation before coming to the obvious conclusion. The woman was *still* mad at him.

"Rest assured, Nudist Beach shall pay to remove the burning wreckage of the DTR Model Ray from your front lawn... and fix your rose garden."

Chuckling nervously when he noticed Integra's furious expression, the cigar held tightly between her clenched teeth visibly tearing, he raised his hands defensively and added, "If this is about your helicopter... let me just say I'm a certified pilot with years of experience! And while I *did* technically steal your helicopter, it was only to make sure proper medical help reached the surviving Wild Geese!"

"The rotorcraft you 'borrowed' had custom-made, Italian leather upholstery. Its controls and cockpit were designed specifically for my height and build. Not even Walter could fly it without difficulty. Only *one* was ever produced..."

Integra calmly removed the cigar from her mouth as she marched towards the nudist, "So pray tell, *why* did you pilot it NAKED?!"

" **Ha!**"

Mugetsu laughed, her threads rippling contently, as she watched the nudist commander stammer out several excuses, each failing to dissuade Integra Hellsing from potentially beating him to within an inch of his life. It was such a *shame* Senketsu wasn't here to see this. Therefore, as the better Kamui, it was her sacred duty to inform him of this delightful event with as much detail as possible.

Her multicolored eyes carefully tracking Aikuro as he continued backpedalling away from the irate woman, beads of nervous sweat dripping down his face, Mugetsu gave the Kamui equivalent of a smirk before asking, ***"Ichigo, do you think she'll make him stop stripping?"***

It took Ichigo roughly a second to think about the question before responding in a deadpan manner, "I doubt it. The guy's going to keep stripping until the day he dies."

"I guess she managed to track him down, after all. Gee, that's a crying shame..."

The familiar baritone voice caused Ichigo to look over his shoulder as Batou leisurely emerged from the nearby shadows, gravel and dirt crunching softly beneath his boots. Watching the shameless display of faux cowardice from his fellow nudist with a mixture of exasperation and embarrassment, Batou eventually sighed in annoyance before rubbing the bridge of his nose. He had known the moment Integra Hellsing asked about Aikuro, the anger visible on her face, what the bastard pulled off. And he couldn't exactly blame her reaction, which was part of the reason he'd so helpfully pointed out the idiot's location. For once he was content with letting Aikuro suffer the consequences of walking around naked in public.

It was just a crying shame there were far more pressing issues to deal with at the moment.

Coughing loudly just as Integra's building frustration with the half-naked nudist reached the tipping point, Batou reached into his

pocket before frowning, "You can kick Aikuro's ass later. Right now we've got a major problem - Osaka's gone dark."

Aikuro's nervous posture immediately vanished at the unexpected news, "That's troubling. What about Karakura Town, Kobe or Kyoto?"

Batou grimaced at the question as he pulled out his cell phone and tossed it to Aikuro, "I managed to contact Berlin and Paris after dropping off our special guest. They've been trying to get in touch with headquarters for the last three hours. Only every nudist base across the island has gone completely silent."

"The lights are on yet nobody's home, huh?" Aikuro grimly muttered, a perturbed expression crossing his features at the implications, "A total communications blackout timed almost perfectly with Millennium's attack. Only one person on the planet possesses the resources to pull off something of this magnitude in such a short period of time."

Ichigo frowned at the obvious answer, "Ragyo Kiryuin."

"Then I suppose you should make haste for Japan without any further delay."

There was an almost habitual display of motion as the leader of the Hellsing Organization placed the frayed remains of the cigar between her teeth. Her overcoat billowing ominously in the early dawn as the familiar taste of tobacco filled her mouth, the aroma helping to soothe her agitated nerves, Integra inhaled deeply before explaining, "After speaking with that despicable Quincy I realized leaving anything to chance when it came to Ragyo Kiryuin was suicidal. As we speak, a military aircraft is refueling at RAF Northolt. Sir Hugh Irons has also prepared a helicopter to transport you to the airfield once you've secured your guest. With any luck, you should arrive in Japan in approximately fifteen -"

"You think you're the only ones that want Ragyo Kiryuin dead?"

The heavily accented voice rudely interrupted the rest of Integra's explanation as Heinkel Wolfe came marching from the direction of the field hospital. Her tattered cassock billowing with every purposeful step, exposing the tightly wrapped bandages around her mostly regenerated chest, the paladin sneered irritably before reaching out and rudely pushing Batou to the side. Straw-blond hair lightly rustling in the predawn breeze as she stomped to a halt in front of Integra, the large differences in their respective heights apparent, Heinkel's burnt hand sporadically twitched, "She is an inhuman monster! An abomination that needs to be destroyed, her black soul chained to the deepest depths of Hell for all eternity! I will not let *verdammt* Life Fibers devour humanity like it's a stuck pig!"

With a calmness befitting a woman of her social standing, Integra patiently listened to Heinkel before removing the cigar from her mouth and sardonically responding, "Very well... I have no objections to your decision. However, I presume there will be no further altercations between our organizations until both Ragyo Kiryuin and Revocs are dealt with?"

An indignant scoff escaped the paladin's mouth at the rhetorical question, "Ragyo Kiryuin has seized full control over the Vatican, her insidious threads turning His Holiness into her damn puppet! Everything Anderson tried to prevent thirteen years ago has come to pass. So right now I don't *care* if you're Protestant. Because if you can guarantee that abomination will die, her bleeding corpse strewn across the earth, than I'll gladly fight at your side."

"Fair enough."

Integra gave the paladin a humorless smirk, her tone unfaltering, as Ryuko Matoi marched into view out of the corner of her eyes, the teenager's scowling expression betraying a wide variety of emotions. Crushing the half-smoked cigar between her fingers, wisps of smoke briefly curling through the air, she waited long enough for Ryuko to join them before turning to Batou, "Given both the severity of the situation and the danger posed by your prisoner, I have ordered Seras to accompany you to Japan. I hope that won't be an issue."

"Nah," the nudist commander's scowl briefly lessened as he folded his arms and grunted, "In fact, it would probably make things a hell of a lot easier for us. I know Olivier will chew me out for saying this, but I'll sleep better knowing there's a nearly immortal vampire on our side when we storm Honnouji Academy."

"Then what the hell are we waiting for?"

Ryuko's mounting annoyance at the situation was made apparent as she cracked the knuckles on her right hand, the corners of her mouth curled into a vicious smirk. As faint traces of autumnal sunlight shimmered over the horizon to the east, the early dawn casting the destruction wrought by the Quincy in an entirely new light, she glowered sourly and added, "It's about time I had a little chat with 'dear old mom.'"

**" Yes, I believe we've overstayed our welcome, Ryuko,"**

Senketsu's single eye twitched, focusing on Heinkel for a few seconds before swiveling upwards, **"Hopefully Ragyo Kiryuin will be defeated by the time we get back. All this fighting has really tired out my threads. I could use a good ironing."**

**" Is getting ironed all you can think about?"** Mugetsu rolled her eyes, a difficult feat for a Kamui, at Senketsu's utterly selfish behavior. The fate of the world was at stake, hundreds of humans would probably die, and all he could think about was getting ironed? The nerve! Of course... she wouldn't mind if Ichigo hand washed her on the trip back, hopefully using that special brand of detergent.

But unlike her fellow Kamui, she would *never* dare say that out loud.

Senketsu bristled angrily at Mugetsu's smug expression, **"At least I -"**

A familiar, although annoying, ringtone rudely interrupted the Kamui before he managed to finish his admittedly brilliant retort. Growling slightly under his non-existent breath at the incessantly repeating song, Senketsu's first reaction was to stare angrily at Aikuro

Mikisugi. After all, he was the only one that had a cell phone in their hands. However, it didn't take long for the Kamui to realize the ringtone was coming from his *left*, where he saw Ichigo rummaging through Mugetsu's pockets in search of his own cell phone. An embarrassed look on his face when he finally pulled out the device, which had miraculously survived the night with little more than a cracked casing, the teenager's eyes widened in muted astonishment at the number displayed prominently across the screen.

"Yoruichi?"

Batou's already troubled expression soured when Ichigo placed the phone against his ear. Something didn't feel right about this. How the hell could Yoruichi have bypassed whatever trick Ragyo used to cut off Japan from the rest of the world? It would take someone smarter than Satsuki's hacker friend to...

God damn it.

The only bastard smart enough to pull off a stunt like this, yet not tell anyone until the last second, was Kiske Urahara. Massaging the bridge of his nose while making a mental note to have a heart-to-heart chat with the 'retired' shinigami when they got back to Karakura Town, Batou stiffened when Ichigo suddenly stammered.

"What."

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## **Kamui Tales #32 - The Incredulous Skeptic**

"I swear that's what happened!"

Integra Hellsing arched a single eyebrow, her expression stoic and unchanging, as she stared incredulously at the slightly nervous nudist soldier standing at attention. Briefly glancing over her

shoulder at Batou, the nudist commander busy directing soldiers halfway across the clearing, she took a deep drag from her cigar before asking in the most deadpan voice she could muster, "Really?"

A single bead of sweat slowly trickled down the man's cheek at the piercing stare, "Yes, ma'am!"

Calmly removing the cigar from her mouth, faint wisps of smoke drifting lazily through the air, Integra closed her eyes and took a moment to compose her thoughts, "You mean to tell me that Sir Penwood, one of my most trusted associates and my late father's closest friend, cut a swathe of destruction through Millennium's forces with his *bare* hands?"

"Don't forget about the taxi!" A member of the SAS randomly quipped from the other side of the clearing, earning a scathing glare from Batou.

The leader of the Hellsing Organization listened in growing irritation when the nudist soldier explained for the third time the sequence of events that transpired during their retreat out of the city. How they'd been running through the corpse-choked back alleys only for a Quincy to suddenly crash through the buildings in front of them. That Sir Penwood had calmly strolled through the cloud of dust and smoke, his suit impeccable, while fixing the cuff of his sleeve. And yes, how the apparently nervous wreck of a man had reached out and picked up an automobile and thrown it at a group of Quincy.

An angry snort left the woman's mouth at the mental image.

"What you just described is, quite frankly, impossible," Integra snapped, her patience reaching its rather short end, "I've known Sir Penwood since I was a girl. The man helped raise me after my father's untimely death. I would have *known* if he was capable of the supernatural feats you've described! For God's sake... *Alucard* would have at least mentioned if the man possessed any type of extraordinary power!"

For a moment there was utter silence, the nudist refusing to look away, before he answered, "He did bring up the vampire."

Judging by the slight tensing of her jaw, which nearly snapped her second cigar in half, Integra hadn't been expecting *that* answer, "Sir Penwood has known Alucard since the Second World War. I fail to see how it's relevant to the matter at hand."

"Upon dealing with the last of the Quincy, which involved snapping their weapons with his bare hands, Sir Penwood engaged Commander Batou in conversation," the nudist coughed to dislodge the nervous lump in his throat, a byproduct of Integra Hellsing's stern gaze, and motioned to the gray haired nudist, "During this time, he casually mentioned Alucard."

Integra narrowed her eyes at the statement, "What were his exact words?"

Flinching under the intense glare, the nudist soldier hesitantly answered, "I cannot recall the exact phrasing but the context involved the vampire's inability to solve anything without his help."

It was only due to her extreme patience that Integra did not express her annoyance about the ludicrous story in the most direct way possible. While the likelihood that both Nudist Beach and the SAS were lying right to her face were low, especially in the aftermath of a gruesome massacre that left three million dead, she refused to even consider the notion that Sir Penwood was capable of fighting off a Sternritter using nothing more than his bare hands and a dented manhole cover. Especially considering the Sternritter was the same Quincy who gave Ryuko Matoi some difficulty.

"Richards! Don't forget to tell her how the guy - "

A loud smack echoed throughout the clearing when Batou slapped the SAS member on the back of the head hard enough to cut him off midsentence, "Give it a rest! It's not like she's going to believe



anything you say! Even if it is true, we have no goddamn evidence. But jeez... that guy could throw one hell of a punch..."

"I managed to take a picture, sir."

All eyes turned onto the nudist in front of Integra as he reached into his vest and pulled out his phone, "I noticed Ryuko Matoi leave her phone in the safe house after she departed to fight the Quincy. I thought it best to hold onto it until I could return it to her."

Integra's eye twitched for the briefest of moments, her lips quivering in building irritation at the nonsense surrounding her, when the nudist reached into his pocket and began looking through the images on Ryuko Matoi's phone for the mysterious photograph. Grabbing the device once the nudist apparently found what he was looking for, her finger posed over the screen, she stared at the high-definition image and frowned.

It was blurry... *of course* .

Yet she had to give them proper credit. Despite the suspicious blurriness, the individual displayed prominently in the image *did* resemble Sir Penwood to a remarkable degree. But she still doubted their claims. For instance, Sir Penwood certainly did not possess a body that well sculpted or muscular. Nor could he overpower the same Sternritter that captured Walter and fought off Ryuko Matoi using nothing more than standard grappling techniques. It was insanity.

"A single blurry image proves nothing," Integra scoffed, turning the full focus of her ire upon Batou, "But from the evidence you've put forth it appears that Sir Penwood managed to survive the nigh, a rather miraculous feat. So... where is he? Surely contacting him will settle this annoying little matter?"

"I don't know," Batou shrugged, allowing the woman's glare to wash harmlessly off his body. He'd seen Olivier angrier whenever Alex accidentally ate her lunch, "The guy left after punching the Quincy

halfway across London. Said something about dealing with his annoying son..."

Integra found that statement to be strange. Sir Penwood only had a single child and he was identical to his father in nearly every way imaginable, including a meek temperament. He was also studying in Spain at the moment, which raised several questions. If Sir Penwood was indeed in possession of supernatural powers, including the ability to easily overpower a Sternritter with nothing more than his bare hands, what else had he been hiding?

Across time and space, in a dimension hidden within the Soul Society, Yhwach's face flinched for the briefest of moments.

## You Make Me Feel Brand New

*It's been a while since I managed to upload two chapters less than a month apart but Chapter 52 was just so easy to write. And with the Hellsing Arc reaching its conclusion back in Chapter 51, the various actors and characters recovering from the Battle of London, I'm pleased to announce (and give up) the first chapter of the Karakura Assault Arc, which returns exclusively to Bleach and Kill la Kill. And while there might be a few mentions of Hellsing, either by characters talking about Integra or Alucard, none of them will actually appear in the arc.*

*I hope you enjoy the chapter. And be sure to check out the story's tvtropes page. it has a lot of stuff you might have missed while reading the story.*

*Also, I feel the need to mention that the poll between Satsuki and Ryuko is basically tied.*

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### Chapter 52 - You Make Me Feel Brand New

November 9th, 2002 - 10:50 AM JST [2:50 AM GMT]

"Are you telling me the shipment never arrived?"

Ragyo Kiryuin halfheartedly listened to the middle manager stammer relentlessly over the phone. Strumming her fingers against the desk when the man fervently shifted the blame for the shipment's loss onto Nudist Beach's shoulders, the cacophony of colors radiating from her silver hair permeating every shadow of the former Student Council chambers, her mood quickly soured when he mentioned the destruction of her COVERS.

"Well then... you can expect tighter security for the next delivery."

A cold smirk danced across the Kiryuin matriarch's lips at the middle manager's relieved sigh. What a foolish reaction. Did he honestly believe she'd simply let things slide? The man wouldn't survive another week for his failure to stop Nudist Beach, that was certain, but his usefulness was not yet at an end. She still needed to understand how her former husband's organization managed to acquire her company's shipping manifest.

"However, your doubt concerning my COVERS suggests the problem is far greater than you've reported."

She heard the man's breath hitch in his throat at her offhanded comment, an expression of pure terror that brought a smile to her face, "It would be troublesome to send Xcution out to deal with such a minor problem... especially after Miss Tristan's murder at the hands of these naked pigs. But perhaps you have a point. Nudist Beach must suffer the consequences of continuously disrupting the European market. You can expect Miss Partas to arrive within twenty-four hours to ensure the shipments are properly delivered across France."

The middle manager's pathetic stammering intensified at the mention of her employee. Tapping one finger rhythmically against the desk as she patiently listened to his faux confident pleas that such drastic measures weren't needed, that his forces were more than enough to prevent any further assaults, Ragyo narrowed her maroon eyes and smirked, "Bien sûr... but please inform me once the next shipment arrives in Paris."

Snapping the phone shut on her soon-to-be terminated employee before he could respond with more of his annoying drivel, Ragyo turned towards the windows overlooking Honnouji Academy's barren courtyard and stared at the recently constructed satellite transmitter. As several COVERS floated across her field of view, tendrils of Life Fibers trailing lazily from their collars and sleeves, she stopped strumming her fingers and sighed. Nudist Beach was becoming far

more of an annoyance that initially anticipated. She'd assumed her husband's audaciously named organization would focus their efforts on the COVERS slowly pushing southward. Yet that had not been the case. And she could trace the source of her woes back to Olivier Mira Armstrong.

She *should* have searched for the woman's body after dealing with Genesis...

Her former employee had been quite busy these last seventeen years. Ragyo couldn't help but reluctantly concede that Olivier had done quite well in taking over Souichiro's pathetic organization. Turning what would have most likely been a mockery of an army more focused on fighting naked instead of destroying Life Fibers into a reasonable threat was quite the feat, an accomplishment worthy of the Armstrong name. But what truly garnered her attention was the presence of a *fourth* Kamui.

Danketsu.

The Kamui's magnificent name sent a shiver racing down her spine. She had known about Danketsu and its wearer for quite some time, despite her foolish daughter's valiant attempts to keep the information under wraps. At first she assumed the Kamui was nothing more than a cheap knockoff, a mockery woven by her treacherous husband using a small sample of Junketsu's Life Fibers. It was a belief that had been bolstered in the aftermath of Nui's mission to Rio de Janeiro, where her clone observed the Kamui's advanced configuration was nearly identical in appearance. Yet that changed when dearest Nui excitedly announced how the woman - the same woman that coward failed to capture in Seattle - was a Life Fiber Hybrid.

While she needed to reprimand Yuu for leaving something so important out of his report, such a revelation certainly explained how the woman survived his trap. To think yet another Life Fiber Hybrid existed upon this pathetic planet. One unrelated to either Isshin or herself. It was miraculous, a quirk of fate she could play to her

advantage. And if dearest Nui was correct, this woman's, Kinue Kinagase, Life Fibers were quite powerful, which could potentially cause issues down the line. But the presence of another hybrid did not compare to the problem currently occupying her every waking moment.

Isshin.

After twenty-two years that man know how to both infuriate and infatuate her. It was thanks to that lovable oaf that Souichiro even managed to weave Danketsu in the first place. Her former husband was a pathetic man, a parasite possessing only a modicum of talent. All of his creations - Senketsu, Danketsu, the Scissor Blade and Anti-Life Fiber weaponry - were nothing more than cheap copies of *her* inventions. But that didn't bother her. No, what truly bothered her, what caused the rainbow light shining throughout the office to dim, was that Isshin knew everything about the Original Life Fiber's glorious plans and yet he *denied* it. Every step of the way he's fought against the Life Fibers, from kidnapping dearest Amu to hiding Souichiro and Ryuko.

And during the Great Culture and Sports Festival he had the *audacity* to lay a hand on her.

But, even so, she couldn't help but love the man.

Despite his childish but annoying rebellion against Life Fibers, things would be truly *boring* without Isshin's charming personality. He was the only man worthy of her affection. For there was no other soul worthy of the Original Life Fiber's gift, to travel eternally at her side throughout the heavens once humanity succumbed to its inevitable fate.

La vie est drôle...

Ragyo was torn from her swirling thoughts when the wooden doors on the far side of the office creaked open, her maroon eyes swiveling sideways as Rei Hououmaru appeared in the doorway. Subtly

adjusting her aviator sunglasses as she crossed the expansive room, her heels clicking softly with every step, the Revocs secretary bowed profusely before addressing her boss, "I presume your business call with the Paris office went as expected?"

"Paris is most definitely a lost cause at this point," Ragyo tensely conceded, her finger traced a pattern against the desk, "Souichiro's organization will undoubtedly interfere if we sent another shipment to the city, which impacts our market saturation across Western Europe. For the time being we'll refocus our efforts upon the African market. Oh, and please be sure to fire the manager who allowed this atrocity to happen."

Hououmaru stiffened as she pulled a PDA from her breast pocket, "I shall begin preparations right away. However, something has come up that requires your immediate attention."

A single silver eyebrow quirked at her secretary's remark, "Oh?"

"Ten minutes ago we received a heavily encrypted package of data," Hououmaru swiped her fingers across the PDA's screen before continuing, "According to the information, at this very moment the Quincy organization known as 'Millennium' are launching a major assault on London and the surrounding boroughs."

Ragyo nearly laughed at the irony, an amused smirk playing at the corners of her mouth. London, the bastion of the organization that managed to keep the embargo on her company in place, was under attack from those pathetic rats scurrying in the shadows. Dearest Nui's report had been most enlightening. Her mannerisms aside, it had been quite interesting to hear that Millennium and those Quincy from the Great Culture and Sports Festival were one and the same. Yet that didn't make the slightest difference in the end. If these Quincy couldn't defeat a single member of Xcution without assistance from Nudist Beach or her daughters, than what threat could they pose against her?

After all, none of them possessed the same power as *that woman* .

Maroon eyes narrowed fractionally as she perished the thought from her mind, "Is there anything else, Hououmaru? Foolish as they may be, I hardly think these Quincy would simply waltz into London with a creature like Alucard waiting for them."

"Satellite imagery detected several aircraft heading towards London," Hououmaru brought up an image on her PDA, "They should reach the city in just over ten minutes."

Ragyo sighed, an annoyed frown gracing her features as she glanced towards the computer on the desk. It appeared she *vastly* overestimated the intelligence of these Quincy. Directly attacking London and earning the full and undivided attention of Alucard was something even she wasn't keen on doing. The vampire was a mystery, a creature that defied logic and caused her a small amount of grief. But she was content to leave London, and by proxy Great Britain, alone if it meant not having to deal with Alucard, especially after witnessing his sealed power.

Tapping a perfectly manicured finger against the desk as she glanced toward the computer, a detailed image of Shinra Koketsu displayed on the screen beneath scrolling lines of data, she mused thoughtfully before shrugging, "It's tragic that Isshin's actions prevent me from leaving Honnouji Academy. I would have loved to watch Ryuko and Ichigo eviscerate the Quincy down to the last man."

"There's one last thing you should know, Ma'am."

The excitement tainting Hououmaru's voice piqued Ragyo's interest, "It seems Millennium's objective is to destroy Alucard - which will involve slaughtering the entire population of London."

"A rather laudable goal."

The deaths of a few million people did not bother the Kiryuin matriarch. She had already written Great Britain off as a lost cause, the entire country firmly under the control of Nudist Beach and the Hellsing Organization. And with a monster like Alucard, regaining



any semblance of control over the English market would have been nearly impossible. Which is why she couldn't help but thank Millennium.

London's destruction would undoubtedly create a humanitarian crisis of global proportions. Millions of people will require essential supplies to survive the winter, things like shelter, food and *clothing* . Nobody would find it suspicious if Revocs, the largest and most successful attire conglomerate in the world, donated thousands upon thousands of outfits. After all, she was the magnanimous CEO of Revocs, a philanthropist in the eyes of the pigs in human clothing. Not even Alucard would dare interfere in -

Ragyo stiffened, an expression of dawning realization slowly crossing her face, before she coldly asked, "Everyone, you say?"

Hououmaru smirked while subtly adjusting her sunglasses, "All three million residents, Ma'am."

Melodious laughter slowly filled the Kiryuin matriarch's office as she absorbed the true meaning of Hououmaru's answer, the corners of her mouth sadistically twisting upwards. As rainbow light burst forth, covering the room in a brilliant cacophony of colors, Ragyo's laughter continued growing in volume until it could be heard even within the deepest bowels of Honnouji Academy.

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A thunderous clash exploded across Tsubakidai Park as Ira Gamagori stumbled backwards, arcs of electricity crackling around his Shackle Regalia Mark II. Grunting in determination as he planted an armored foot deeply into the ground to arrest his momentum, the former Disciplinary Committee Chair of Honnouji Academy paid no heed to the disturbing glowing cracks slowly spreading across his Goku Uniform. Failure was not an option! Not when everything was

on the line! He couldn't allow himself to stagger, to fall upon his knees at this critical moment!

"Your strength remains as impressive as ever."

Admiration filled Gamagori's voice as the faceplate of his Shackle Regalia slid upwards with a hiss of pressurized air, exposing his smirking features, "But it will take more than that to defeat me, Yasutora Sado!"

Chad quietly grunted in acknowledgement of the Elite Four's compliment as he relaxed his stance, wisps of blue spiritual energy rising from the dual-colored shield extending nearly halfway up his right arm. Flexing his armored fingers, the slight tingling sensation from Gamagori's attack already beginning to fade, he answered, "... thanks. You've gotten better as well."

His brown hair shifting lightly in the autumn wind blowing gently through the park, Chad frowned pensively without saying another word as he considered what Gamagori was *truly* asking. But despite agreeing to the pre-determined rules of their match, which had for some reason involved signing release forms, he was still reluctant to unleash Brazo Izquierda del Diablo's full power against the former member of the Elite Four.

Which was a problem at the moment.

After more than half a dozen similar matches, all of which eventually ended with Gamagori's Shackle Regalia torn to shreds, Chad felt like he understood the teenager far better than most people. Gamagori was stubborn to a fault. Even if he destroyed his Goku Uniform, Chad knew the teenager would continue fighting until he was either knocked unconscious or Satsuki Kiryuin ordered him to stand down. And that was something he couldn't help but respect. The former Disciplinary Committee Chair might be slightly... loud... but he was just that kind of guy, willing to lay his life on the line for a friend. And while he was fairly certain Gamagori saw himself more as Satsuki

Kiryuin's right-hand man instead of her friend, it was still petty much the same thing.

"You want me to hit you as hard as I can, right?"

Chad's question sounded more like a statement as the stoic teenager raised his right arm, spiritual energy enveloping the transformed limb, "... but my answer hasn't changed since the last time you asked. Sorry."

"You DARE go easy on me?!"

Scintillating bolts of purple and green electricity exploded from Gamagori's Goku Uniform at the audacity of his opponent. He was Lady Satsuki's impenetrable shield! There was no attack in all of creation he would not weather to protect her! His faceplate snapping back into place as he stomped forward, the impact of his steps shaking the ground, Gamagori held out his arms and loudly shouted, "While reluctance to harm one's allies is very admirable, do not forget the rules of this match! You signed an agreement *in writing* to use everything at your disposal! If you attempt to renege on your promise, to go back on your WORD, I will not hesitate to discipline you using the full power of my Shackle Regalia!"

Chad spent almost a minute quietly weighing his options before eventually coming to a decision. Extending his left arm, liquid metal flowing down the limb and coalescing into white and red armor, he flexed his fingers before answering, "Alright... but I don't want to destroy your Goku Uniform again. Your friend was rather... scary... after last time."

"Excellent! I'm glad you've realized the error of your ways!"

Arcs of crackling electricity scorched the surrounding landscape as Gamagori rushed towards Chad, one fist cocked over his shoulder, "But do not think the outcome of our battle will be the same as last time, Yasutora Sado! Now prepare yourself! Shackling Punch!"

"Look at those two idiots go..."

Nonon Jakuzure murmured irritably under her breath when the two idiots resumed beating the crap out of each other. Why the hell did she leave the warm comfort of her apartment to watch the toad get his Goku Uniform destroyed for the sixth time? Oh, that's right. Satsuki wanted to observe Gamagori's fight against Strawberry's friend and she just couldn't allow her best friend to go alone. Tucking her hands deeper into the pockets of her bright pink jacket to stave off the bitter cold, her cheeks flushed red, Nonon grumbled in annoyance when Gamagori slammed his fist against Chad's transformed right arm.

"How surprising. The toad is quoting his stupid rules even when he's completed pissed off..."

"You are mistaken, Jakuzure."

The absolute certainty permeating every word of the short answer easily overwhelmed the vibrant display of clashing spiritual energies, the cacophony of harsh and conflicting sounds subsumed beneath the far more noble response. Adjusting the collar of her white jacket, fully unzipped to allow Junketsu the freedom to gaze upon the world, Satsuki Kiryuin's voice remained perfectly calm when she continued, "Gamagori possesses no animosity towards Yasutora Sado for his past defeats."

Nonon frowned in confusion but an annoying voice rudely interrupted her before she could speak, "Lady Satsuki's right."

The golden bandana covering Uzu Sanageyama's sewn eyes fluttered softly in the wind as the kendo master observed the friendly sparring match taking place fifty two feet and seven inches away, pulses of what he now recognized to be spiritual energy painting an extraordinarily vivid picture of Gamagori's fight with Yasutora Sado. It was still strange to consider that his Shingantsu, which he had sacrificed so much for, had been incomplete, unable to sense the supernatural energy known as spiritual energy. At first he found such

assumptions insulting. But after getting his ass handed to him several times a week by Yoruichi Shihoin, a cocky smirk on the shinigami's face while she ran circles around his Blade Regalia Mark III, Sanageyama conceded that maybe she had a point.

"Gamagori's tougher than Chad," the former Athletic Committee Chair explained, smirking when he sensed the approving nod from Lady Satsuki, "But all of his techniques are slow and easy to dodge. And that's ignoring the lack of anger or frustration in his muscles. Heh... smooth. So that's what he's trying to do."

Nonon snapped her head towards the blind kendo master at his enigmatic answer, "What? What is the toad trying to do?"

"Gamagori has recognized the difference between power and experience."

Satsuki's heels clacked softly against the ground as she calmly answered Nonon's question, her piercing blue eyes completely focused on the high-intensity battle between Gamagori and Ichigo's friend. Ignoring the powerful bursts of electricity arcing through the air as the two combatants fought for dominance, the slightest hint of red spreading across her cheeks, the former Kiryuin heiress stood tall before continuing, "You should already know, Jakuzure, that simply possessing power greater than your opponent's does not guarantee victory if you lack the necessary experience to properly wield it. For in a battle between two warriors of comparable strength and speed it will be the more experienced fighter who will emerge victorious. My defeat against Ichigo is testament to that notion. And when facing a monster like my mother, who possesses both power and experience in abundance, such a noticeable weakness will only result in your death."

Reaching towards the auburn Scissor Blade strapped against her back, the hardened Life Fiber weapon unable to collapse to a more manageable size, Satsuki curled her fingers around the curved handle, "It was not until the Great Culture and Sports Festival, when my mother finally dispensed with her mockery of civility, that you

experienced what it truly means to fight to survive, to use all of the power at your disposal against opponents fully intent on taking your life. For make no mistake. If events had proceeded upon a different path Xcution would have killed you without the slightest hint of regret. Such is their unholy and barbaric dedication to Ragyo Kiryuin."

"And that's why Lady Satsuki wants us to train against Ichigo's friends."

Sanageyama folded his arms and smirked when another burst of spiritual energy washed over his body, "Ichigo's fought against some pretty nasty characters... Hollows, arrancar and even a few shinigami. Heh... I'm actually envious of the guy. Fighting through alternate dimensions to save the world from psychopaths sounds like a lot of fun. But if there's anyone that can help Gamagori, it's going to be Chad."

"Jeez... that *almost* sounded profound, monkey," Nonon smirked when Sanageyama's expression didn't change for several seconds, which was the length of time it took him to realize she was being entirely sarcastic. Mockingly waving her baton through the air, a snarky grin plastered across her face, she waited until he *just* began reacting before adding, "And give it a rest with the sagely advice, would you? We all know you're counting down the hours until you can fight that annoying woman again!"

"Yoruichi's brutal training helped expand the range of my Shingantsu," Sanageyama impatiently tapped a foot against the ground, the bandana wrapped over his eyes shifting with his expression. He would not let Nonon's snarky comments get to him. Not again, "If you actually followed Lady Satsuki's instructions and fought Uryu Ishida seriously, you would have noticed the same improvements with your Symphony Regalia."

"Bite me, monkey."

Nonon wasn't in the mood to hear that annoying Quincy's name. When Satsuki announced that she wished for them to fight Ichigo's friends, both to gain valuable combat experience and help Iori and the creepy shopkeeper find any remaining defects in their regalia, she had marched forward jauntily. After all, getting stronger was the only way she was ever going to settle the score with Dokugamine. That near-sighted psychotic bitch was going to pay for trying to turn her 'fluffy!' But before she even thought about kicking Riruka's ass halfway back to Italy, she needed to focus all of her efforts on Uryu Ishida.

Ugh, even thinking the name left a bad taste in her mouth!

Somewhere along the line the Quincy decided that since his stupid powers don't work all too well against her Symphony Regalia, which was fine by her, he would instead hit her with everything at once. Turning around and finding more than one thousand arrows only a few feet away from her face was bad enough, but it was the annoying and condescending smirk that really pissed her off. It was bad enough knowing that the freaks could fly, which was her territory god damn it, but having to hear the Quincy's arrogant commentary every time he blitzed through her defenses was infuriating!

Stomping her foot against the ground and growling when she remembered the Quincy's *last* comment, which had been nothing more than blatant mockery of her choice of music, she vowed to make him pay during their next fight. It didn't matter if they were allies or Satsuki found no fault with his behavior. Nobody mocked Nonon Jakuzure! Not Strawberry or the Transfer Student. And especially not that four-eyed bastard!

"That's enough."

Gamagori stopped moving the instant Satsuki's authoritative voice reached his ears, crackling chains of purple electricity halting inches from Chad's extended left arm. Turning away from his worthy rival at the familiar clacking of heels against dirt, his Shackle Regalia reverting back into its normal form in a burst of stars, the former

Disciplinary Committee Chair ignored his disheveled appearance and stood at attention, "Understood, Lady Satsuki."

Silence momentarily reigned over the park as Satsuki flipped the Scissor Blade around in her grip, the polished surface reflecting her stern expression, before planting it firmly in the ground. Leaving the weapon partially embedded in the ground as she continued marching forward, blue eyes narrowed fractionally at Gamagori's damaged Shackle Regalia, Satsuki's voice contained a measure of pride when she finally spoke.

"Over these last few weeks your performance in battle has improved across the board - strength, reflexes, speed and intuition. But do not confuse improvements with readiness! For I noticed several weaknesses during your match with Yasutora Sado! Vulnerabilities and flaws that my mother and her followers will undoubtedly exploit at the first opportunity! Your Shackle Regalia might have been woven with a singular purpose, but that does not mean you must limit yourself to it! Thinking outside the box! Breaking through the false limitations imposed upon oneself! It is through those methods that you will receive the experience necessary to stand against Life Fibers!"

Gamagori's brow creased into an introspective frown at the biting criticism, the hidden truth of Lady Satsuki's bold words as clear as day. He had allowed himself to grow complacent with his Shackle Regalia's power, limiting himself to the techniques Iori had initially instilled into the Goku Uniform. And while his honest defeat at the hands of his rival during the Karakura Town Raid Trip had opened his eyes, it had come too late to make a difference. Such arrogance could not be allowed for Lady Satsuki's impenetrable shield! How could he hope to protect her if he could not think outside the box?

Steeling his expression into a firm scowl as he turned around, Gamagori marched toward Chad before respectfully extending his hand, "That was a most enlightening match, Yasutora Sado. I look forward to defeating you the next time we fight."



"Likewise..." Chad nodded as he returned the firm handshake, "But please... call me Chad."

"Nonsense!"

The teenager's size seemingly doubled as he folded his arms and passionately declared, "It is disrespectful to address one's allies by anything other than their given name! Calling you anything else would destroy the camaraderie between us!"

"Well said... Maxwell."

A single eyebrow twitched when Yoruichi Shihoin appeared out of thin air almost directly behind him, the playful smirk etched across her face all but apparent. But did she truly think he would allow her to flagrantly disregard the sanctity of social standards? To utter such rude insults against his person?! Angrily spinning around to face the shinigami, a spiked whip emerging from his sleeve, Gamagori's determination to punish Yoruichi rapidly vanished when he found himself face to face with his father.

"Y-You!"

"It fills a father's heart with pride to see his son behave in such an exemplary and commendable manner!"

Alex Louis Armstrong ignored Gamagori's increasingly petulant expression as he firmly clasped a hand around his shoulder. It was truly inspiring to know that his son had grown into a fine young man with a strong moral compass. For despite the more questionable activities he confessed to committing while a student of Honnouji Academy, the knowledge that he did so in order to facilitate humanity's victory over Life Fibers and Ragyo Kiryuin was just enough to earn his forgiveness.

"But I did not come here to exchange simple pleasantries!"

Pink stars twinkling into existence as he flexed his biceps, the well-defined muscles bulging beneath his uniform, Armstrong posed dramatically before adding, "For Satsuki Kiryuin's words carry more than a grain of truth! Despite the great power of your Goku Uniform, the threads PULSING with your determination, there is still much for you to learn before you are ready to fight against the likes of Xcution! Power and experience go hand in hand, two sides of the same coin! One without the other can only lead to disaster! Therefore, Maxwell Bradley Armstrong, I will bestow upon you the secret hand-to-hand techniques that have been passed down the Armstrong line for GENERATIONS!"

"I will require no such thing!"

The nerve of his father to believe he required such archaic techniques to stand at Lady Satsuki's side! Looming menacingly over the older man, who seemed unaffected in the slightest by his son's response, Gamagori boasted, "I shall carve my own path in life! Walking forward as my own man! Independent of the Armstrong name!"

"Simply outstanding, Maxwell!"

Armstrong's boisterous shouting echoed across the park at his son's marvelous answer, the dedication permeating the response bringing a proud tear to his eyes. Tightly clenching his hands together and *flexing*, the already tight-fitting Nudist Beach shirt ripping apart at the seams and exposing his well-sculpted physique to the world, the nudist commander blatantly ignored the mixed reactions from the audience and posed in front of his embarrassed son, "But I must unfortunately DIGRESS! It's the folly of today's youth to think they can survive without learning from the past! Such foolhardy thinking can only lead to tragedy! Yet you are correct! A name is but a sequence of letters! Meaningless on its own! Striving to create your own mark upon the world is a pursuit worthy of an Armstrong!"

"Now then... we have much work to do!"

Firmly grabbing Gamagori's wrist before his son could voice a single protest to the contrary, Armstrong turned around and began marching away. Humming a pleasant tune under his breath as his son futilely attempted to escape his grasp, the passionate blows raining down relentlessly upon his well-defined physique doing very little damage, the nudist commander briefly stopped in front of Satsuki and politely inquired, "Please forgive my rudeness, Miss Satsuki. By interrupting your training session I have besmirched the Armstrong name!"

"I see no harm in this."

Satsuki's unyielding answer brooked no arguments as she closed her eyes and tore the Scissor Blade from its temporary perch in the ground. The eccentric mannerisms of Gamagori's biological father were well known to her. Yet she knew beneath his bombastic and gregarious personality lay an intelligent mind and strong will... the signs of an Armstrong. Flicking a strand of loose hair behind her ear as she turned around, Satsuki remained completely silent while Gamagori was dragged away by his enthusiastic father. Despite his behavior, born out of nothing more than childish embarrassment and petulance, she understood fully well that he would be in capable hands.

For it was foolish to underestimate an Armstrong.

"Man, that's gotta suck..."

Sanageyama shook his head as Armstrong slowly but surely dragged Gamagori off into the distance with barely any effort. In any other situation he would probably make a joke about his comrade's misfortune or take pictures like Jakuzure was doing with her phone. But he was intimately aware of the nudist commander's monstrous strength, power enough to shred his Blade Regalia with a single punch. Rubbing his chin at the phantom memory, Sanageyama couldn't help but feel a little jealous for Gamagori. While his matches against Yoruichi Shihoin were helping his Shingantsu, he would give nearly anything for a rematch against Armstrong.

Only slightly aware of her newest protégé's thoughts as she watched Armstrong passionately drag his son away, the cat-like smirk stretching across Yoruichi's features slowly shifted when she noticed Satsuki Kiryuin staring into the distance. Letting out a tired yawn as she sauntered over to the stern teenager, amber eyes narrowing fractionally when she attempted to follow Satsuki's gaze only to find nothing, the former captain's tone lacked any amusement as she asked, "What's wrong?"

Her undivided attention focused upon Karakura Town's eastern boundary, Satsuki did not immediately answer the formerly exiled shinigami's question as she once more stabbed the Scissor Blade into the ground between her feet. There was something lurking in the farthest depths of her mind. A foreboding sensation that was both alien and nostalgic, bringing to light memories best left forgotten. Yet while she could not understand the reasoning behind the apprehension enveloping her mind, the *direction* in which it arrived was suspicious all on its own.

Turning towards Yoruichi after nearly a minute of silence, Junketsu's multicolored eyes narrowed underneath her jacket, Satsuki skipped the preamble and sternly ordered, "Contact Isshin Kurosaki. Inform him that my mother is most likely preparing to attack."

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The rhythmic clacking of heels against metal echoed softly throughout the retreating darkness as Ragyo Kiryuin strode forth from the elevator, entering the former Student Council chambers with all the regality someone of her stature possessed.

Her elation at the recently revealed news had tempered during the trip from her office, the rainbow light radiating from her silver hair dimming to a fraction of its normal brilliance as she somberly descended the small flight of stairs. She could not simply rush forward. For as ecstatic as she was concerning Millennium's plans

for London, the Life Fibers composing her body thrumming with anticipation, there was too much at stake. One false step, one minor underestimation of Nudist Beach or Isshin's allies, could destroy everything she worked hard to achieve. And with Isshin being... well... *Isshin*, she needed to play her hand carefully. If she didn't, it was quite likely the lovable oaf would find some way to stop her.

But first things first...

"Hououmaru," Ragyo's voice reverberated softly in the darkness, the stern undertone drawing her secretary's attention, "What are our latest projections?"

Flicking her finger across the PDA in her hand, streams of data running down its screen, Rei Hououmaru followed exactly one step behind Ragyo as she answered, "The acquisition of the last remaining American attire companies were finalized during your meeting with the Paris office. Revocs is now the sole distributor of clothing for North America, which puts our market saturation at just over 89.8%."

Ragyo smirked as she plucked a strand of floating Life Fibers out of the air, the crimson thread immediately dying itself the colors of the rainbow. Despite the cowardly yet effective tactics of Nudist Beach, attacking her shipments whenever possible, everything was still proceeding nearly on schedule. Yet simply achieving ninety percent market saturation wasn't nearly enough. Not in the slightest. It didn't matter if every human wore clothing imbued with Life Fibers, the naked apes crushed beneath her feet, if she did not have Shinra Koketsu and the god-like power of Absolute Domination as well.

Absorbing the Life Fiber into her finger as she reached the central platform of the Student Council chambers, her stern gaze drawn to the screens displaying a detailed map of Japan's prefectures, Ragyo closed her eyes and sighed in mild frustration. Ignoring the Mentally Refitted shells of the Honnouji Academy Computer Club, she folded her arms underneath her ample bosom and quipped, "I must give credit where credit is due. The naked apes are putting up *far* more of

a struggle than I anticipated. I assumed the COVERS would have already pushed through Shiga Prefecture. But it seems Olivier is still as stubborn as I remember."

The rainbow light from Ragyo's hair dimmed slightly as she sat down in the very same throne once used by her daughter. Staring at the screen as the information displayed changed to a map of the world, various percentages superimposed on the continents, Ragyo leaned onto her hand before asking the single most important question on her mind, "How long will it take these Quincy to destroy London?"

Hououmaru smirked at Lady Ragyo's question before responding, "The data you gathered during the Great Culture and Sports Festival on the Quincy and their abilities suggests they could destroy London in several hours. However, that neglects the presence of any resistance. Alucard, as well as Ichigo and Ryuko, will most likely take offense to their actions and work to stop them. I understand your excitement, Ma'am, but we must consider the possibility that Millennium will fail to achieve their stated goals."

"You raise a fine point, Hououmaru..."

Ragyo crossed her legs as she hummed thoughtfully, "These Quincy can plan all they want... they can spend another six decades hiding in the shadows like rats... they might even find a way to slaughter London. But they'll tragically perish against Alucard's monstrous power regardless of their own abilities, which unfortunately leaves me with the annoying task of destroying the vampire. Yet once the Grand Couturiers finish Shinra Koketsu, not even Alucard will be able to stand before me!"

Even without the power of Absolute Domination coursing through its weaving, Shinra Koketsu was still a Kamui. A Life Fiber garment of the highest order, fit only to be worn by the being destined to drag humanity towards its final, collective fate. Chuckling softly at the notion of destroying the vampire, Ragyo's maroon eyes snapped towards Hououmaru, "And what is the Vatican's response to Millennium's actions?"

"The information we received suggests that the Vatican has created several battalions under the banner of the Ninth Crusade to deal with Millennium," Hououmaru tapped her PDA's screen several times as she scrolled through the data, "It consists of over three thousand soldiers, most of them wearing Life Fibers, under the control of Iscariot's commander, Bishop Enrico Maxwell. From the Grand Couturier's report, his partnership with the Hellsing Organization and Nudist Beach might be enough to tilt the scales against the Quincy."

"Is that so?"

The amusement in Ragyo's voice did not go unnoticed by her secretary. Enrico Maxwell... now there was a name she never dreamt of hearing again. To think that insignificant child, who possessed not a shred of resistance to Life Fibers, managed to weasel his way into leading the only part of the Catholic Church free of her magnanimous influence. And a *bishop* as well! The irony was enough to make the Kiryuin matriarch chuckle, for this made things far too easy. After all, with so many different forces allied against them, Ichigo and Ryuko including, there was hardly a doubt in her mind Millennium would get slaughtered before the sun rose on London.

But luckily enough, there was a straightforward solution to fix this problem.

Humming softly as she considered her choices, perfectly manicured fingers strumming against the silk-like fabric of her dress, a cold smirk slowly twisted the corners of Ragyo's lips when she came to a decision, "But I can't help but feel a *mere* bishop is insufficient for such a monumental task. Hououmaru, contact our colleagues in the Vatican and let them know that Enrico Maxwell is long overdue for a promotion. I think the rank of archbishop should suffice..."

"As you wish," Hououmaru bowed softly before mechanically turning around, one hand reaching for the phone in her breast pocket, "I shall inform them of your recommendations at once."

Propping her cheek against the palm of her hand as Hououmaru's voice faded into the background, the secretary's Japanese fluidly shifting into perfect Italian, Ragyo closed her eyes and pondered the situation at hand. Yes, it was almost certain she would achieve the necessary market saturation despite Millennium's actions in London. But when the Quincy failed to defeat Alucard, she needed to contend with the distinct possibility the vampire would immediately shift his sights onto her. A twinge of irrational annoyance fluttered in her chest at the thought. Dealing with the vampire would delay the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. But given the power felt by her COVERS clone during their skirmish, which still brought a sneer of revulsion to her face, such preparations were more than necessary.

Yet the high probability of dealing with Alucard was a risk she was more than willing to take at this point.

For the confrontation unfolding in London afforded her quite the golden opportunity.

Rainbow light spilled forth in radiant waves of color as the Kiryuin matriarch's appreciation for Millennium's *marvelous* timing grew exponentially. While she doubted they would be inconvenienced in any way, both Ryuko and Ichigo were effectively trapped on the other side of the world. Their Kamui - Senketsu and Mugetsu - were out of the picture, cutting the number of Kamui standing against her to two. But although most of her remaining attention was focused upon Danketsu and the interesting woman wearing it, Ragyo was hesitant to ignore the threat posed by Satsuki.

La vie est drôle... to think her foolish firstborn believed she could actually arrest her plans.

Yet despite being a failure in every sense of the word, her human body unable to accommodate Life Fibers, Satsuki was *still* her daughter. A fact that would not change no matter how much she wished otherwise. For while she possessed Souichiro's pathetic genes, Satsuki was still conceived after the Original Life Fiber blessed her body with its glorious power. Her ability to activate



Junketsu's advanced configurations during the Great Culture and Sports Festival was proof enough that Satsuki received some modicum of her power, albeit almost insignificant.

But no matter how strong her willpower or intense her determination, Satsuki was still human. And a human could never hope to stand against the glory of Life Fibers.

Subtly twitching her finger, the enthralled members of the Computer Club immediately responding to the gesture by quickly replacing the world map displayed upon the screen for an image of Satsuki wearing Junketsu Zenkan, Ragyo stared at the Kamui as memories of its untapped power pulsed through her mind. Junketsu was the first Kamui, the culmination of years of hard work and research. Both Isshin and her own Life Fibers were used to grant the Kamui existence, which meant if Satsuki hoped to wield Junketsu's full power she would need Isshin's assistance. And given that Isshin is the kind of man to constantly look for new ways to annoy her, she wouldn't put it past the lovable oaf to do just that.

Perhaps Isshin's training would be enough for Satsuki to actually stand against her...

Mocking laughter filled the Student Council chambers at the absurd notion. Even if Satsuki managed to unlock Junketsu's full power with Isshin's assistance, wearing the Kamui with the effectiveness of a Life Fiber Hybrid, in the end she was still just a poor girl using something she could never hope to understand. But Ragyo's amusement was rapidly tempered by reality. Human or not, her daughter was anything *but* stupid, possessing both the mindset and intelligence befitting a Kiryuin. And given the particular *individuals* associated with her former husband's organization, including a very annoying man, it was better to err on the side of caution.

After all, underestimating the pigs in human clothing was how dearest Nui lost her eye. Yet dismantling Nudist Beach, destroying everything her former husband worked so tirelessly to achieve, was an opportunity she couldn't afford to simply let slide.

The gentle clacking of Hououmaru's heels as she returned to her side, one hand smoothing out the faintest of wrinkles on her uniform while the other purposefully snapped her phone shut, caused Ragyo's lips to curl upwards into a conniving smirk. Maroon eyes remaining half-lidded when the image of Satsuki shifted to Ichigo and Ryuko, their magnificent Kamui still as beautiful as the day she first saw them, Ragyo waited several long seconds before asking, "Were there any complications? You were gone for *quite* a while, Hououmaru."

"My deepest apologies, Ma'am," Hououmaru bowed profusely, the aviator sunglasses falling down the bridge of her nose, as she apologized, "But it seems Iscariot has become aware of your infiltration of the Catholic Church, which is most likely due to their ongoing collaboration with Nudist Beach. However, you will be pleased to know that the Pope will anoint Enrico Maxwell as an archbishop within the hour."

"If the Quincy can't slaughter a few million people even after my gracious assistance, then they truly are *pathétique* ."

Slowly pushing herself out of Satsuki's former throne as she spoke, the rainbow cacophony of light illuminating the chamber doubling in brilliance, Ragyo turned to Hououmaru and smirked maliciously, "Begin preparations for Operation Laissez Faire."

Hououmaru's eyes widened fractionally at the command before she quickly regained her composure. Fingers flicking rapidly across the PDA in her hand, the leader of Xcution settled upon one particular file before calmly responding, "Understood, Ma'am. I shall inform Yuu to commence stage one of the operation immediately."

"His merveilleusement performance these past few weeks aside, such an important task might be too much for the coward to handle..."

Ragyo's tone shifted noticeably as she marched across the Student Council chambers, her heels clacking loudly with every step. An

irritated scowl slowly developing across her regal features when her attention was drawn to the monitors displaying the former Sewing Club, the glowing silhouette of Shinra Koketsu crystal clear, she leaned her head backwards and sighed, "I'm afraid Yuu's normal tactics just won't work against Olivier. You're the only member of Xcution that remembers how driven that woman can be, Hououmaru. And with a Kamui such as Danketsu on their payroll, combined with Ginjo's betrayal, Nudist Beach could easily turn the tables on the coward. Oh, that reminds me. Have your people discovered what Ginjo downloaded from our Moscow office?"

"Details concerning the weave patterns of Xcution's raiment, their personal information and histories, a list of Revocs' daughter companies and global market saturation," Hououmaru read off in quick succession, her amber eyes never straying from the PDA's screen, "We're still combing through the data. But the servers Ginjo accessed contained no information on Operation Laissez Faire."

*That* single detail did more to ease Ragyo's growing concern than anything else. Despite his nearly impeccable record during his years of service in Xcution, the only blemish coming from his neutrality during Genesis and Olivier's little rebellion, Ginjo never earned her trust. Perhaps her suspicions stemmed from his close ties to Isshin, for it was that foolish man who convinced her to hire Ginjo in the first place. Or maybe her doubts pertaining to his loyalty began in the immediate aftermath of Isshin and *that woman's* unprovoked attack over seventeen years ago. Ragyo didn't know and, more importantly, she didn't care. She had always suspected Ginjo would side with Isshin when the time came, which is why she limited his role in Operation Laissez Faire from the very start.

And in the end Ginjo accomplished absolutely *nothing* with his pathetic betrayal.

The crimson Life Fibers floating lazily throughout the shadowed chamber immediately adopted a brilliant rainbow hue as Ragyo's lips curled into a psychotic smirk. Her maroon eyes widening sadistically as she stared at Hououmaru, the dark skinned secretary bowing her

head respectfully, the Kiryuin matriarch could barely contain her growing pleasure when she finally spoke, "Inform Xcution that I require a volunteer for a very special mission."

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*"Imitating Hollows... seems like a perfectly logical path for you to follow in order to gain more power. It's not surprising you would do that to becoming stronger."*

*Her breath was coming out in short, gasping pants as she knelt on the ground, bloodied fingers grasping onto a nearby piece of rubble for support. Beads of sweat trickling down her face as the stoic voice drew ever closer, the pale moonlight filtering through the jagged hole in the wall vanishing behind a figure clad in white, she continued gasping for air when he derisively added, "But you will never be my equal."*

*The feeling of complete inferiority permeating every fiber of her being was a strange sensation to the Grand Couturier. Only Isshin Kurosaki had ever made her feel this nervous, and that was only because he was the same as Lady Ragyo. Yet despite the vast chasm between her strength and the figure standing in the darkness, the thought of giving up never crossed Nui's mind. The entire situation was confusing to the Grand Couturier. She didn't understand why she was here, fighting against this complete stranger in the middle of the night, but everybody was counting on her to win. And the thought of letting her friends and comrades die was enough to rouse her into action.*

*Focusing her tired eyes on the pale figure standing against the moonlight, the javelin of green energy clasped in his right hand shimmering brilliantly, she tightly clenched her fingers around the midnight black katana in her own hand, "Getsuga -"*

*"I told you it's useless!"*

*Nui's eyes widened in surprise at the man's frustrated response. That was the first time since their fight started that he showed any emotion. But how did she know that? Pushing such thoughts to the back of her mind as she hastily raised her sword to block his sudden attack, emerald sparks dancing through the darkness, the Grand Couturier gasped when the force behind the strike sent her lurching backwards, her body crashing through the thick wall and out into the night.*

*As she rapidly fell through the skies, smoke and dust clinging to her wounded body, Nui couldn't understand why she wasn't regenerating. Even if her opponent was stronger than she expected, the Life Fibers composing her body should have already healed the damage. It didn't make sense! She wasn't human! She shouldn't be able to feel pain! This shouldn't be happening to her! Yet despite the confusion running rampant through her mind, Nui refused to let go of her weapon. Even as the pale figure closed the distance between them, his bat-like wings flapping harshly in the darkness, her determination to win overwhelmed any thoughts of giving up.*

*What was going on?*

*A pained grunt left her mouth when her opponent slammed his blade against her bare stomach, the twitch of growing frustration barely noticeable in his dulled eyes. Smashing into a piece of falling debris with enough force to shatter the stone, Nui barely managed to catch the brief fluttering of wings before a clothed knee powerfully impacted against the small of her back. The world drifting out of focus as she tumbled through the air, her body crashing multiple times against the side of a massive stone column, the Grand Couturier grimaced when she finally reached the open skies only for a clawed hand to reach out and grasp the tattered remains of her sleeve.*

*And despite teetering on the edge of consciousness, her sight drifting out of focus, Nui still refused to let her sword fall from her numb fingers.*

*" Why won't you let go of your sword?"*

*Her opponent's voice remained as emotionless as ever, yet the trace of incredulousness in the question reached her half-conscious mind. Held aloft several inches above the roof, Nui felt the world slowly drift back into focus when he added, "You've experienced the vast difference in our powers and yet you actually still think you can defeat me."*

*" Difference... in power? That doesn't... matter at all."*

*The words left her raw throat before the Grand Couturier understood what happened. None of this made any sense. Why did she feel the need to say that? Who was this person that so easily managed to defeat her? As the unanswered questions continued growing inside her confused mind, Nui forced herself to look into the figure's cold eyes, "You think I'd give up, just because you're more powerful than me? From our first battle together I knew that you were stronger. At this point, no matter how many times I see how powerful you are, it won't make a difference to me. I'm determined to see this through to the end. I refuse to give up! You should have realized that by now!"*

*Tired muscles quivered as she declared, "I will... find a way... to beat you... \*\*\*\*\*!"*

*A burst of static pierced through the hazy background, cutting off her opponent's name even though she was the one who said it. Eyes widening slightly when the man's grip tightened dangerously around her sleeve before he callously tossed her away, Nui coughed painfully as she bounced against the roof. Panting heavily as she struggled onto her feet, the Grand Couturier stared tiredly at her opponent when he lightly scoffed, "That's nonsense, \*\*\*\*\*. Those are the words of someone who doesn't know the true despair of defeat."*

*Kneeling on the ground, a trail of blood oozing down her forehead and forcing her left eye shut, Nui still couldn't understand why she was still fighting. Even though it infuriated her tremendously, this*

*wasn't an opponent she could defeat. He was too powerful and fast. And with her regeneration not working, she might actually die if they kept fighting. Wait... why was she fighting in the first place? Was it to protect a friend? But that was nonsense. She didn't have any friends aside from -*

*Her heart nearly stopped when the pale figure extended his wings, dark green torrents of energy surrounding his body. Unable to move when the pressure in the air doubled and then tripled, flickers of shadows enveloping her opponent as he slowly transformed, the Grand Couturier could barely breath when an emotionless voice pierced through the darkness, "Since you do not understand I will teach you. This is what true despair looks like."*

*" Resurrección: Segunda Etapa."*

Nui Harime's sapphire blue eyes snapped open, cutting off the rest of the dream before she could find out what happened next.

Blinking slowly as she stared upwards in the perpetual darkness, her position on the cute bed she ordered Hououmaru to bring into the Sewing Club giving her a nearly perfect view of Shinra Koketsu, the Grand Couturier absentmindedly moved a lock of blonde hair off her face. It wouldn't be proper for a woman of her standing to not look her best when she woke up, you know!

"Hmm... what was I dreaming about?"

The question lazily escaped the Grand Couturier's mouth as she watched hundreds upon hundreds of Life Fibers float throughout the darkened room. Sitting up while holding a finger against her chin, an expression of purely innocent wonder adorning her features, Nui pouted when most of the dream slipped away like water through a sieve. All she could remember was fighting against some strange creature that looked like a bat... or maybe it was a bird? Well... she knew it was at night. But the moon had looked awfully strange. And the last time she checked, she didn't have a black sword like Satsuki's useless Bakuzan.

"Oh well, I guess it wasn't that important!"

A saccharine smirk stretched across the Grand Couturier's joyful features as she leapt out of bed, her pink boots landing upon the ground without a single hair out of place. Humming happily when every wrinkle besmirching her dress vanished, Nui adjusted the bow in her hair before skipping towards her destination. There was a lot of work she needed to do if she wanted to remain on schedule. And tardiness wasn't something Lady Ragyo tolerated! Cheerfully watching the Mentally Refitted members of the Sewing Club work without any food or rest, her expression twisted into an annoyed frown when she noticed several new corpses slumped against their sewing machines.

Gosh, she must have overslept. They were all still alive the last time she checked!

With a quick snap of her fingers several COVERS landed behind the fallen students, the emaciated and perpetually screaming faces of their victims not bothering the Grand Couturier in the slightest. Hands clasped behind her back as she watched the Life Fiber beings wrap themselves around the corpses before leaping back into the darkness, Nui Harime purposely ignored the fresh blood splatters and happily looked over her shoulder.

"Golly... I guess I really *did* oversleep!"

Staring directly into the dulled eyes of her twin sister, Amu's purple dress a darker reflection of her cute pink one, Nui pouted childishly, "I hope it wasn't too much trouble working without me, Amu."

"Of course not," Amu Harime replied without emotion, strands of Life Fibers trailing from her outstretched fingers into the darkness, "But did you hear? Lady Ragyo..."

"... is preparing to attack the naked apes," Nui finished without missing a beat, the knowledge of everything she missed during her nap coming to the forefront of her mind. Entwining her fingers with



Amu's, the Life Fibers composing her body pulsing at the contact, she grinned happily, "To think Lady Ragyo is ready to make her grand entrance! It's enough to..."

"... make our hearts flutter," Amu stoically agreed. Tilting her head upwards, dulled sapphire eyes gazing at the nearly completed Shinra Koketsu, she thought silently for several long seconds, "But we should get back to work. It wouldn't be wise to let those nudists think they could win. After all..."

Nui laughed happily as she walked off with her sister, "... they have no idea what they're in for!"

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The early afternoon shadows slowly lengthened along the abandoned stretch of highway as the faint whirring of a helicopter faded into the distance, a brief shimmer of white paint visible against the overcast background before vanishing. Landing in a soft crouch several hundred feet below her departing aircraft, the pavement cracked from the landing, Esdeath Partas flicked a strand of blue hair out of her eyes as she stared at the skyline far to the west.

Perfect...

Esdeath slowly stood up with an almost disturbing level of calmness, one hand brushing dust from her raiment, before folding her arms and assessing the situation. Her landing hadn't been the most inconspicuous. It was more than likely the nudists were already aware of her general presence, which meant she would need to contend with the various Anti-Life Fiber measures they had in place.

Grinning at the thought of finally destroying the naked pigs and their headquarters, Esdeath pressed a finger against her ear, "I've arrived, Lady Ragyo."

"Magnifique..."

The Kiryuin matriarch's tone carried a hint of joyful pleasure at the announcement, "You're free to commence Operation Laissez Faire, Miss Partas. Use every scrap of power at your disposal to make sure not a single nudist leaves Osaka alive."

"Of course, Ma'am," Esdeath's smirk twisted sadistically at the news, "And shall I spare Olivier Mira Armstrong?"

"No," Ragyo's cold response wasn't surprising to the member of Xcution. She was well informed on the Armstrong's reputation, the harshness and ruthless passion in which she used to command Xcution before turning traitor. That Lady Ragyo wanted the woman to suffer before dying only made her task easier, "While I would prefer if you tortured her for all the years she's spent opposing me, time isn't exactly on our side. So kill Olivier quickly... and do *not* underestimate her."

"Understood."

It was difficult for her to tell what was more pathetic - that Nudist Beach had the audacity to oppose Lady Ragyo or that they truly believed they could prevent Life Fibers from taking their rightful place in the world. Life Fibers were the pinnacle of evolution. Anyone that attempted to fight back, to prevent Lady Ragyo's plans from coming to fruition, would perish down to the last man, woman and child. To believe otherwise was foolish. For there was nothing on earth that could resist the power of Life Fibers. Not even those pitiful Quincy, the insultingly named Sternritter, could stand against the strength of her raiment without assistance from Lady Ragyo's treacherous daughter.

Her battle against the Quincy possessing pyrokinesis had proven moderately interesting. While his flames did counter her raiment to some extent, the rest of his techniques were quite inadequate. And while he *did* manage to lightly singe her forearm, a lapse of judgment

born from overconfidence, the superficial injury did not stop her from freezing *his* entire arm in exchange.

If Satsuki Kiryuin hadn't interfered a moment later, when the Quincy was at her complete mercy, she would have struck the finishing blow.

Marching forward, her heels clacking with every step, Esdeath traced a finger against the Xcution symbol stitched above her left breast as she stared at Osaka in the distance. Rapidly swinging her left arm outwards as the sun vanished behind a cloud, she smirked while proudly exclaiming, "Xcution Uniform: Cocytus Raiment!"

An intense burst of rainbow light shone across the landscape as Esdeath's raiment transformed, pale blue metallic armor flowing across her body. Grinning wildly when the last piece of her armor settled into place, the pleated skirt shimmering lightly in the sunlight, she took a moment to experimentally clench her fingers before disappearing in a burst of speed. Ice spreading across the ground with every step she took, the surrounding landscape melting into a blur of orange and brown, Esdeath kept her eyes squarely locked on Osaka. There was no telling what tactics and weaponry the naked apes were preparing to use against her.

But it was the Kamui wearer she was looking forward to meeting the most.

The notion of fighting against that woman caused Esdeath's sadistic smirk to widen. This was the first time since the Grand Couturier wove the last stitching into her Cocytus Raiment that Lady Ragyo authorized the use of its full power. And she planned on using every scrap of power to overwhelm the Kamui wearer before dragging her limp body back to Honnouji Academy for proper judgment. But fighting against such a worthy adversary in a clash for dominance, her very life and existence in the line, was something she'd been hoping -

Esdeath instinctively ducked when an Anti-Life Fiber needle pierced through the exact spot her head had just been occupying.

"A sniper... at this range?"

It was mildly impressive a human existed with the skill and eyesight to accurately shoot a target from over two kilometers, especially without the assistance of Life Fibers. There were perhaps only a handful of people in the world capable of such a feat. Yet it didn't make the slightest difference in the end.

Expertly deducing the most likely locations for the sniper's nest based on the needle's incoming trajectory, Esdeath's expression twisted in perturbed annoyance when she could only narrow down her search to two buildings along Osaka's western edge. Forced to twist sideways when several more needles spiraled precariously close to her body, the wake following the unique bullets rustling her blue hair, she quickly began counting down the exact amount of time it took the sniper to reload. Somewhat impressed by the barely five second interval between shots, Esdeath waited until the next passed harmlessly over her shoulder before raising her hand into the air.

"Cristaux de Glace."

A cacophony of light shone brightly from Esdeath's Cocytus Raiment as an ornately spear carved exclusively of ice flashed into existence between her outstretched fingers. Slamming the weapon harshly against the pavement, a thick layer of frozen water expanding outwards from the point of contact, Esdeath frowned in temporarily irritation as she glanced futilely across the distance skyline. She *still* couldn't find the sniper's location, which only helped to make her mission that much more interesting. The corners of her mouth slowly twisting into a malicious smirk as she reared back her arm, Esdeath carefully focused on the center window of the building's top floor before stepping forward and *throwing* the spear.

The surrounding ice shattered as the spear left her fingers, spiraling through the air in a display of turbulence faster than the speed of sound. Watching in ruthless amusement when the lance pierced through the building's façade less than ten seconds later, the structure shuddering from the impact, Esdeath lowered her arm and

smirked as the secondary effects of her attack began. Thick columns of razor-sharp ice exploded through the walls of the building, tendrils of crimson-tinted thorns skewering every cowering nudist within the structure. And on the off chance the sniper wasn't in the building?

Well... there was only one other choice.

An intricate rapier forming between her fingers in a burst of frost, Esdeath chuckled when the first klaxons pierced through the somber and quiet afternoon before resuming her march upon Osaka.

There was nothing on earth that could stop her from completing Operation Laissez Faire and making all of Lady Ragyo's dreams a reality. The Kamui wearer she fought against back in Brazil could certainly try, but Esdeath was more than prepared to deal with the traitor to Life Fibers. While Danketsu's power severely dwarfed her raiment's, the woman possessed a single weakness that would make victory all but impossible - she *cared* for humans.

As the surrounded landscape vanished within a firestorm of explosions, courtesy of the Anti-Life Fiber mines buried along the highway, the sadistic smirk adorning Esdeath's features didn't falter in the slightest.

She was going to *enjoy* this.

"Hmm? Oh my, it seems like I missed. Well, there goes my perfect record..."

Sukuyo Mankanshoku gently sighed as she pressed a hand against her cheek. Kneeling against the roof as she lowered the M-98 Widow Anti-Life Fiber Model Type 5, the specialized weapon still aimed at her target, she stiffened when the high-rise two blocks to her left exploded into a column of jagged, blood-covered ice. It seemed their uninvited guest could not pinpoint her nest, which didn't come as a surprise. It would take someone with the eyes of a hawk, or at the very least wearing supernatural clothing that granted the ability, to spot her from over two kilometers away.

With a slight narrowing of her eyes as stared through the M-98 Widow's sight, Sukuyo ignored the dozens of nudists who just perished in an extremely brutal fashion to focus on what was truly important. Her perfect record, spanning nearly thirty years and several countries that no longer exist, was in jeopardy of being tarnished! If she wanted to return to Karakura Town a hero, with lots of snacks and souvenirs for Mako and Mataro to enjoy, she needed to make sure the next needle pierced right through their uninvited guest's temple.

She could still salvage her perfect record yet!

Pausing in her efforts when Esdeath Partas vanished within an expanding cloud of smoke and fire, her position obscured courtesy of the Anti-Life Fiber mines, Sukuyo took a moment to reload the M-98 Widow. One should always make sure they had plenty of ammunition, especially when attempting to take down such a stubborn target. Smirking gently when the feed snapped shut with a soft click, the younger-than-she-appeared Mankanshoku was about to resume her efforts when a nudist vaulted up the fire escape to her right.

"The Anti-Life Fiber claymores had no effect," the man announced with audible frustration, sweat and dirt marring his features. Breathing heavily as he stared off to the west, covered eyes narrowing at the column of smoke drifting upwards into the overcast skies, he frowned before adding, "Current estimates place Esdeath Partas reaching the city limits in just over five minutes."

"Why, that's not a lot of time," Sukuyo shouldered the M-98 widow and turned to the nudist, "How odd... I didn't receive any new orders from Miss Armstrong."

The nudist grimaced, his eyes never leaving the highway to the west when he answered, "Communications across the country were severed eight minutes ago. We're currently relying on Kaneo Takarada's self-stylized *Granny Network* ."

"You mean that sweet old lady that stopped by just a few minutes ago?"

Sukuyo's tone lacked any sort of concern as she stared back through the M-98 Widow's sight, which caused her to miss the nudist's twitch of annoyance. Softly squeezing the trigger as the smoke surrounding her target cleared, the blue haired woman visibly staggering when the needle flew slightly off-course and ricocheted off her left leg, she stiffened slightly in dull surprise when Esdeath's gaze focused upon her position. Sighing daintily as she stood up, Sukuyo turned to the nudist and cheerfully announced, "It seems the target managed to spot me. We should run away as quickly as possible!"

"What?!"

An eruption of rainbow light immediately followed the nudist's shocked question as the remaining smoke and fire surrounding Esdeath dissipated into nothingness. Teeth clenched in disbelief as he spun around, eyes widening behind his sunglasses, the soldier couldn't understand how the woman managed to spot Sukuyo. They were over two kilometers away from Esdeath, which was far enough that even the *General* had difficulty accurately spotting a hidden target. This was insane! He needed to warn headquarters! Breaking into a sprint as he remembered the granny crocheting in the second floor of a store down the block, the nudist choked when Sukuyo grabbed his collar and yanked hard in the opposite direction.

"Not that way!" she politely scolded, the M-98 Widow already folded within the case strapped to her back, "Our uninvited guest is getting ready to launch a salvo of deadly arrows on this location. You'll get skewered alive if you flee in *that* direction."

It was thanks to years of fighting against Life Fibers that the nudist was able to pinpoint the source of the faint whistling growing louder by the second. Running behind Sukuyo when the first shards of ice began slamming into the rooftop, thorns of frozen death rapidly spreading outwards, the nudist gaped in surprise when the dainty

sniper vaulted across the nearly fifteen foot alleyway to the adjoining building. His envy at her prodigious skill tempered by the worsening situation, he pushed himself to his utmost limits before following her lead, cursing lightly when he barely managed to land on the rooftop.

Leaping behind the emergency stairwell the moment he landed, a mixture of annoyance and relief on his face when he noticed Sukuyo crouching a few feet away, the nudist coughed heavily when the building he'd been standing upon not a minute ago vanished underneath a layer of crystalline ice. Kinue hadn't skimmed on the details in her mission report. Without reinforcements, and soon, the woman would easily tear through what remained of their outer perimeter defenses before heading into Osaka. And he did not want to imagine what the psychotic slave to Life Fibers would do once she reached the city.

Kinue couldn't have picked a worse time to be in Kobe.

"We can't stay here."

A cascade of explosions tore through the afternoon when Esdeath targeted several other buildings in her increasingly creative attempts to kill them, the structures collapsing under the weight of the blooming ice. He needed to warn the General about the enemy marching upon Osaka. With their communication network offline and Kaneo Takarada's *Granny Network* nowhere to be found, headquarters was completely in the dark. If he didn't figure out a method to send a message to the General without getting killed by Esdeath in the process, any reinforcements sent would be slaughtered by the woman before they even realized what happened.

The relentless wailing of the emergency klaxons continuing unabated, the nudist chanced a glance around their cover in case of any further surprises before gravely adding, "We need to fall back and warn the General. Esdeath cannot be beaten without a DTR!"



Sukuyo nodded understandingly at the order before pointing over his shoulder, "But reinforcements are already here."

Mentally kicking himself for failing to notice something so obvious, the nudist turned around to see dozens of military helicopters rapidly flying towards his location. This was one of Nudist Beach's pride and joy, the same fleet that rescued Ichigo Kurosaki and the others during the Great Culture and Sports Festival. But the soldier's relief was quickly extinguished when Olivier Mira Armstrong leapt from the lead helicopter, her boots slamming violently into the nearby rooftop.

"Would you care to repeat that comment, soldier?"

Olivier's derisive tone carried the full weight of her displeasure for the soldier's audacious claims. Scoffing lightly when the man respectfully saluted her, the nervous twitching of his hand visibly apparent, she marched past him without saying another word. Although the notion of preparing one of their remaining DTR Model Rays left a vile taste in her mouth, the leader of Nudist Beach wasn't stupid. Whoever came up with the belief that the first side to show their trump card automatically loses should be shot. The *point* of a trump card was to take down your opponent before they could use *their* best weapon. And with Kinue currently in Kobe, a mistake on her part, that title fell to the DTR Model Ray.

But that didn't mean she *liked* it.

The DTR Model Ray was commissioned nine years ago with the express purpose of eventually fighting against the most powerful incarnations of COVERS, a name Professor Matoi weaseled out of the surprisingly tight-lipped Isshin Kurosaki. It wasn't designed for regular combat, even if the enemy was someone like Esdeath Partas. And once Aikuro returned to headquarters after his little joyride halfway around the world, which involved commandeering a multi-billion dollar piece of military equipment, Olivier planned on explained in clear, *concise* language how much she appreciated his insubordination.

She didn't give a single *fuck* if Aikuro was the one who designed the DTR Model Ray in the first place.

Sternly watching several helicopters rapidly break formation to directly engage Esdeath, their Anti-Life Fiber weaponry adequate enough to momentarily stall the woman's march, she didn't react into the slightest when a large metallic crate crashed into the roof next to her feet. Stomping a boot against the steel box, the latches automatically coming undone, Olivier reached down and grabbed the heavily modified ML-77 Missile Launcher. If Esdeath Partas wanted to arrogantly march on Osaka like an invincible bitch, then she was going to make her work for it.

Mouth curled into a fierce scowl as she effortlessly hauled the nearly one hundred pound weapon onto her shoulder and walked towards the edge of the roof, Olivier waited until right before Esdeath sauntered within range before depressing the trigger. Unflinching when the Anti-Life Fiber missile immediately burst forth, the specialized starch and bleach warhead travelling just under the speed of sound, Olivier looked over her shoulder once the projectile slammed into Esdeath's position and growled, "That won't slow her down for long. But it will be a cold day in hell before Xcution sets foot in *my* city!"

"I've been around the block quite a few times, you know."

Sukuyo's cheerful smirk didn't falter in the slightest as she propped the M-98 Widow against her shoulder and approached Olivier, "And as a mother who's routinely had to scold her son for his duplicitous methods of stealing furniture, food and other random accessories, I've learned to spot a diversion from a mile away."

"Agreed."

Unflinching when the surrounding aircraft launched their entire arsenals at Esdeath, the notion that the firepower would be enough to kill the woman never crossing her mind, Olivier handed the now useless missile launcher to the nudist soldier, "Order the men to fall

back to position Delta Omega Alpha. The entire concept of high ground is pointless when fighting someone like Esdeath Partas."

Her boots stomping heavily against the rooftop as several helicopters exploded in the distance, dozens of frozen arrows puncturing completely through their fuselages, Olivier scowled when she became acutely aware of another presence. Glancing downwards only to find the same old woman who had been sitting next to her on the helicopter had somehow managed to jump out without breaking a single bone in her body, Olivier swallowed her growing irritation at Takarada's insulting network, "Inform Tsumugu Kinagase to thoroughly sweep the city, starting with our headquarters. I sincerely doubt Esdeath is the only one Ragyo Kiryuin sent."

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"Revocs has some nerve to think they can just walk into *my* town."

From his extravagant but completely safe office in Naniwa Kinman High School, Kaneo Takarada watched the battle erupting to the west with growing annoyance. Did these Revocs punks seriously think they could get away with this? The communications network stretching across the Kansai region had been state-of-the-art. Millions of dollars had been invested into the project. Nudist Beach even managed to acquire a few lucrative patents on the damn thing! And in the course of ten minutes, just when he was about to eat lunch, some asshole uploads a virus and shuts it all down.

"But don't think we're just going to let ya waltz through the front door," Takarada grinned wildly at the troops marching through the streets in front of his school, the heavy artillery and weaponry enough to unnerve at least several major governments. Ragyo Kiryuin had to be nuts to think they hadn't anticipated a full-on invasion. The timing might have sucked, especially with one of their trump cards away in Kobe, but Nudist Beach had been preparing for

the rainbow bitch to pull a stunt like this since the disaster at Honnouji Academy.

The sound of stomping boots caught Takarada's attention when a group of heavily armed nudists, soldiers he personally selected as his entourage, stormed into his office. Ignoring the teenager as they fanned out across the room, the form-fitting body armor hiding their features, the seven nudists thoroughly checked every inch of Takarada's office before turning to the Student Council President.

"Sir," one of the nudists, a grizzled man in his late forties, stepped forward, "We've been ordered by the General to escort you to our headquarters. It'll be the safest position in Osaka should the intruder penetrate the outer perimeter."

"Do any of ya have any idea where you're standing?"

A bundle of Takarada Bucks appeared in the teenager's hand as he lightly fanned his face, the reflection from the window showing his greedy smile, "Next to your headquarters there ain't no safer place in Osaka than this room! Five-inch thick titanium walls laced with Anti-Life Fiber technology, bulletproof glass that can withstand concentrated artillery fire and a security system that only responds to my biometrics. Nothing can get into this room without my permission!"

"Mr. Takarada..."

Another nudist, a young man with faint traces of stubble, threw away any pretenses of politeness, "The woman currently marching on Osaka will not hesitate to torture and kill you if she manages to breach the perimeter. If you refuse to leave under your own power, the General has ordered us to drag you to headquarters using whatever means necessary."

"I'm well aware of that woman's murderous reputation. I've paid for and attended far too many funerals to forget something like that."

Takarada's characteristic smugness vanished at the heavy reminder of the sadistic pleasure Esdeath Partas took in torturing and killing any nudists she captured. Fingers clenching the stack of money in his hands, the faux currency crinkling under the pressure, he snorted loudly before exclaiming, "But we have a weapon of our own! Something powerful enough to tear apart that ice bitch! And I'm not talking about something simple like guns! Because when dealing with monsters like Ragyo Kiryuin or Esdeath Partas, conventional missiles and guns are about as useful as pennies on the dollar!"

The nudists briefly glanced at each other before one, a young woman, asked in an extremely deadpan tone, "Are you talking about money, sir?"

"Of course I am!"

He couldn't believe the nerve of the nudist to ask such a ridiculous question. Slapping the bundle of Takarada Bucks against his desk as he spun around, the customized and expensive wood costing a fortune and a half creaking under the blow, he grinned smugly, "That bitch might be strong as hell but her uniform ain't close to being a match for the unlimited power of money! Money can buy anything in the world except for loyalty, because someone that can be bought for nothing more than a few thousand bucks ain't someone that won't accept a higher offer!"

Takarada walked around his desk with a confident swagger, the ZENI etched across the front of his golden grill shining brightly as he waved the thick stack of legal tender at the stoic nudists. His cocky smile widening when the door to the office slammed shut with a hiss of compressed air, the windows behind his desk shimmering as the Anti-Life Fiber technology in the panes activated, he flamboyantly announced, "Money is what developed the state-of-the-art equipment used by Nudist Beach! It's what funded the research into countering our guest's uniform! And do I need to mention money is what allows your organization to hide across the world from Revocs? Money is the beginning and end of everything! For money is how we

created the ultimate Anti-Life Fiber trump card! A weapon to surpass Kamui!"

An awkward silence permeated the newly sealed office when none of the nudists bothered to respond to his grandiose speech. Stuffing the bundle of Takarada Bucks into the folds of his coat upon noticing the seven identical expressions of resigned annoyance, the heir to the Takarada Conglomerate swallowed whatever remained of his dwindling pride and walked across the room towards the fridge underneath his Rembrandt.

"Ya might as well make yourselves comfortable. That door ain't going to open for another ten minutes."

Humming under his breath as he rummaged through the extensive selection of foods and drinks stuffing every shelf in the fridge, all of which were legally purchased and shipped into Osaka through completely legitimate methods, Takarada smirked when he spotted a choice dish of lobster. Nearly salivating in anticipation at his lunch, which had almost been ruined by the invasion, he reached out to grab the plate only to freeze before his fingers touched the porcelain. There was a nearly imperceptible discoloring of the seafood, something people without money would never have noticed.

With a loud snap of his fingers six of the nudists immediately betrayed the seventh, their Anti-Life Fiber weapons aimed directly at his shadowed face. Grinning widely as he stood up and turned around, the tainted food in the fridge already forgotten, Takarada mockingly clapped his hands at the caught spy, "I suppose ya think I'm some rich idiot without a shred of intelligence."

"Well..." the intruder smirked as he slowly raised his hands, the barrel of the weapon pressed against his neck making quite the point, "Your security system was just so lax I couldn't help but snoop around."

"Is that right?"

Takarada gave the intruder a wide berth as he strode toward his desk. Folding his arms as he sat down, he pointed a finger at the man and exclaimed, "I suppose ya feel rather smart for bypassing my security, don't ya? I've heard a lot about ya, especially about your show in London. And evading a woman like Yoruichi Shihoin ain't no walk in the park either! But ya made one mistake coming after me..."

Slamming his hand against the desk, the Student Council President leaned forward and shouted, "I only have SIX guards and I know all of their names and faces by heart! Ya lost the moment ya walked through that door! Ya have a better chance of Satsuki Kiryuin confessing her love to *me* than tricking Kaneo Takarada! Heh... but what can I expect from a coward working for that rainbow bitch to the north?!"

"Why thank you..."

An intense burst of rainbow light exploded from the intruder's body at the backfired insult, destroying not only the misappropriated Nudist Beach uniform but also exposing the active Lache Raiment somehow concealed underneath. The corner of his mouth twisting into a cocky grin as he danced through the reflexive gunfire, the specialized Anti-Life Fiber needles passing harmlessly through his equally smug afterimage, Yuu Akiyama displayed not the slightest trace of hesitation when he appeared in front of a nudist and smashed his knee into the man's crotch.

"My apologies..."

Letting go of the soldier as he collapsed to the ground in the fetal position, both hands tucked firmly between his legs, Yuu glanced over his shoulder before casually ducking beneath the Tailor Dagger aimed at his spine. One hand gripping the edge of his burglar's cap while he counted to five, the potent sleeping gas emitted by his Lache Raiment quickly knocking out two more nudists, he turned towards the three remaining soldiers and smirked as strands of crimson Life Fibers emerged from his sleeves.

"But I prefer to fight in a fair, but cowardly, way."

The glowing Life Fibers twisted into thin razor-sharp wires between his splayed fingers at the command before whipping towards the nudists in the blink of an eye, effortlessly slicing apart their weapons fast enough to heat the metal to a red-hot glow. Whistling jauntily when two of the nudists quickly recovered and attempted to blindside him only to get caught by a previously invisible Life Fiber trap, the threads wrapping taunt around their struggling bodies, he curled his finger and watched as the sixth and final nudist was bound tightly next to her colleagues. After giving his newly captured prisoners a once over, their arms and limbs pinned tightly together, Yuu clapped his hands and turned towards the unnerved Takarada.

"Not many people would have noticed the colorless, odorless poison I laced throughout every single one of your meals," Yuu ignored the muffled groaning from the captured nudists and politely inquired, "What gave it away?"

"Ya think an antiquated trick like that would fool me?!"

Takarada ignored the nervous sweat trickling down his face as he glared defiantly at Yuu, "Ya think you're the first bastard to try and poison me? Ya should have seen what happened during last year's Student Council elections!"

"Oh, I know all about that..."

Yuu smirked at the Student Council President's falling expression while casually pulling out a burglar mask from his raiment's pocket, "Which is why I installed a very special device into your fridge. The moment you opened the door a small but powerful signal was emitted, priming the fifty-nine bombs scattered across the city. And before you ask, the bombs do not contain any Life Fibers. So your detectors won't be able to track them down... unless I tell you where to find them, that is."



Grinding his teeth at the worsening situation, Takarada gripped the edges of the desk while subtly moving his finger towards the emergency escape hatch button, "I suppose this is the part where ya threaten to detonate the bombs unless I tell ya what ya want to know? Or are ya just going to kill me?"

"I'm afraid it's neither of those options," Yuu merrily spread his arms, an expression of faux surprise etched on his face, "You're far too valuable of a hostage to simply kill. And after last year's Student Council elections I never would have been able to sneak the detonator into your office. Instead, the bombs will immediately detonate once you press the emergency escape hatch button underneath your desk."

The Student Council President of Naniwa Kinman High School froze at the declaration, his finger hovering an inch away from the button. Was the coward bluffing? No... he was sure the member of Xcution was telling the truth. Sweating nervously when Yuu walked across the office and leaned over his desk, Takarada stiffened when the cowardly spy smirked.

"Now, why don't you start by telling me all about this secret weapon. I believe you called it... DTR?"

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### **Kamui Tales [Alternate Weave #3 - Purity]**

"... *Ichigo!*"

Ichigo Kurosaki's eyes snapped open as he smashed through the surface of the water. Momentarily struggling for air against the salt water invading his lungs before remembering that he didn't *need* to breathe, or at least not like a normal person, he gritted his teeth before pressing down on the spaulder strapped around his left shoulder. As Mugetsu's power coursed through his body, Ichigo had

only a second to register her rising worry and confusion before she independently activated Gufū and reoriented his body.

Bursting through the surface of the ocean in a violent spray of salt and foam, the heat exploding from his transformed legs boiling away the surrounding water, Ichigo reflexively tried to catch his breath. Rivulets of water running down his face as he hovered in the air, Mugetsu shivering around his body in order to remove any liquid still stuck in her threads, Ichigo stared out across the ocean and quickly realized they were no longer in London.

**" *Ichigo, where are we?* "**

"I don't know," Ichigo hesitantly admitted as he searched for any signs of human life. The last thing he remembered was getting a call from Yoruichi before a massive wave of vertigo swept over him. And just before blacking out he heard Ryuko shouting his name, "But we can't stay -"

The chaotic mixture of presences that suddenly washed over his mind, two spiritual energies he never imagined working together, cut Ichigo short before he could finish. What he felt was impossible. And judging from Mugetsu's shock it was clear he wasn't the only one to come to that conclusion. He knew better than anyone that Senketsu would *never* let Ryuko wear Junketsu. He was just too jealous... just like his own Kamui. And even on the extremely off chance Senketsu *did* allow Ryuko to wear another Kamui, there was still the question of *how* she managed to get all the way out here from London.

**" *Why is Ryuko wearing Junketsu?* "**

Mugetsu's multicolored eyes swiveled across her backswept wings as she stared over the horizon before narrowing in venomous disgust. She *knew* the abhorrent sensation plucking at her threads. It was something the Kamui thought she would never have to feel again. But there was something else, a slight difference that made things exponentially worse. Allowing the pure and adulterated anger she felt to permeating through their intimate connection, Mugetsu

growled with barely contained contempt, ***"Ichigo, I can't tell where Junketsu's Life Fibers end and Ryuko's begins! It's as if someone wove them together, destroying who they were to create something monstrous!"***

Ichigo didn't wait for Mugetsu to finish speaking before blasting towards Ryuko, jets of waters exploding upwards from the speed. This was bad. Even if the situation wasn't anything like the Karakura Town Raid Trip, and his Life Fibers had nothing to do with Junketsu's current distress, he refused to allow them to suffer. The vivid memories of the Kamui's agony due to Satsuki were still fresh in his mind.

He *would* find a way to help them.

It took him barely a minute to finally spot the carrier cutting lazily through the ocean and another five seconds to realize Ryuko was fighting against Satsuki. His confusion worsening when he sensed Senketsu, the Kamui wrapped around Satsuki as she desperately fought to defeat her brainwashed sister, Ichigo swallowed the nervous lump in his throat as he twisted around and landed on the SS Naked Sun's deck several meters behind Ryuko. Grimacing in growing dismay at the potent yet vile spiritual energy pulsing from Junketsu, the Kamui's presence tainted beyond anything he felt in Karakura Town, Ichigo's eyes widened at the sheer *joy* Ryuko was experiencing choking her sister to death.

"Ryuko!"

Ryuko's fingers tightened around Satsuki's throat, eliciting a gasp of pain from her sister, when she heard some asshole shout her name. Growling angrily at the unwanted interruption to her sister's long overdue ass-kicking, she turned around to tell them to 'shut the hell up' only to freeze as her eyes locked upon an orange-haired teenager wearing what looked like a very good imitation of a Kamui. No... it was a Kamui. But more importantly, it actually covered nearly every inch of his body.

"That's a pretty fancy Kamui you got there," she smirked maliciously as she drank in Mugetsu's enveloping appearance, how her clothing covered all of Ichigo's body, before turning spitefully back to her struggling sister, "It looks tailor-made too, nothing like this shitty dishrag."

**" *What did she call Senketsu?* "**

Ichigo pushed aside the growing sensation of foreboding as he drew Tournesol, the blue weapon instantly catching the attention of several people. Calmly swinging the Hardened Life Fiber blade in front of his body, the motion causing Ryuko's smirk to widen, he scowled when she tightened her grip around Satsuki's throat, "Let her go."

"So your Kamui can talk..."

The malicious interest in Ryuko's eyes was easily visible as she turned completely towards Ichigo with Satsuki's heels dangling only a few inches above the deck. Smirking when she released Satsuki before smashing an armored fist into her face, the force behind the blow sending her sister crashing backwards along the Naked Sun, Ryuko pointed the Scissor Blade at Ichigo and growled in annoyance. She didn't like the way his Kamui was looking at her. And the conflicted expression in Ichigo's eyes was enough to seriously piss her off.

Why the hell did he look so freaking sad?

"Whatever, I can deal with my bitch of a sister later," Ryuko muttered while flicking her wrist, causing the Scissor Blade to rapidly transform into Decapitation Mode accompanied by a metallic clang. Strutting menacingly towards Ichigo, who had yet to raise his own weapon in defense, she spat to the side while rubbing her chin. Junketsu could instinctively sense the power coursing through the guy's Kamui. But she knew that wasn't why Junketsu was pressing relentlessly against her mind, imposing its pure and untainted will

upon her hybrid body. There was something else about the guy, a sense of familiarity. It was almost as if he was just like -

"Heh... you've got to be freaking kidding me!"

The deep blue undertone staining her feathery hair shone brightly as the last pieces settled into place. Now she understood everything about this guy! Tilting her head sideways while pointing the Scissor Blade at Ichigo, Ryuko grinned savagely, "It all makes sense now! There's no freaking way a normal human could wear a Kamui as fancy as yours without being eaten by it! But you're perfectly fine! Without a freaking care in the world! Which means you're just like ME!"

Steel crumpled like paper beneath Junketsu's heels as Ryuko rushed Ichigo, thoughts of skewering his body with the Scissor Blade pulsing through her twisted mind. She didn't give a damn if mother would be disappointed she ignored Satsuki and potentially allowed her escape. Finding another Life Fiber Hybrid and Kamui, especially when she was damn sure they weren't supposed to exist, would more than make up for it. She could already see the look on her mother's face when she dragged the guy back to Honnouji Academy. And thanks to not being human, she could do whatever she wanted to the guy without worrying about killing him.

Ryuko felt Junketsu's presence press firmly against her mind, directing her willing body like a puppet, as she tightened her fingers around the Scissor Blade. It was right. She couldn't afford to hit the guy with anything less than her full power. Wisps of crimson energy evaporating off the extended blade like smoke while superheated steam erupted from Junketsu's pauldrons, Ryuko stomped a heel against the Naked Sun's deck for leverage as she hefted the Scissor Blade over her shoulder and swung it at Ichigo's seemingly exposed neck.

She knew damn well beheading the bastard didn't have a shot at killing him. But it would make sure he was too busy regenerating while she finished dealing with Satsuki.

"Damn it!"

Ichigo cursed his stupidity when he attempted to parry the Scissor Blade with Tournesol only for the force behind Ryuko's attack to nearly shatter his arms. Gritting his teeth when his feet began pushing through the reinforced steel of the Naked Sun's deck, sapphire and crimson sparks dancing through the air between their blades, Ichigo stared into Ryuko's crazed eyes and grimaced. He should have activated Mugetsu Zangetsu the instant he noticed Junketsu was already in her advanced configuration. But something had stayed his hand. While the familiar strength of Junketsu Zenkan was powerful enough for Ryuko to almost break through his guard, the fact he actually *blocked* her attack without using Zangetsu implied the Kamui wasn't as strong as he remembered.

Which meant he had a chance.

A mixture of blood and spittle flew from Ryuko's disbelieving mouth when Ichigo somehow managed to overpower Junketsu and punch her in the face. Skidding backwards along the Naked Sun's deck, her Kamui's heels digging twin trenches in the steel plating, she gnashed her teeth in frustration. What the hell was going on? How had this asshole, this punk who came out of freaking *nowhere*, overpowered Junketsu so damn easily?! Blue eyes flickering to the left when she noticed Satsuki getting back onto her feet, Senketsu's single eye focused on their battle, Ryuko sneered at Ichigo as a blue aura surrounded her body, "Well, you're certainly not a pushover like my bitch of a sister. But I'm still going to kick your -"

"Mugetsu Zangetsu."

Ryuko was caught off guard by Ichigo's sudden shift into his Kamui's advanced configuration, its magnitude of power more than enough to temporarily quiet Junketsu's voice. Teeth clenched at the sanctimonious expression on the bastard's face, the look in his eyes seriously starting to piss her off, she snarled when she heard him whisper to his Kamui, "I'm sorry about this, Mugetsu. But we can't keep holding back against Ryuko and Junketsu."

" *I know*," the Kamui's feminine voice responded in a remorseful tone, "***The longer Ryuko is bound to Junketsu, the harder it will be to safely separate them.***"

"SHUT THE HELL UP ALREADY!"

Any pretense of civility was rapidly discarded when Ryuko tore across the Naked Sun toward Ichigo. She was getting *sick* and *tired* of the asshole's stupid attitude. Did he really think she couldn't hear his every goddamn word? She didn't need his fucking pity! Shouting impotently as her heels kicked up large sheets of steel, Junketsu shining with a dangerous blue light, Ryuko attempted to bifurcate Ichigo only for the Scissor Blade to pass harmlessly through an afterimage. Fingers locked around the transformed hardened Life Fiber weapon as she attempted to slice Ichigo again and again... only to miss each and every time... Ryuko gagged when the bastard finally decided to attack, the simple swing of his blade sending her sailing backwards before crashing into the ship.

"Stop this, Ryuko," Ichigo nearly flinched when Ryuko staggered back onto her feet despite his warning, her eyes narrowed in rising fury.

"How the freaking hell do you know me?!"

Ryuko harshly stabbed the Scissor Blade into the Naked Sun as Junketsu's anger echoed throughout her mind, a tempest of emotions that caused the Life Fibers binding them together to quiver. Panting lightly as the trail of blood dribbling from her mouth vanished, absorbed back into her body without leaving a scratch, she snorted at Ichigo's conflicted expression and growled, "That annoying look in your eyes... the way you're *holding back* against Junketsu... you know me, don't ya?"

A tense wind blew across the Naked Sun, carrying with it the scent of the Pacific Ocean, before Ichigo solemnly replied, "Yeah..."

Bursts of steam erupted from Junketsu as Ryuko uncaringly grabbed the Scissor Blade before tearing it out of the Naked Sun. Tranquilly swinging the extended blade across her body, wisps of crimson energy enveloping the weapon, she spat onto the deck and frowned, "Whatever, but I guess this means I can't keep attacking you without thinking. Otherwise you'll just keep kicking my ass. But once I'm through tearing apart your Kamui, I'm going to finish dealing with my bitch of a -"

Ryuko's threat was severed prematurely when dozens of miniature rockets slammed into her body, enveloping a third of the Naked Sun in a roiling sea of flames while sending a thick cloud of smoke into the sky. Staring in morbid fascination when Uzu Sanageyama rushed toward Ryuko naked as the day he was born apart from a few well-placed belts and straps on his arms and legs, Ichigo didn't show the slightest hint of surprise when Satsuki appeared at his side.

"Your Kamui..."

Calmly wiping the blood oozing down her face onto Senketsu's sleeve, the Kamui rapidly absorbing the nourishing liquid, Satsuki paused briefly to gather her thoughts before turning her full gaze upon Ichigo, "Where did you get it?"

Ichigo resisted the urge to roll his eyes at Satsuki's demeanor, "Does it matter?"

"I suppose not," Satsuki admitted as she watched Ryuko demolish the Elite Four's attempts to restrain her with predictably little effort. Returning her attention to Ichigo after Jakuzure unleashed a second salvo of rockets, most of which were cut to shreds before reaching their target, she took notice of Mugetsu's appearance before commenting, "You referred to your Kamui as Mugetsu - Moonless Sky. I suppose that means you can communicate with it?"

"Yeah, I can hear her," Ichigo didn't flinch apart from a slight narrowing of his eyes when the Naked Sun's main cannons fired upon Ryuko, one of the massive shells ricocheting into the clear



skies courtesy of the Scissor Blade. Hand tightly clenched into a fist when he heard Ryuko's sadistic laughter, the cruelty permeating her voice causing Senketsu to continue worrying about his only true wearer, he partially turned to Satsuki before asking the question that was on his mind, "Does Karakura Town mean anything to you?"

"No."

Satsuki arched an eyebrow in moderate curiosity at the seemingly random question. She had never heard of a city called Karakura Town, yet the emphasis he placed upon the location implied its importance. It was highly likely the city was either where he was born or where his Kamui was woven. Barely missing Ichigo's dejected expression when another series of explosions tore across the Naked Sun's deck, Satsuki easily discarded her current line of thought to focus on the matter at hand, "We can save such trivialities for later! Your Kamui's power will be useful in restraining Ryuko Matoi should she regain the advantage! But do not interfere unless absolutely necessary! For it is *my* duty to free Ryuko from clothing!"

" ***Ugh, I nearly forgot how Satsuki used to speak,***" Mugetsu grumbled at Satsuki's overbearing presence before her multicolored eyes swiveled toward Ryuko, "***But freeing Ryuko is not going to be easy, Ichigo. I don't know how we're going to separate Junketsu's Life Fibers from her own.***"

" ***What?***"

Senketsu's eye quivered fearfully at Mugetsu's comment as he watched his wearer tear through the Elite Four, "***There has to be a way to save Ryuko!***"

"I've dealt with something like this before," Ichigo grimaced as he desperately tried to think of a way to save Ryuko without killing either her or Junketsu, a situation which was made unnecessary more difficult when Satsuki glared at him with suspicion in her eyes. He had nearly forgotten she couldn't hear Kamui. But before he could explain to her what Mugetsu had told Senketsu, Ichigo stiffened

when a familiar presence pulsed through his mind, a sensation that caused Mugetsu to instinctively tighten around his body.

**" *She's coming, Ichigo...* "**

Senketsu shivered at the mixture of frustration and apprehension in Mugetsu's voice, an action that quickly drew his current wearer's attention, **"*Who's coming?*"**

"Someone stitched Junketsu directly onto Ryuko. It won't be easy separating them," Ichigo didn't give Satsuki the chance to argue as he turned towards the purple light just beginning to shimmer on the horizon. Great, this was *just* what he needed at the moment, "But you should figure something out quickly. I don't know how long I can keep Nui Harime busy."

If Satsuki was bothered by Ichigo's familiarity with the Grand Couturier she didn't express even the slightest hint of surprise, her eyes instead narrowing in determination. There were more important matters to deal with at the moment than asking such meaningless questions. Whether Nui Harime was truly on her way due either to her mother's orders or the Grand Couturier's immoral interest in Ryuko, the end result would be a disastrous complication to her plans. And she refused to allow such distractions at this crucial time.

"Deal with the Grand Couturier however you see fit," the Kiryuin heiress still didn't trust Ichigo. Until a few weeks ago she had been privy to her mother's deepest and most closely held secrets. There should have only been *two* Kamui in existence - Junketsu and Senketsu. The presence of Mugetsu, a third Kamui and proportionally stronger than Junketsu, threw everything into turmoil. Yet she would not allow suspicion to cloud her judgment. Ichigo's clash against Ryuko demonstrated his allegiance was not with her mother, and for the time being that was good enough.

Senketsu's heels clacked against the Naked Sun's deck as she left Ichigo to deal with the Grand Couturier. Despite her suspicions, the information he willingly provided would prove vital in freeing Ryuko

from Junketsu's deeply woven control. Tightening her grip upon the reforged shards of Bakuzan as she leapt away, steam bursting from her temporary Kamui's vents as a wave of exhaustion pulsed through her mind, Satsuki vanished into the surrounding smoke moments before Nui Harime landed silently behind Ichigo.

"Were you expecting me?"

The Grand Couturier tilted her head in curiosity at the teenager's audacity, the determined look in his eyes causing her to giggle in amusement. But it was the Kamui wrapping around his body, covering nearly every inch of flesh with clothing, which stopped her from immediately messing with Satsuki's little scheme. It had only taken the briefest of glances to figure out that it was a true Kamui and not a fake dishrag like Senketsu, which caused a twinge of envy in her heart. Who could have woven such a high-quality piece of clothing *without* getting Lady Ragyo's attention?

It was *almost* at her level.

"And you're wearing a Kamui, which raises so many interesting questions!" Nui's single sapphire eye blinked cutely when Ichigo didn't answer the question. Smirking as she reached into her pink dress and pulled out the purple Scissor Blade, she tucked it against the small of her back and playfully pouted, "I really should drag you back to Lady Ragyo. She would so want to examine your adorable little Kamui! But don't you worry! I'll come back and deal with you right after I throw a wrench into Satsuki's plans!"

Something completely unexpected happened when she attempted to interfere with Satsuki's little scheme to separate Ryuko and Junketsu. One moment she was easily passing Ichigo without any difficulty, the purple Scissor Blade gleaming dangerously within her manicured fingers, and in the next she found her center of balance abruptly shifting when something locked firmly around her wrist. Blinking owlishly when the sudden change in momentum caused her pink boots to comically leave the ground, her large pigtails fluttering

in the wind, the Grand Couturier was surprised when she was spun around before being rudely tossed away from Ryuko and Satsuki.

"Huh?"

Her smile fading as she smashed face-first into the Naked Sun's deck, the metal crumpling under the impact, Nui easily flipped back onto her feet a moment later looking no worse for wear. Yet she was starting to get annoyed. There was nothing that could stand against the strength of her Life Fibers! But this human wearing a high-quality Kamui had just tossed her away from Ryuko without any effort. And that just wouldn't do!

Ichigo narrowed his eyes when the Grand Couturier vanished without saying another word. He knew what happened when Nui started getting annoyed. Having a Scissor Blade thrust into his chest wasn't something he wanted to experience a second time. But while it was still uncertain about a lot of things, including how different this Grand Couturier was from the one he knew, one thing he *did* know was that she was *weaker* . And that was good enough for him.

"Sorry about this..."

Calmly tracking Nui as she attempted to sever his left arm at the elbow, the manic expression on her face intimately familiar, Ichigo waited until the Scissor Blade was inches from his body before blocking the strike with Tournesol. As the Grand Couturier's eye widened, nervousness and fear playing across her features when she realized his arm hadn't moved from the moment their weapons connected, Ichigo's features tightened into a scowl, "But I'm not going to let you stop Satsuki from saving Ryuko."

# Killer Queen

*It took a little longer to write this chapter than I anticipated, mostly because I went back and rewrote the introduction of Ragyo and Hououmaru into the story in Chapter 3. I recommend you go back and reread that chapter because I closed a lot of potential plot holes while clarifying a few things... as well as Ragyo's initial surprise at Kisuke Urahara's skills in weaving Mugetsu and creating a Bleach Bomb. The initial version was rather lackluster considering how much I've improved my writing, so it was necessary to go back and rewrite everything in Ragyo's introduction from scratch (especially considering her personality in that chapter was created prior to Episodes 18 and 19).*

*I also highly recommend you go back to Chapter 18 and reread the entirety of Isshin's flashback from start to finish. The reason why will become clear once you read through this chapter.*

*There is one other thing I need to mention. **Grocamol** on deviantart has commissioned an ongoing manga adaptation of my story, drawn by the extremely talented **Ardeearollado** . It's only five pages into the first chapter but I'm truly honored that someone would willingly pay an artist to draw a manga about my story.*

*So that being said, I hope you enjoy this chapter!*

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## Chapter 53 - Killer Queen

March 10, 1985 - Kiryuin Manor

" I'm sorry about Masaki."

*Isshin Kurosaki pulled uncomfortably at the collar of his only formal business suit, a nonnegotiable requirement whenever he visited Ragyo, for the fourth time since walking through the front door. Grimacing at the sensation of the high-quality threads rubbing against his skin, the former shinigami ignored the tiny voice whispering from the depths of his mind that he could weave something truly worthy for a man of his station out of Life Fibers. He nearly laughed at the utter failure of a temptation. If he hadn't even tried sewing anything of his own accord over the last three years aside from Junketsu, which really didn't count as clothing given that she was technically alive, he wasn't about to start now.*

*And luckily enough the whisper in the back of his mind, the voice that first appeared in the aftermath of his encounter with the Original Life Fiber, had grown increasingly silent over the last few months. Maybe it finally realized it would never convince him to use Life Fibers and decided to give up.*

*"It's nothing more than a cold," Isshin half-smirked as he stopped trying to loosen his tie, the specially tailored suit quickly snapping back into place, "As long as my darling Masaki drinks plenty of fluids she'll be up and about in no time. But I'll be sure to pass along your condolences, Souichiro."*

*"That's good to hear."*

*Souichiro Kiryuin absentmindedly played with his wedding ring as he sighed in relief at the welcoming news. They had originally planned on visiting Karakura town several days ago but Ragyo's ongoing attempts to expand into the South American market and his Life Fiber research on Junketsu's sentience had forced a change of schedule. To think that something like a Kamui could function on nothing more than a few drops of Ragyo's blood per day, remaining completely mobile without any need of a host. It was remarkable. Every theory he had derived on Life Fibers assumed they required a host's bioelectrical energy to survive. Yet Junketsu sustained itself on nothing more than Ragyo's blood.*

*As the early afternoon sunlight filtered through the windows of the second floor corridor, saturating everything in yellow and white hues, Souichiro ignored the faint shouting coming from the foyer and rhetorically asked, "So how was your first impression of Kuroido?"*

*Isshin gave his friend a dirty look, the memory of the portly man attempting to slam the front door on his face still quite fresh, "He's not the friendliest person in the world."*

*" Sorry about that," Souichiro half-heartedly apologized, earning the man another glare from Isshin, "Soroi stepped down from steward of the manor a few months ago, forcing us to search for a suitable replacement. Kuroido might be a little... abrasive... but he takes his job very seriously. He was probably unaware of your tendency to walk through the front door without knocking. Or that you're one of Ragyo's oldest friends."*

*As the last vestige of Kuroido's distant shouting reached his ears, no doubt the result of Soroi explaining the identity of the man he recently insulted, Souichiro took the opportunity to examine Isshin's peculiar attire - a white business suit with matching red tie. There was no question that Ragyo personally designed the clothing, he could spot her patterns from over a mile away. But the bright red tie was undoubtedly Isshin's contribution to the ensemble, a somewhat childish act of rebellion against Ragyo's choice of attire. Yet the notion that his wife could force Isshin, the same man who constantly wore bright and highly clashing colors, to wear this particular suit whenever he visited Souichiro found utterly baffling.*

*" By the way..."*

*The Life Fiber scientist, one of only a handful of people in the world who understood the alien organisms to any appreciable degree, trailed off when Isshin attempted to adjust one of his sleeves. Repressing the desire to smoke, a habit he was trying to break, Souichiro decided to ask the single question that had been plaguing him for the last few minutes, "What did you do to your hair?"*

*Raising a hand to his hair, which once more resembled its original coloring from his tenure as captain of the Tenth Division, Isshin grinned proudly at the fact he wasn't shining with the colors of a rainbow and gave Souichiro a thumbs-up, "Hiding my stunning silver hair for more than a day or two proved difficult, a challenge I'm more than certain Ragyo knows far too well! It took countless nights of work but it's been almost a month since my naturally produced rainbow light penetrated THIS disguise! You should have seen Masaki's joyous expression when she realized she no longer needed sunglasses around the house!"*

*Souichiro sighed heavily and refused to say anything the rest of the way to Ragyo's office. Holding one hand against the partially open mahogany doors, the gentle tones of a familiar voice reaching their ears, the scientist looked over his shoulder and quietly asked, "Isshin, if it's not too much trouble can you teach your technique to Ragyo? I'm sure she will listen to you on the need to... more thoroughly... disguise herself in public."*

*" Nonsense!"*

*Isshin resisted the urge to interrupt his beleaguered friend's request before he could finish. Folding his arms as he loudly declared his intentions, the former shinigami turned around and sagely continued, "A man must never criticize their wife's inherent talents or beauty no matter how strange or outlandish their sense of fashion! It is our duty as husbands to say they're the most beautiful person in the entire world! Someone you would sacrifice everything to protect! Always approve of whatever they think is fashionable even if deep down you know that's not true."*

*" Is that right?"*

*The slightly amused voice carrying just the barest undertone of faux annoyance immediately caused every muscle in Isshin's body to stiffen. Adorned in a loosely fitting white business suit and matching skirt, jeweled earrings jangling lightly as she tilted her head sideways, Ragyo Kiryuin tapped a manicured finger against her*



*cheek and smirked slyly, "I'm insulted by your flagrant lack of tact, Isshin. You should check to make sure nobody could eavesdrop before spouting such nonsense. What will Masaki think when I inform her of your opinion on the matter?"*

*Isshin sputtered incoherently at the thinly veiled threat, which caused a brief bout of subdued laughter from Ragyo. The former shinigami was unsure whether she actually intended to inform Masaki on his transgressions or was simply trying to get underneath his skin. In either case, this wasn't a bluff he was willing to call. Not when the end results involved a stern discussion from his lovely wife.*

*As the man furiously attempted to think of an excuse to minimize Ragyo's willingness to call Masaki, which from her expression seemed incredibly likely, his train of thought abruptly crashed and burned when Souichiro rubbed his nose and coughed awkwardly, "Isshin, your hair is showing."*

*"What?!"*

*Rushing around Souichiro faster than the scientist's eyes could process the movement, Isshin pressed his face against the mirror hanging on the nearby wall and stared in disbelief at the dim rainbow light penetrating his disguise. Damn it! More than a month without any problems, of not having to listen to Ryuken's dry and mocking humor about his hair, only for Ragyo to ruin everything with nothing more than a single jesting comment.*

*"Oh for the love of..."*

*Ragyo irritably rolled her eyes at the ongoing display of childish antics. She would never understand why Isshin stubbornly insisted on disguising his true appearance with something so boring. Neither of them should care what the rest of the world thought, especially those foolish men working to destroy Revocs and everything she cherished. Still, she had to give Isshin's remarkable technique credit. That he constantly strove to improve the duration of his idiotic*

*disguise, ignoring every notion to the contrary, was only further evidence that the man should have been her Grand Couturier.*

*Yet she knew better than asking Isshin such a foolish question after his previous nineteen refusals.*

*The faint crying from the bundle held against her chest caused Ragyo's maroon eyes to narrow angrily. Immediately curling two fingers on her free hand through the air, shimmering strands of rainbow Life Fibers reflecting dimly in the sunlight, she lazily swung her arm downwards and harshly tore away the rest of Isshin's stupid disguise. Smiling pleurably as the man's shoulders slumped in defeat, his glorious silver hair once more matching her own, Ragyo motherly cradled the infant in her arm and asked, "I'm sure you didn't come here just to cry in a corner like a petulant child, Isshin."*

*Isshin's self-induced depression was instantly forgotten when he noticed the small bundle held protectively in Ragyo's arms. Grinning widely when Satsuki's familiar blue eyes closed as she yawned and fell back asleep, he chuckled quietly and proudly boasted, "Well, it seems that I was right after all. Satsuki did, in fact, receive your - "*

*A soft smack interrupted the rest of the compliment when Rei Hououmaru appeared behind Isshin and firmly smashed her clipboard against the back of his head, "Please refrain from finishing that line of thought. Lady Satsuki is trying to sleep."*

*" What?" Isshin rubbed the spot Hououmaru hit with her clipboard and impetuously groaned, "I was just going to say Satsuki inherited Ragyo's - "*

*The stainless steel clipboard shattered in the secretary's fingers when she smashed it against the back of Isshin's skull a second time. Staring emotionlessly at the former shinigami as he rubbed his uninjured head, she adjusted her aviator sunglasses before stoically warning, "I understand you are enthusiastic about Lady Satsuki, Isshin, but attempting to comment on her appearance a third time will force me to break out the Anti-Life Fiber weaponry."*

*" Punishing Isshin is one thing... but please try not to break Revocs equipment in the process."*

*Ragyo lightly chastised Hououmaru's lack of proper forethought. Something as mundane and common as a steel clipboard wasn't enough to teach the notoriously stubborn but sweet man his lesson. A more delicate approach was necessary to get the point across to Isshin. Fortunately it appeared he was reluctant to repeat his mistake a third time. Handing Satsuki to Hououmaru, the secretary carefully cradling the infant in her arms, Ragyo flicked a strand of silver hair out of her eyes, "Please bring Satsuki to Soroi, Hououmaru. And schedule a conference with Xcution at the earliest possibly opportunity."*

*" Very well," Hououmaru bowed her head respectfully, careful not to wake Satsuki, before adding, "I thought you should also know that Motoko's unit reported from Berlin just over an hour ago. Their investigations suggest several organizations are preparing to break into our Tokyo research facility."*

*" How prévisible..."*

*Ragyo sighed in annoyance as Hououmaru left with Satsuki. Preventing Life Fibers from falling into human hands was proving excessively tedious, due in large part to the attempts by her rivals to constantly break into Revocs research facilities. One would think after witnessing their mercenaries devoured alive by Life Fibers, torn apart by the very threads they foolishly attempted to carry out of her facilities without proper protection, they would have given up. But the stupidity of humanity was endless. If, or rather when, Revocs gained full control of their companies she planned on enthusiastically dismissing their boards of directors down to the last man and woman... with prejudice.*

*" Humans just can't seem to resist the allure of Life Fibers."*

*Something about the way Ragyo said 'humans' rubbed Isshin the wrong way. But before he could voice his concerns on the matter, or*

*how knowledge of Life Fibers spread to the rest of the world, she sauntered back into her office without another word. Turning to Souichiro for an explanation only for the scientist to shrug his shoulders in response, the exhaustion in his eyes slightly bothersome, Isshin pulled at the tight collar of his suit before walking into the spacious and accommodating office.*

*" I know I've been out of the loop for a while," Isshin's hair shifted in the early spring wind gently gusting through the open windows behind Ragyo's desk. Frowning pensively as she sat down with a tired groan, he rubbed the back of his neck and asked, "But how did anyone learn about Life Fibers?"*

*" An ex-employee..."*

*The guilt and self-loathing in Souichiro's voice surprised Isshin, "A geneticist I personally hired to help improve our understanding of Life Fibers. She was one of the best in the field, someone that could have broken down the evolutionary process that led to Life Fibers taking on their current form. But two months after being brought on board she leaked classified information on Life Fibers to several rival companies and governments."*

*" That's unlike you, Souichiro," Isshin folded his arms and frowned, "You're usually more careful about this sort of thing."*

*" Olivier's leading the investigation into how she slipped through security without getting caught," the Life Fiber scientist collapsed on the couch across the office from Ragyo's desk and grimaced, his expression suddenly twisting into a morbid grimace, "But we might never find out who hired her. Ten minutes after she released the information she tried stealing a bundle of Life Fibers without any protection."*

*" This sounds serious," Isshin had faith in Olivier's investigative capabilities but it was better not to take any chances with Life Fibers, "I know someone who -"*

*" Your assistance is appreciated but I'd rather not drag you into this atrocious mess," Ragyo passionately interrupted before Isshin could finish voicing his suggestion. A few minutes passed in silence, the tension building in the air as Ragyo signed several forms pertaining to recent acquisitions in South America and Europe, before the corners of her mouth curled upwards, "She's due next month, you know."*

*" Huh?"*

*Ragyo sighed deeply at the dumbfounded expression plastered across Isshin's face. Pressing a hand delicately over her stomach, the simple action enough to cause the man's maroon eyes to visibly widen, she patiently explained, "My second daughter - Satsuki's younger sister - is due in a few weeks."*

*" That's great news!"*

*All traces of somberness vanished into the spring breeze as Isshin flashed across the office and wrapped an arm proudly around Souichiro's shoulders, the scientist wilting in surprise at the overly friendly gesture. Thoughts of future play dates, birthday parties and other family events passing through his mind, the former shinigami chuckled sagely, "We should get Hououmaru to begin scheduling dozens of play dates for our children!"*

*Ragyo's maroon eyes widened fractionally at the confession, "Isshin, are you saying..."*

*" We found out last week," he proudly announced, the memory of Masaki's joyous smile shining brilliantly in his mind, "Our son's set to arrive in July!"*

*The pen in Ragyo's hand almost snapped in half, her self-control the only thing preventing blue ink from staining the documents scattered across her desk. As Souichiro congratulated Isshin, her husband offering to take him and Masaki out to celebrate, the Kiryuin matriarch's expression shifted between several conflicting emotions*

*before she settled upon a simple smile, "I suppose congratulations are in order, Isshin."*

*Isshin scratched at his stubble-free chin and smirked, "Ichigo is going to have a hard time fighting off Satsuki and her sister when they're older."*

*" Already planning that far ahead? I don't..." Souichiro trailed off as the full weight of Isshin's statement came to light, "... did you say Ichigo?"*

*Ragyo felt a minor headache immediately start to develop in the depths of her mind at the particular choice of name Isshin decided to bestow upon his son. Leaning onto her hand and sighing impatiently when Souichiro's attempts to gently break the obvious news to the man fell on deaf ears, she waited several long seconds before dryly announcing, "Isshin, despite whatever YOU might think, Ichigo is most often a girl's name."*

Isshin Kurosaki opened his eyes when the portable radio on the coffee table somberly announced severe thunderstorms set to arrive in the afternoon.

Staring silently out the living room window, faint traces of crimson pulsing across the glass from the customized Anti-Life Fiber protections he installed a few months ago, the former shinigami frowned at the slowly darkening overcast skies. It was going to rain soon, perhaps even before Ragyo and her army of COVERS arrived. The irony of the familiar situation was enough for Isshin to subtly clench his hand into a fist.

Dark and stormy days like this brought up terrible memories.

The rainbow undertone shining from his silver hair dimming minutely as the Anti-Life Fiber protections installed around the home hummed gently in his ears, an entirely separate one from the barrier around Karakura Town, Isshin grumbled quietly under his breath and sighed. Pulling a cell phone out of his pocket as he turned around, the

floorboards creaking with every step, he tightly gripped the device at Yuzu and Karin's muffled conversation from the kitchen before taking a deep breath.

"I'm going out for a while!"

Despite the cheerful tone of his voice, developed after years of practice, Isshin's expression was etched into a tight grimace as he marched towards the front door. Staring at the phone when Yuzu nervously asked where he was going, the sullen mood enveloping Karakura Town over the last few weeks causing his most sensitive and caring daughter to constantly ask such questions, he wondered not for the first time if keeping them home was the smartest option. While his improvements around the house prevented any Life Fibers from entering or leaving without his direct permission - including his own - there were other places around the world equally safe from Ragyo's forces.

"It's dad business!" Isshin shouted loudly over his shoulder when he opened the front door and was promptly greeted by a gust of wind, "Don't leave the house until I get back!"

"Just make sure to kick her ass," Karin's annoyed response echoed dully from the kitchen.

"Karin! Language!"

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Satsuki Kiryuin ignored the tense silence permeating the training ground underneath Kisuke Urahara's shop as she glared dispassionately at the elevator in the distance.

Nearly twenty minutes had passed since she initially informed Isshin Kurosaki of her mother's actions while ordering the remaining residents of Karakura Town, those who possessed the required

strength and fortitude to stand firmly against Life Fibers, to gather within the secondary Nudist Beach headquarters. Such an order should have been followed without any issues given the size of the city. Yet while most of her friends and allies were already in attendance, two people remained suspiciously absent - Kisuke Urahara and Isshin Kurosaki.

It had been Yoruichi Shihoin who explained the former's sudden departure, albeit in a manner that expressed her deep annoyance with the exiled shinigami's eccentric behavior. If her story was accurate, Kisuke Urahara had vanished less than a minute after she informed them of the situation, leaving behind only a hastily typed note to explain his absence. Although this wasn't the first time the shopkeeper purposely left Karakura Town despite her orders, which caused Gamagori endless aggravation, the timing between her mother's offensive and his departure was too perfect to be coincidental.

She only hoped Kisuke Urahara's written claims of 'reinforcements' were not merely the man's usual ambiguousness.

Her greatest concern at the moment, however, was the conspicuous disappearance of Isshin Kurosaki. As the individual most capable of defeating her mother, Ichigo's father played a crucial role in defending Karakura Town. Yet the man had purposely decided not to attend the meeting.

The fact he profusely apologized over the phone before abruptly hanging up only made things worse.

"We cannot wait any longer."

Leaning over the table displaying a holographic representation of Japan, the forty-seven prefectures in the image colored in shades of green or red, Satsuki's expression tightened into a disciplined scowl as the surrounding murmurs immediately quelled, "Please begin, Inumuta."



Houka Inumuta pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he continued typing commands into Kisuke's computer. The collar of his Goku Uniform automatically unzipping when the three-dimensional image transformed into a replica of Honnou City, a spherical shimmer of light surrounding the academy at the center, he coughed gently, "Upon receiving Lady Satsuki's warning I immediately repositioned several of the Ishida Conglomerate's satellites above Honnou City. While it still remains virtually impossible to penetrate the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier, I was able to detect large-scale movement over Tokyo Bay."

Uryu frowned at the familiar objects floating across the holographic image, "How many COVERS?"

"Fifteen thousand at the very least, empowered by the former residents of Honnou City most likely," Inumuta paid no attention to the varying outbursts of surprise by those present as his fingers responded to the information scrolling across the monitor, "At their current velocity the COVERS will reach Karakura Town in roughly thirty minutes."

"Trying to overwhelm us with quantity, huh? Luckily we have quality on our side," Ira Gamagori acknowledged sagely, his mood tempered by Jakuzure's obnoxious groaning and her subsequent commentary. Marching forward when something on the image caught his attention, he poked his finger at the holograph and asked, "What are these red dots?"

"I'm glad you asked."

Inumuta finished typing on the keyboard with a dramatic flourish, his finger loudly pressing one final button before turning around. Waiting patiently as the three bright red dots in the image grew larger, data and information rapidly scrolling down the computer's screen, the former hacker took a deep breath, "As some of you already know, the Life Fibers woven in every Goku Uniform possess a unique energy signature, which enabled Iori and myself to gather data on Ryuko Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki's battles against the Club Captains

back at Honnouji Academy. Using both the flash drive from the Moscow Distribution Facility and Kisuke Urahara's notes on spiritual energy, I managed to modify my software to detect the Life Fibers composing Xcution's individual raiment."

There's only three dots," Gamagori irritably pointed out, his face twisting into a contemplative scowl at the lack of helpful information, "Who are they?"

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, the sheer obviousness of his fellow Elite Four's question plucking a nerve, the former hacker tensely sighed before answering, "I'm afraid that's far beyond the limits of my software. We won't know their exact identities until they reach Karakura Town."

Satsuki furrowed her brow at the unwanted implications behind Inumuta's lack of useful information. Aside from Rei Hououmaru, there were *five* members of Xcution still remaining in her mother's employ. It was a noticeable decrease from the height of their power yet they still remained a formidable and highly dangerous force upon the battlefield. The presence of only three members, their raiment most likely newly stitched by the Grand Couturier was alarming for a variety of reasons. Her mother was not someone who would field only half of her elite operatives, those fanatically loyal to Life Fibers in both body and soul, against a target as hardened and resilient as Karakura Town.

She was missing something.

The traces of anxiety coursing through her calculating mind abated when Junketsu tightened around her body in a comforting gesture. Her glower lessening as she turned her attention onto the only person in the room more qualified to speak about Xcution than herself, Satsuki flicked an errant strand of hair out of her eyes, "Kugo Ginjo, as Xcution's former second in command, beholden to my mother's secrets for nearly twenty years, you possess greater insight into the organization than anyone present. Myself included. Who would Rago trust enough to lead this operation?"

"It's nowhere near that simple..."

The former substitute shinigami didn't look Satsuki when almost two decades of memories flashed through his mind, images of former colleagues screaming for help right before they were devoured by the Life Fibers in their uniforms or worse. Running hand through his combed back hair, Ginjo let out a deep sigh before elaborating, "Xcution is fanatically loyal to Revocs to the point of suicide, all thanks to Ragyo Kiryuin's Life Fibers woven into their raiment. Most of them don't last for more than a few years, which is why your mother hunts down teenagers with high resistance to Life Fibers. By the time they finish training with the Grand Couturier their minds are completely broken."

Folding his arms during the subsequent silence from the shocked and appalled audience, Ginjo's felt Ragnarok shift slightly across his back, "But don't underestimate Xcution. Ragyo might control them like puppets but they're still extremely dangerous. Some like Esdeath doesn't even *need* to transform to use their raiment's abilities."

A frustrated snort escaped Uzu Sanageyama's mouth at the reminder of his embarrassing loss, "Tell me about it. That sadistic bitch didn't even bother trying to activate her raiment."

Ginjo's grimace deepened as he finally turned to Satsuki, "Ragyo must have been concerned Xcution would accidentally kill the civilians before the COVERS had a chance to feed on them, especially considering Esdeath has a tendency to freeze everything to death whenever she activates her raiment. She probably ordered Xcution to only use a fraction of their full power."

"Who wasn't at Honnouji Academy?"

The seemingly innocuous question caused the already foreboding atmosphere to grow increasingly stiffening. Taking the former Student Council President's intrigued reaction to his observation as a sign to continue, Uryu flicked a finger against the frame of his glasses, "Alexander Anderson killed one member of Xcution while

the other four survived with minor wounds. Kinue Kinagase dealt with another two before the festival. So excluding Ginjo and Hououmaru, that leaves one person unaccounted for..."

"Yuu Akiyama."

Satsuki mentally noted Kugo Ginjo and Yoruichi Shihoin's reactions to the name moments before her face twisted into an annoyed scowl. As a backdrop of blue-white light appeared directly behind her head, the fierce illumination bright enough to nearly penetrate every shadow in the room, she splayed her hands across the table and passionately declared, "By his own admission, Yuu Akiyama is a coward of the highest order. But don't let his childish behavior fool you! Yuu's most dangerous ability is not the uniform sewn from Life Fibers but his own mind! For only a genius could out-manuever someone of Yoruichi Shihoin's caliber before escaping to London, where he proceeded to nearly hand the country to Revocs!"

Yoruichi grumbled at the unwanted reminder of her failure. After chasing the bastard halfway across the country, fighting her way through the hundreds of COVERS he placed in her path, she finally cornered him several kilometers north of Tokyo. But even after avoiding all of his traps, which was only possible thanks to years of working with Kisuke, the coward *still* managed to pull one over on her. When she grabbed the bastard by the neck and prepared to tear the raiment from his body, Yuu had pulled out a remote and calmly claimed there were more than twenty hostages in the surrounding buildings, which were set to explode if he wasn't at least ten kilometers away in the next ten minutes.

In hindsight she really should have punched the damn bastard.

It was only when she reached the first hostages that things rapidly went from bad to worse. All of the men and women sitting in the shadowed warehouse, thick ropes tied around their arms and legs, were actually life-like animatronics programmed to simulate a range of human movements and sounds. And they were *all* stuffed with

plastic explosives that detonated the instant she stepped close enough to realize the bastard tricked her again.

As her expression soured at the smug coward making her look like a damn recruit fresh from the academy, and *not* the previous commander of the Onmitsukido with over a century of experience, Ginjo somberly explained, "Yuu's poisoned, blackmailed, kidnapped and even hacked his way through dozens of companies, all without using his raiment."

Gamagori stiffened at the grim news, "So you're saying we're dealing with someone equal in intelligence to Lady Satsuki? That's quite the frightening concept."

"While I surpass Yuu Akiyama in a variety of fields, likewise he is my superior in others," Satsuki admitted without a trace of shame. Calmly retaking her position in the chair next to Kisuke's computer, she crossed her legs before continuing in a stern tone, "Which is why there's a distinct possibility Yuu has already managed to sneak into Karakura Town. If Kugo Ginjo's information is indeed accurate, Isshin Kurosaki's Life Fiber barrier won't detect Yuu, leaving him free to disable the barrier and allow my mother to march upon the city with impunity.

"The situation is far worse than that..."

The complete *lack* of bravado in Alex Louis Armstrong's voice as he marched into the room ground the conversation to a halt, "We've lost all contact with the Kansai Region."

Inumuta was acutely aware of Lady Satsuki's genuine surprise at the announcement, her normally regal features marred by an unsightly scowl, as he activated his Probe Regalia Mark II. Rapidly searching through thousands upon thousands of lines of coding, the entirety of Nudist Beach's servers laid completely bare to his eyes, the former hacker's mouth twitched when he found the source of their problems, "It seems someone managed to upload a worm into your communications network, causing the Kansai Region to go

completely offline. I can repair the damage, but that's going to take some time."

The silence following Inumuta's admission was deafening, broken only when Armstrong stroked his chin and frowned, "Is that so? That's quite disconcerting news. But if we're truly unable to contact headquarters for the foreseeable future, then there is only one path left to take..."

Any naïve hopes that the younger Armstrong sibling would continue behaving in a respectable manner were violently disproven when he suddenly flexed his arms and boasted, "Until such time that my sister reestablishes communications from Osaka I shall assume full control over the nudist forces within Karakura Town! The stockpiled weaponry! The disciplined soldiers trained in several types of Anti-Life Fiber tactics! They shall be the blade that cuts through the thousands of COVERS ready to descend upon this fair and noble city!"

Nodding respectfully in response to the nudist's bombastic declaration while noting Gamagori's irritation, Satsuki leaned back in the chair, "Continue, Inumuta."

The former hacker was enveloped by a second burst of light when his Probe Regalia returned to its normal uniform appearance. Adjusting his glasses as he typed several dozen unique commands into the computer, the holographic image on the table flickering from Honnou City to Karakura Town, he pressed one final button and scoffed, "Under the assumption that Yuu Akiyama succeeds in somehow disabling the Life Fiber barrier, our first order of business will be neutralizing Xcution. While my software cannot differentiate between members of the organization, it *can* detect their raiment once they get within range. Which brings us to Lady Satsuki's plan..."

Mitsuzo Soroi stepped forward at the faint nod from his mistress, the silver tea tray in his hands covered with over a dozen earpieces. As he diligently made his way around the room, pausing just long

enough for every person to grab one of the devices, Inumuta took a deep breath and explained, "Since one-on-one battles against Xcution are quite dangerous, not to mention suicidal, I recommend attacking them in groups. These earpieces will allow easy coordination of our movements so please make sure they are switched to channel two."

"Kicking Xcution's collective ass is great and all but I think we're forgetting about something a little more important."

Rubbing two fingers against the earpiece in his hand, the minute grooves etched onto the device enough to paint a clear picture in his mind, Uzu Sanageyama scoffed derisively, "Like how we're going to take down the Grand Couturier. Not to mention the big bad herself - Ragyo Kiryuin."

"Isshin Kurosaki shall deal with my mother."

Not a trace of uncertainty or doubt plagued Satsuki's answer, for Ichigo's bumbling father was the only person that could counter her mother upon the battlefield. Despite her personal desire to kill the woman determined to feed humanity to Life Fibers, the former Kiryuin heiress was not delusional. Junketsu's power was not enough to contend with what she briefly witnessed during the Great Culture and Sports Festival. But while Isshin Kurosaki would effectively contain her mother, preventing her from singlehandedly slaughtering anyone she came across, he would be unable to assist in defending Karakura Town from Xcution and the rest of her mother's forces.

Her sharpened mind, honed over more than a decade of planning from the shadows, rapidly coming to terms with the new variables, Satsuki's brow furrowed at the thought of the last opponent they needed to face, "As for the Grand Couturier, although her strength surpasses anything accomplishable by both regalia and raiment, it is her innate regeneration that will pose the greatest threat. Therefore, Yoruichi Shihoin, Tessai Tsukabishi and myself will work in tandem to defeat Nui Harime."

"And what of young Ururu?"

Tessai Tsukabishi frowned deeply at Satsuki's grim expression, his square-rimmed glasses shining in the lighting, "Do you intend to deal with the manager's daughter as well?"

Satsuki closed her eyes before stoically answering, "If Ururu Tsumugiya has been swayed into swearing fealty to my mother, than there is nothing we can do to save her."

"I refuse to believe young Ururu is beyond saving," Tessai's enormous frame quivered with barely repressed emotion as he tightly clenched his hand into a fist, "Which is why I must sincerely apologize for refusing to follow your plan, Miss Satsuki. If the manager's daughter appears upon the battlefield, it is my solemn duty to bring her to heel."

Nodding at the formerly exiled shinigami, Satsuki mentally began adjusting her plans, "Can you compensate for Ururu Tsumugiya's increased abilities?"

"There are several rather strong sealing techniques at my disposal," Tessai declared gruffly, his glasses flashing ominously with each word, "They should be enough to restrain Ururu until we can reverse whatever damage was done to her mind."

"I'm afraid that won't work..."

The clomping of wooden geta echoed loudly in the artificially bright underground chamber as Kisuke Urahara emerged from the shadows. Brushing some coal-black dust off his coat while blatantly ignoring the sudden tenseness in the atmosphere, the shopkeeper casually explained, "Life Fibers sustain themselves upon the bioelectrical energy produced within the nervous and circulatory systems of living organisms. However, that's only partially accurate. In reality, this bioelectrical energy is nothing more than spiritual energy. And since Kido are really nothing more than spiritual energy



molded into the desired technique, Ururu's Life Fibers will devour any Bakudo you might use against her."

Yoruichi's fingers twitched impatiently as she waited for Kisuke to finish speaking. Once she was absolutely sure he had nothing else to say, she sauntered across the room and kicked him in the shin, "Where the hell have you been?"

Kisuke smirked enigmatically despite the pain running up his leg, "I went to get some reinforcements once I heard Satsuki's mother was paying a visit! Didn't you read my note?"

The dark skinned shinigami's amber eyes twitched in rising annoyance as she grabbed the man's coat, "Reinforcements, you say? By some miracle did you finally manage to find out why we can't contact the Soul Society? Or better yet... will the entire Gotei 13 arrive to deal with Ragyo Kiryuin?"

"Hmm... you'll just have to wait and see, Yoruichi!"

Rubbing his injured leg when Yoruichi responded by kicking him in the shin *again*, Kisuke grinned mischievously as he recovered from the debilitating attack. A paper fan appearing in the palm of his hand, the exiled shinigami turned to Satsuki, "I couldn't help but overhear your plans for dealing with Nui Harime, Miss Satsuki. You really are quite the intelligent young woman. I assume you have several contingencies ready in the event the Grand Couturier survives your trap?"

Blue eyes stared intensely at the shopkeeper, years of dealing with both the Grand Couturier and her mother allowing the former heiress to easily penetrate his eccentric personality to the devious man hiding beneath the surface, "When facing an enemy that straddles the boundary between insanity and reality it's best to consider all options and scenarios."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Kisuke acquiesced, "And you're right about one thing. Junketsu's power working in tandem

with Yoruichi should theoretically be sufficient for you to defeat Nui Harime..."

The calculating tone in Kisuke's voice as he trailed off was not lost on those intimately familiar with the shopkeeper. Waving the paper fan in front of his face as he walked across the room, wooden geta clomping softly against the floor, he stared directly into Satsuki's eyes and finished, "But I humbly request you throw out any plans regarding the Grand Couturier. Because I can state with absolute certainty she will make her way to this shop, or more specifically *me*."

Satsuki's gaze narrowed at the admission, "The Grand Couturier is not known for her predictability."

Unperturbed by the teenager's accusatory tone, Kisuke's smirk slowly vanished as he snapped the paper fan shut with a flick of his wrist, "You should know better than anyone in this room that Nui Harime doesn't appreciate being upstaged when it comes to the fine art of sewing. Not only did I manage to figure out the secret to weaving a Kamui, which I'm certain she's tried to create, but I also embarrassed her in front of your mother during the Great Culture and Sports Festival. So I'm pretty much guaranteed to be at the very top of her list."

"But you believe Nui Harime is insane, don't you Miss Satsuki?"

The shopkeeper's tone deepened dangerously as he continued without pausing, "Truthfully, I was originally of similar mindset. But after doing a little research and speaking with both Ichigo and Ryuko concerning their experiences at Honnouji Academy, I adjusted my hypothesis. It may come as quite the surprise, but the Grand Couturier is actually quite sane. She simply has a twisted perspective of reality... among other things. I'm sure you noticed her behavior around Ichigo. How she referred to him as her 'cousin.' The reason for the peculiar nickname can be traced to her rather concerning attachment issues. She treats every Life Fiber Hybrid as extensions of her family, lashing out whenever someone attempts to

disprove that notion. Or worse, take them away. And since she likely believes I kidnapped Ururu seventeen years ago..."

"She's going to lash out disproportionately," Satsuki finished with a tightening of her own expression. She remembered with vivid clarity Nui Harime's psychotic outbursts when she returned to Revocs, blood streaming from her left eye. The usually saccharine Grand Couturier, possessing an unnerving dissonance befitting of someone without a shred of humanity, had taken her frustration out on the middle managers, slaughtering over a dozen employees before her mother was forced to intervene.

But all that occurred after the Grand Couturier's mind shattered, broken beneath the heavy strain of attempting to reconcile the notion that a human permanently injured her body with Ragyo's teachings about the superiority of Life Fibers. It had been too much for Nui Harime, causing her intelligence to falter alongside a noticeable decrease in her strength while she fervently sought out Ryuko for revenge. However, the complete restoration of her eye changed everything. Now that she regained her full mental faculties, the Grand Couturier would undoubtedly *not* repeat her mistake.

"I presume you have a plan to defeat both the Grand Couturier and Ururu Tsumugiya?"

"More or less," Kisuke frowned pensively at the barely noticeable quivering of Yoruichi's shoulders. So she realized what he was planning, huh? That would make things easier in the long run, "But I'm going to need everyone to leave my humble little shop until further notice."

"You're going to use *that* against Ururu?!"

Yoruichi's unrestrained outburst drew the attention of those familiar with the normally playful shinigami. Acutely aware of Tessai's subdued reaction to his explanation, the stoic man staring intently in his direction, Kisuke patted dust off his coat before grimly responding, "While the long-term effects of Ragyo Kiryuin's Mental

Refitting on humans normally leads to death, I'm unsure how the Life Fibers she implanted into Ururu interface with her mind. Ragyo's skill with Life Fibers exceeds my own by a large margin. Not to mention whatever other tricks she picked up from the Original Life Fiber..."

Taking his childhood friend's ensuing silence at the explanation as a sign she was letting the matter concerning Ururu rest for the moment, Kisuke mentally sighed in great relief when Yoruichi decided *not* to kick his shin a third time. It would be unseemly, not to mention embarrassing, if he collapsed to the ground writhing in pain. Calmly removing his bucket hat as he walked across the room, the measured clapping of his geta echoing in the silence, the shopkeeper replaced the paper fan within the folds of his coat, "That being said, there's one last order of business. Uryu..."

The teenager Quincy resisted the urge to scowl at the shopkeeper's enigmatic tone, "I need you and Tessai to escort Orihime to Karakura General Hospital."

"W-What?"

Orihime Inoue, who had thus far remained silent, widened her eyes in absolute surprise, "But why?"

A contemplative scowl etched itself across Satsuki Kiryuin's features as she attentively listened to the comments from Orihime Inoue's friends in response to Kisuke Urahara's logical but cold answer. Running a finger down Junketsu's sleeve when she noticed the Kamui's multicolored eyes staring intently at the orange haired teenager, she cleared her throat before speaking loud enough to immediately gain everyone's undivided attention, "You're referring to the events of the Naturals Election. Or more precisely, the miraculous regeneration of Nui Harime's formerly missing eye."

"There are two ways to counter the regeneration of a Life Fiber Hybrid."

The upper half of Kisuke's face was framed within the shadows of his bucket hat as he solemnly explained, "The first is exhausting their spiritual energy. Contrary to popular belief, a hybrid's regeneration isn't limitless. It takes a certain amount of spiritual energy for their Life Fibers to regenerate. However, fighting Nui Harime long enough to reach that point will be rather difficult. The other method involves cutting through their body using a pair of hardened Life Fiber blades, which would effectively negate the regenerative properties of their internal Life Fibers. Such an attack is usually permanent. But your Shun Shun Rikka easily managed to regenerate Nui Harime's damaged eye."

"And that makes *you* the single greatest threat to Ragyo Kiryuin's plans."

Orihime's depressed expression quickly morphed into a state of confusion at the shopkeeper's comment. How could her Shun Shun Rikka pose any sort of threat to someone powerful like Ragyo Kiryuin? As she spent several moments wracking her mind for an answer, Orihime was torn from her thoughts when Kisuke took the initiative, "The ability to heal injuries caused by Hardened Life Fiber blades wouldn't normally draw Ragyo Kiryuin's undivided attention. But someone like her, whose knowledge on Life Fibers is second to none, undoubtedly understands the *true* implications of your powers."

"If you can reject the damage caused by the Scissor Blades, it only makes sense that you can *mimic* them."

Satsuki's eyes immediately focused upon the formerly exiled shinigami, "How certain are you of this?"

"Pretty certain," Kisuke enigmatically answered while pulling a small device out of his coat, the nearly palm-sized invention faintly glowing around its edge. Fiddling with the strange device while fully aware of the building tension in the atmosphere, the corners of his mouth curled into a familiar knowing smirk before he added, "But there is a single advantage we have over Ragyo Kiryuin. Despite her

impressive knowledge on everything related to Life Fibers, her background on spiritual matters is sorely lacking. Tessai's skills, in conjunction with Ryuken's unique style of construction, should conceal Orihime from your mother."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news but it appears we overestimated Ragyo Kiryuin's patience. She'll be arriving on our doorstep in just over twelve minutes."

The former hacker ignored the subsequent uproar as he began packing away his equipment. While he was mildly interested in Orihime Inoue's miraculous ability to resurrect the dead, his current priority was preventing Karakura Town's communications network from being sabotaged by a third party. In other words, he needed to prepare defenses to make sure Yuu Akiyama didn't repeat what happened to Osaka.

"I'll require another secure location to keep the communications network fully operational," Inumuta's collar automatically unzipped as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and turned toward Satsuki, "Karakura General would be optimal in reestablished a secure base for the network. Furthermore, connecting directly to the Ishida Conglomerate's servers will allow me to more accurately track Xcution's movements."

"And I shall take my leave as well!"

Pink sparkles twinkled around Armstrong as he vigorously shook Kisuke's hand, the strength behind the display of respect causing the shopkeeper to wince, "Your bravery in the face of adversity is inspiring, Kisuke Urahara! It's a travesty that you must fight your own flesh and blood! Forced to battle the daughter you love and cherish! But please feel honored that your words of encouragement have not gone unheard! For Nudist Beach shall fight until our last breath to prevent Ragyo Kiryuin and her army of COVERS from taking the city!"

An expression of mild curiosity graced Satsuki's features at the nudist's boisterous speech. Silently observing Gamagori's eyebrow twitching spasmodically in response to his father's actions, which Jakuzure was more than willing to derisively mock, she leaned slightly toward Inumuta before quietly inquiring, "What is the status of Iori's project?"

The blue hair teenager subtly glanced around the room, "Preliminary testing was completed yesterday afternoon. After Kisuke Urahara checked over the results, Iori began processing your request. The package has been delivered with detailed instructions tailored specifically for the designated target."

Despite the importance of the discussion, Satsuki found her mind drifting upon watching Yasutora Sado attempt to comfort Orihime Inoue, who seemed increasingly depressed by the revelations regarding her abilities. Biting the interior of her cheek as she regally stood back up and grabbed the auburn Scissor Blade from its resting place against the table, Satsuki's heels clacked loudly with each deliberately placed step as she marched across the underground chamber towards the elevator. Her stride unfaltering when Yoruichi Shihoin demanded to know where she was going, the former Kiryuin heiress's expression didn't waver as she answered.

"To find Isshin Kurosaki."

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It was going to rain soon.

Isshin could feel the familiar chill in his bones, or whatever facsimile his internal Life Fibers created. In less than an hour the heavens would open asunder and Karakura Town would be deluged in a heavy downpour, which coincidentally made the windbreak he put on this morning, one of Masaki's last gifts before her passing, all the more necessary. Although his current physiology, unwillingly

bestowed by the Original Life Fiber, made him immune to both the ravages of time and the elements, there were some things he refused to ever lower himself into doing. Dressing flamboyantly in bright and overwhelming colors like Ragyo, uncaring about anything the world had to say, was one such line the former shinigami would never cross.

Ichigo's completely unfounded remarks about his atrocious sense of fashion didn't prove anything.

Lost in his spiraling thoughts while sitting upon one of Tsubakidai Park's somewhat comfortable wooden benches, built when Ryuken donated millions of dollars into revitalizing the city after Satsuki's Raid Trip, Isshin frowned at the spiritual energy growing closer with every passing second. Judging from the way Ragyo was flaunting her presence, which only he could sense thanks to the glowing spool of eldritch yarn underneath her manor, she was either incredibly content or extremely annoyed. Emotions that he knew from experience would only lead to trouble for him in the long run.

Fixing the collar of his worn jacket as the distant peeling of thunder echoed faintly from the north, the air growing heavy with the scent of rain, Isshin resisted the urge to sigh heavily when he sensed Ragyo shifting her course by a fraction of a degree, "Well, there goes any chance of catching her off guard..."

After embarrassing her in front of thousands of people, not to mention being the only true obstacle in her path, Isshin expected Ragyo would want to personally deal with him. And he knew she wouldn't be in the mood to sit down and simply talk things out like normal adults.

"You never were the sort of woman to just take 'no' for an answer," he solemnly confessed with a heavy sigh. Wrapping his arm around the back of the bench as another rumble echoed only a few kilometers to the north, Isshin watched a brief flash of purple light illuminate the overcast skies before his mind drifted toward



something that had been troubling him since the Great Culture and Sports Festival.

Ragyo was stronger than he remembered.

It was apparent from the moment she angrily slapped him during Parent Student Day that Ragyo wasn't the same woman from seventeen years ago. Since the fateful night he realized the depravities Ragyo committed in the name of the Original Life Fiber he'd secretly been training. It hadn't been easy hiding his progress from Kisuke's ever-watching eyes but since Life Fibers are completely different from both shinigami and hollows, he managed to convince the bastard that his shinigami powers were still gone. But the strength he felt when she slapped him, or rather how much power Ragyo was actually holding back, suggested his old friend hadn't grown complacent.

"I suppose you couldn't relax with someone as strong and handsome as myself on the playing field," Isshin sagely commented. He had assumed for a long time that Ragyo would find training abhorrent since it meant the Original Life Fiber's power wasn't enough to fulfill its plans for humanity. Yet not only did she train, almost catching up to him despite all of his effort, but Ragyo somehow learned how to properly wield a sword instead of swinging it around like a complete idiot.

Lightly rubbing his jaw at the memory of their fight, Isshin sarcastically added, "But who the hell taught you to throw a right hook?"

The rhetorical question went unanswered when a familiar prickling pulsed across his mind. Sighing slightly louder than necessary as he checked his watch for the time, Isshin watched arcs of lightning illuminate the darkening skies in shades of sickly purple for nearly a minute before arching a silver eyebrow, "Your request caught me by surprise. Usually you're the one against these personal meetings."

Coughing awkwardly into his hand when the friendly comment was followed by a long moment of silence, Isshin scratched the side of his face and grimaced, "I hope you didn't have too much trouble getting through the barrier. I had Kisuke test the damn thing but the guy can't exactly wear Life Fibers..."

There was another long moment of silence despite Isshin's best efforts to break the ice before the obscured figure standing patiently on the other side of the bench hung their head and sighed. As the intricate white cloak concealing both their gender and any revealing features billowed in the gusting winds preceding the approaching storm, the figure coughed into a gloved hand before asking in a slightly strained tone, "How did you copy Ragyo's improvements? It's..."

"Amazing? Well... I do know quite a few things about Life Fibers," Isshin smugly boasted, his expression darkening as another wave of thunder echoed through the heavens, carrying with it the heavy scent of rain.

What he failed to mention was that Ragyo's ingenious improvements to his barrier didn't come without their drawback, a painful lesson the former shinigami knew better than anyone else at the moment. Reverse engineering the Infinite Woven Life Fiber Barrier had been fairly straightforward, thanks largely to Kisuke's detailed notes and the knowledge seared into his mind by the Original Life Fiber. But reworking his designs from the ground up, altering the fundamental construction of the barrier, had come with a heavy price. For although his improved barrier flawlessly worked to prevent Ragyo and her COVERS from entering Karakura Town, he could never leave.

And the knowledge that thousands of people were dead, or worse, constantly gnawed on the edges of Isshin's conscience.

"But if it's any consolation, copying Ragyo's barrier wasn't the easiest thing in the world," Isshin continued in a fairly pleasant tone, none of his guilt or self-loathing evident when he leaned backwards

and smirked, "Kisuke might understand how she built the damn thing but the guy doesn't have an artistic bone in his body. He'll never comprehend Ragyo's unique craftsmanship when she puts her heart into something. It's a miracle he managed to create Mugetsu without leaving a single Life Fiber out of place."

"I see..."

The cloaked figure's concealed shoulders hitched slightly with every strained breath as the bitterly cold wind briefly intensified, exposing several strands of sweat-covered purple hair sticking to their hidden face. While they normally allowed Isshin to speak freely for several minutes before *gently* guiding him back to the reason they were meeting in the first place, time was of the essence. As rivulets of blood dripped from within the folds of their left sleeve, staining their gloved fingers a deep crimson before pattering quietly onto the grass, they resisted the desire grab their limp arm, "It was difficult avoiding Ragyo's attention. I had to wait until after Esdeath departed for Osaka before excusing myself from her office. And if the Grand Couturiers hadn't been preoccupied with an errant stitching on Shinra Koketsu I never would have managed to leave Honnouji Academy alive."

Isshin's brow furrowed at his colleague's words, his fingers clenching as the mirth and amusement drained from his features, "How is Ururu?"

A wince completely unrelated to their current condition rippled through the figure's cloaked form. Coughing hoarsely when the air briefly thickened, the world momentarily turning to shades of gray and black before snapping back to normal, they ignored the rampant pain in their left arm and somberly replied, "I'm sorry, Isshin. But Ragyo was very... thorough... in her methods when Ururu proved resilient to normal Mental Refitting."

Several minutes of agitated silence passed excruciatingly slow as Isshin cursed his shortsightedness. Despite all of the information on Life Fibers unwilling implanted into his mind by the Original Life Fiber

and decades of experience as captain of the Tenth Division, he wasn't the most brilliant tactician. He didn't have Ragyo's cold logic and intelligence and all of his plans couldn't hold a match to Kisuke's when the sly bastard was given ten minutes to prepare. Having Ururu follow Ichigo and Ryuko to Honnouji Academy had been extremely risky considering Ragyo's plans, but with the Soul Society unable to help she had been the only one who could stand against Nui Harime.

But contrary to popular belief the Grand Couturier wasn't an invulnerable monster. In fact, Isshin could name several captains off the top of his head that were both stronger and faster than Nui Harime. The problem *anyone* would have if they chose to fight against the Grand Couturier was overcoming her powerful regeneration.

Yoruichi could have dealt with Nui during the Great Culture and Sports Festival if he hadn't asked her to remain in Karakura Town in case anything went horribly wrong. But without a Hardened Life Fiber blade, which in the hands of a shinigami was no different from a normal sword, she couldn't counter Nui's regeneration. From there it was only a matter of time until the Grand Couturier slowly but surely analyzed Yoruichi's fighting style for the perfect moment to strike. And that wasn't factoring in Ragyo's propensity for personally dealing with those standing in her way.

Even with over a century of experience and enough power to overwhelm the Grand Couturier, Yoruichi wouldn't have stood a chance against Ragyo.

Isshin had hoped Ururu's connection to Nui - Twin Life Fiber Entanglement - would weaken the teenager long enough for either Ryuko or Ichigo to knock her unconscious. He knew they wouldn't kill the Grand Couturier despite the atrocities she committed under Ragyo's orders. And once Nui was out of the way he could have dealt with Ragyo and her COVERS before easily sweeping aside Xcution, putting an end to the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet before it could truly begin.

In hindsight, it had been an extremely risky plan even if it technically worked. But he should have known Ragyo would have something special up her sleeves. Yet how could he have ever expected the woman would stoop low enough to hire someone to assassinate his own daughters?

"I'm sure Kisuke has something prepared for Ururu. The bastard has contingencies for everything you can imagine," Isshin half-heartedly dismissed with a lazy wave of his hand, the strained smirk never reaching his eyes. Despite his heavily restrained ability to speak about most topics pertaining to Life Fibers thanks to the Original Life Fiber, he had a pretty good idea how Ragyo molded Ururu into her twisted version of a perfect daughter.

Permanently restitching a Life Fiber Hybrid's mind wasn't easy by any stretch of the word, especially if they fought against the technique every step of the way. Ururu's internal Life Fibers should have instantly rejected the foreign threads, preventing the sickening ability from ever taking hold. But if Ragyo used Mental Refitting alongside Life Fiber Hierarchy in a specific combination that made his stomach mentally lurch, she could have easily achieved such revolting results.

"But you should probably find someplace to lay low for the next few hours."

Despite his concerned tone of voice, Isshin was internally grateful for the distraction provided by the burst of familiar spiritual energy from halfway across Karakura Town. He would have given an arm to forcibly derail that train of thought before it ruined his entire day. Satsuki wrapping up her emergency meeting on dealing with Ragyo was the perfect excuse for him to shift the conversation onto a more positive topic. But judging from the way Ragyo's daughter activated Junketsu seconds after leaving Kisuke's shop, it was very likely Satsuki was intent on hunting him down.

That might be a problem.

"There's an abandoned hospital north of here," Isshin rested his arms against the bench while ignoring the thunder rumbling almost directly over the city, "Its basement was converted into a shelter during Satsuki's Raid Trip. You can hide there until this mess blows over."

Prefacing the suggestion with a tired sigh, Isshin once more calmly checked his watch when he sensed Ragyo's pace toward Karakura Town abruptly quicken. His expression twisting at the chaotic cacophony from the army of COVERS annoyingly buzzing in the back of his mind, the inhuman vibrations from the Life Fibers focused upon a single purpose, Isshin's eyes narrowed in growing suspicion at his colleague's strange silence. They were *never* this quiet. In every meeting stretching back almost seventeen years they had always spoken in an exasperated yet serious manner, chastising his purposeful lack of focus before forcefully returning the topic back to Ragyo.

This was the first time *he* was the one leading the conversation. And that was more than enough of an incentive for Isshin to finally turn around.

"What's wrong?" Isshin glanced curiously over his shoulder, "You're not usually this -"

The question died in his throat when he turned around and noticed what he should have seen from the start. Momentarily stunned into speechlessness at his colleague's heavily injured condition, countless bloody tears covering the once pristine white cloak, Isshin was brought back to reality when they hunched forward and coughed wetly, thick strands of blood and saliva dribbling thickly from their mouth. He should have noticed something was wrong when they refused to talk any more than was necessary, a clear and worrisome departure from their previous meetings. It was a miracle they managed to flee Honnouji Academy with a dislocated, and possibly broken, shoulder without falling unconscious, which was something that greatly bothered Isshin.

Their injuries were severe enough that he *should* have detected something wrong with their spiritual energy before they even arrived.

But until a few seconds ago, when he actually turned around, they had sounded and felt perfectly *fine* .

"I'm... sorry..."

Isshin's heart skipped a beat when his colleague slowly started falling backwards, their body finally giving out after pushing itself long past the breaking point. Vanishing in a burst of motion faster than the eye could follow, the former shinigami managed to gently catch his friend just before their head bounced off the ground. The blood staining his cherished jacket completely ignored as he instinctively began examining the full extent of their wounds, decades of human and spiritual medical knowledge coming to the forefront of his mind, Isshin tensed as a raspy voice reached his ears, "Ragyo caught me... right before I could..."

"You didn't have to do this!"

The first drops of rain lightly landed against the back of Isshin's neck as he interrupted their completely unnecessary excuse. Grimacing angrily at his inability to have stopped Ragyo sooner, he clenched his hands impotently and declared, "You shouldn't have risked everything trying to escape! Telling me about Ururu or anything else wasn't worth your life!"

"Ragyo... she..."

A choking gasp barely managed to escape the figure's blood-filled mouth as they were wracked by another series of painful coughing. Their head resting limply against the ground as the howling wind picked up, exposing strands of blood-caked purple hair, Rei Hououmaru stared upwards into the stormy skies before weakly continuing, "... she... Laissez... Faire."

Isshin's breath hitched in his throat at the unexpected name. He had spent much of the past decade working relentlessly to counter Ragyo's plans, thinking of creative and unique ways to work around the mental blocks placed upon his mind and soul by the Original Life Fiber. But it wasn't until a few weeks after Ichigo left for Honnouji Academy, when Hououmaru last managed to escape Ragyo's watchful eye, he first heard of Operation Laissez Faire. And what little information Hououmaru knew about it wasn't good. An operation designed for the singular purpose of eliminating both Nudist Beach and himself.

In any other situation the notion that anyone in Revocs aside from Ragyo could hurt him would have been laughable. But from the way the woman was rapidly marching on Karakura Town, the previously flaunting presence now extruding a cold fury, it appeared she was worried Hououmaru knew something that could jeopardize her operation. Asking Hououmaru could give them an advantage over Ragyo. But at the rate she was losing blood, and whatever internal injuries she most likely had, she wouldn't survive much longer.

It wasn't a difficult decision to make for the former shinigami.

"Try not to talk..."

Even if Hououmaru *did* know everything about Operation Laissez Faire, he wasn't going to risk his friend's life in the process. Carefully examining several of the larger gashes placed across her stomach, the crimson dyed into the fabric beginning to mix with the falling rain, Isshin refrained from tearing open the bloods-soaked cloak and pressed a finger against her neck, "You have internal bleeding. I'm not sure if Ragyo sewed Life Fibers into your body but Ryuken's hospital is the only place in Karakura Town that has the proper equipment to stabilize your -"

It was the incessant electronic beeping, barely audible over the pouring rain and thunder, that caused every muscle in Isshin's body to simultaneously stiffen in dawning realization.



*She wouldn't...*

Harshly tearing apart Hououmaru's cloak without a second thought, his concern for her grievous injuries forgotten in light of the changing circumstances, the former shinigami's eyes widened in disbelief at the device intricately woven throughout the Life Fibers of her raiment. A Bleach Bomb, one of the most dangerous weapons in the world that only a handful of people even *knew* existed, had been stitched into the very fabric of the uniform. This wasn't good. It was impossible to disarm the device unless he knew *exactly* how Ragyo primed it in the first place. And knowing that woman, she made sure the Bleach Bomb would explode if he so much as *touched* it.

Damn her.

Isshin's fingers twitched nervously inches above the beeping device as rain continued trickling down his face. He needed to bring Hououmaru to Kisuke. The bastard was the only one who could safely disarm the Bleach Bomb without killing her or setting it off in the process. Swallowing the lump in his throat as he examined the Life Fiber circuitry stitched into the raiment, rainbow threads intermingling with normal cloth, Isshin nearly flinched at the unadulterated terror in Hououmaru's eyes.

"Don't worry," the former shinigami ignored the rapid pounding of his heart, born from apprehension and nervousness, as he reassured his friend, "If I know Ragyo, she was counting on me attempting to disarm the damn thing. It's probably primed to react only to my Life Fibers. So don't move. I'm going to call Kisuke and -"

Reaching for his cell phone, determined to get Kisuke's assistance no matter how much he needed to threaten the bastard, Isshin had barely pressed the first number before he became acutely aware that the Bleach Bomb was shimmering with a dangerous light. Staring at the glowing circuitry woven through Hououmaru's raiment, he numbly dropped the phone as a disturbing light started bathing the surrounding landscape in shades of black and white. This shouldn't be happening! He didn't even touch the Bleach Bomb!

An unnatural stillness pressed down upon Isshin's ears when the rainfall suddenly ceased falling, repelled by the chaotic energy radiating from the Bleach Bomb. The passage of time slowing to a crawl as he reached toward Hououmaru's uniform, fingers grasping through the air inches away from the glowing Life Fibers, maroon eyes widened when a faint pulse of spiritual energy rippled outward, bathing the surrounding landscape in shades of gray and black. Moving without any regard for his own well being, Isshin gripped the trapped raiment and *pulled* as the entirety of Tsubakidai Park was enveloped within an explosion of terrible white light.

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Ragyo Kiryuin's expression twisted into depraved amusement at the beautiful explosion rippling through Karakura Town in the distance.

Floating majestically high above the ground while surrounded by thousands of Combat-Class COVERS, the Life Fiber creatures completely unmoving apart from the emaciated faces of their victims silently screaming for salvation, the Kiryuin matriarch's maroon eyes narrowed in sadistic pleasure. Sometimes it was just far too easy to play that man. But if she was perfectly honest, it was highly surprising Isshin fell for such an obvious trap. Despite his gregarious but annoying personality, he was still her equal when it came to Life Fibers. Every mote of knowledge bestowed upon him by the Original Life Fiber was given to her as well.

So why on Earth would Isshin think she'd do something so *predictable* as setting the Bleach Bomb to *his* Life Fibers?

"Oh Isshin..."

The name of the only man she ever loved passed from between slightly parted lips as the Kiryuin matriarch beheld the aftermath unfolding over the horizon. Silver hair gently waving in the torrential downpour, Ragyo trailed a perfectly manicured finger down her arm

and mockingly sighed, "It's insulting that you *honestly* didn't see this coming."

Sometimes she couldn't help but wonder why she continued encouraging the man's behavior. Did Isshin honestly believe she was blind to her own secretary, who's worked at her side for over twenty years, disappearing at random hours of the night? Such a flagrant insult to her intelligence made Ragyo want to slap some sense into the loveable oaf. However, it was that same disrespect that allowed Operation Laissez Faire to exist in the first place. And for that she was willing to completely forgive Isshin's numerous mistakes and childish acts of rebellion against Life Fibers.

However, he still needed to pay for confiscating the Scissor Blade from dearest Nui. Stealing from a defenseless teenage girl was a personal matter she couldn't disregard. Did he have no standards?

But once again, accounting for Isshin's predictable behavior in her plans was so *facile*. Which made the Bleach Bomb she patiently stitched inside Hououmaru's rewoven raiment, one of the Grand Couturier's gifts in the aftermath of the Great Culture and Sports Festival, all the more amusing. The man's self-centered presumption that the device was configured for *his* specific Life Fibers meant he would willingly sentence Hououmaru to an excruciatingly slow and painful death from internal bleeding while he tried calling for help. But since the Bleach Bomb was subtly connected to the Life Fibers composing her secretary's cloak, Isshin still fell into her trap despite his paranoia. Thanks to a few modifications, the man would have just enough time to ponder the consequences of his pointless defiance before the Bleach Bomb detonated at point-blank range.

Of course, she had no intention of *killing* the man. For despite years of frustration and heartbreak born from his callous spurning of her affection, not to mention kidnapping Amu, she found the notion of killing Isshin completely reprehensible.

"La vie est drôle."

Ragyo shuddered pleasurably at the sensation of the Life Fibers woven throughout the garment she'd chosen to adorn her body. With Esdeath and Yuu currently dealing with Olivier's pathetic nudists in Osaka, slaughtering all who would reject the glory of the Original Life Fiber, it was time to begin the next phase of Operation Laissez Faire. And with Isshin out of commission, there was nobody left in the miserable city capable of stopping her.

"Hououmaru's splendid performance aside... I believe it's time to put an end to your pathetic display of resistance."

The peeling of thunder reverberated across the drenched landscape as the Kiryuin matriarch's lips twisted in sadistic amusement. Slowly raising a hand in front of her face, manicured fingers pressed tightly together, she chuckled darkly as the Life Fibers from Hououmaru's raiment scattered to the far corners of Karakura Town. Did Isshin truly think the crux of her plan only involved incapacitating him with a Bleach Bomb? Au contraire. Expanding her senses to the thousands of threads blown throughout the encapsulated city like a dandelion in the wind, she momentarily basked in the heavenly pleasure coursing through her veins before grinning madly.

"Au revoir..."

Isshin hadn't exaggerated about the impenetrability of his barrier. Not a single COVERS or Life Fiber Hybrid could traverse through the high-velocity Life Fibers enveloping the city without his permission. While a bothersome annoyance on the best of days, he then had the audacity to further modify the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier, preventing either of them from crossing. The man really knew how to test her patience. However, impenetrable wasn't the same as indestructible. And that was a lesson Isshin would have time to ponder while her forces ravaged and slaughtered everyone in Karakura Town.

Except, of course, for her foolish daughter. She had something special waiting for Satsuki and the treacherous Kamui adorning her undeserving body.

Folding her arms underneath her ample bosom as thousands of COVERS immediately descended upon the unprepared city, Ragyo sighed in utter content at the subsonic vibrations of their Life Fibers. Their roars were akin to a beautiful symphony resonating in the depths of soul, an elegant cacophony unmatched by anything humanity ever accomplished. *This* was the moment she'd dreamt about for years. Months of planning coming to a head as Isshin's attempts to defend humanity from the Original Life Fiber were torn apart down to the dress patterns.

The truth of the world he'd denied for the last twenty years would *finally* be drilled into his thick skull... whether he liked it or not.

"Proceed with the operation."

Ragyo paid only the barest amount of attention to the three simultaneous eruptions of rainbow light across the rain-soaked landscape. While it was heartening to watch her employees diligently march forward, obeying her orders down to the letter, the heavy resistance undoubtedly waiting within Karakura Town meant some of them wouldn't be returning alive. But that was simply how the world worked. Xcution were nothing more than sacrifices, obedient servants ready to throw away their lives to ensure the success of her plans. Yet while she would have loved taking her sweet time with Isshin before personally killing Kisuke Urahara, she didn't have the luxury of an empty schedule. The generator powering the barrier was undamaged and fully operational. It was only a matter of time before she needed to retreat, lest her forces get trapped inside the city when the barrier restored itself.

But forty-five minutes was *far* longer than she needed.

Sighing contently at the plumes of smoke already rising from Karakura Town, miniature explosions crossing the horizon as the beleaguered defenders fought tooth and nail against the power of Life Fibers, Ragyo's lips quirked into an amused smirk when two presences simultaneously appeared on the periphery of her senses, "I take it things are nearly finished?"

"Gosh, we wouldn't be here otherwise!"

The saccharine voice pierced through the torrential downpour as Nui Harime smiled widely from her perch upon the right shoulder of a giant COVERS, having arrived only moments prior to Lady Ragyo ordering Xcution to kill every man, woman and child in Karakura Town. Sapphire eyes staring mirthfully over the dreary landscape as the rain caused her blonde pigtails to wilt slightly under the weight, the Grand Couturier enthusiastically nodded her head, "All that's left is the final stitching. But I could do that with both hands tied behind my back! So we decided to take a break and see how things are progressing! After all, watching these humans squirm..."

"... is something we wouldn't miss for the world," Amu Harime finished stoically with only the slightest trace of detectable emotion, her purple boots splashing lightly as she stood on the Life Fiber being's left shoulder. Tilting her head to the right and blinking when Lady Ragyo didn't acknowledge their answer, deigning to remain silent and continue staring at the battlefield in the distance, she pressed the purple Needle Blade against the small of her back, "Shinra Koketsu only needs a few more hours of work, Lady Ragyo. Once we heard what happened with Hououmaru, we couldn't help ourselves from watching. Because without Mr. Kurosaki..."

"... there's absolutely, positively nobody left on the planet that can stop us!" Nui proudly finished with an exaggerated bobbing of her head. Smirking mischievously as her own purple Needle Blade glistened in the pouring rain, the Grand Couturier stared at her unblemished reflection before cheerfully adding, "Even that shopkeeper and his transforming sword can't hold a candle to you, Lady Ragyo! But we're not stupid, you know! We wouldn't have come all this way if the old goat hadn't fallen into your trap!"

"Is that right?"

The smirk adorning the Kiryuin matriarch's features widened at the insinuation, "And this has nothing to do with a certain annoying man?"

Nui tilted her head in mimicry of her sister and giggled, "Gee, was it that obvious?"

Ragyo was keenly aware that it was dearest Nui who dragged her loving sister all the way from Honnouji Academy. Her cheerful daughter's motivations for disobeying a direct order were painfully obvious to the woman. Yet she couldn't fault the Grand Couturier. Kisuke Urahara had been an annoying thorn in her side from the beginning, a man who consistently pushed the boundaries of both her self-control and patience. From creating Mugetsu to entering the Original Life Fiber's sacred chamber, desecrating the holy being with his presence, the shopkeeper had long ago earned the exclusivity of her wrath.

If only her COVERS had managed to capture the man during the Great Culture and Sports Festival...

The deafening crackle of thunder gently pulled the Kiryuin matriarch from her darkening thoughts. Having the Grand Couturiers participate in Operation Laissez Faire was incredibly risky. And it wasn't too late to send her daughters back to the safety of Honnouji Academy. But she wasn't so cruel as to deny them the opportunity to stretch their legs. After working countless hours weaving the final garment necessary for humanity's destiny at the hands of Life Fibers, they deserved the chance to take vengeance. To torture Kisuke Urahara for the pain and humiliation he inflicted upon them by wiping the man and everything he cherishes from the face of the planet.

"Now I certainly cannot deny my daughters the chance to enjoy themselves..."

Ragyo flicked a strand of silver hair away from her eyes as something in the distance caught her attention, a brief shimmer of familiar blue light moving rapidly across the rain-soaked landscape, "But do be careful. He may be a foolish man but Kisuke Urahara *has* proven to be quite resourceful when cornered."

"You don't need to tell us twice, Lady Ragyo!"

Puddles of water splashed haphazardly across the COVERS as the Grand Couturier cheerfully walked off its shoulder. A dangerous glint visible in her eyes when her pink boots found purchase upon thin air, a trick she learned from watching those stupid Quincy at Honnouji Academy, she propped the Needle Blade behind her back and laughed, "We're not going to underestimate that party pooper a second time! While Xcution is having fun killing those stupid nudists..."

"... we're going to hunt down that stupid shopkeeper and kill him," Amu's waist-length black hair, styled in a manner reminiscent of her sister, was weighed down slightly by the rain as she leapt off the COVERS. One leg curled upwards as she gently landed in the air next to Nui, whose fingers reached out and entwined with her own, she smirked darkly and added in a subdued tone, "But not before torturing him for keeping me away from you, Lady Ragyo."

The Kiryuin matriarch saw no reason in clarifying that it was *Isshin* who kidnapped dearest Amu seventeen years ago, not the foolish shopkeeper destined to rot in the deepest bowels of hell. Chuckling heartily, Ragyo folded her arms underneath her bosom and smirked, "Well then... amusez-vous."

A wistful sigh escaped from between slightly parted lips when the Grand Couturiers smirked in synchronization before vanishing in an impressive burst of speed. Today's youth were simply too impulsive and impatient. She understood dearest Nui's desire to violently eviscerate Kisuke Urahara but the man was someone that couldn't be underestimated. Creating a Kamui wasn't something anyone could simply *learn*, a lesson her daughter understood. Yet it was the non-Life Fiber powers wielded by the residents of Karakura Town that garnered a modicum of her admittedly minuscule interest.

Just *how* did Isshin manage to conceal these people from her notice for all these years?



"Life is indeed amusing... wouldn't you say, Isshin?"

Ragyo's lips twisted into a psychotic smirk as the rainbow undertone shining from her silver hair intensified, bathing the surrounding landscape with its harsh light. She couldn't *wait* to see Isshin. They had *so much* to talk about...

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A single involuntary twitch plucked at Satsuki's eye as she soared over Tsubakidai Park, the rain-soaked landscape displaying just how much damage it sustained from the detonation of the Bleach Bomb. Changing her trajectory as wisps of white energy curled through the humid air, clinging briefly against Junketsu's flight configuration before dissipating into the storm, the teenager's frown deepened when the Kamui tightened around her body. Although she remained unable to hear Junketsu for obvious reasons, the underlying connotations of the reaction were perfectly clear.

With a soft clack Satsuki's heel connected with the damp soil, her body illuminated by a shimmering flash of blue light and stars when Junketsu instantaneously transformed back into her standard configuration. Cautiously examining the decimated environment with a discerning eye, the former heiress's nose scrunched in disgust at the overbearing scent permeating the atmosphere. She had been unaware of Bleach Bombs until Kisuke Urahara's enigmatic explanation of his escape from the Grand Couturier.

Drawing the auburn Scissor Blade strapped across her back with a metallic snap, Satsuki ignored both the rain streaming down her face and the deep-seated revulsion pulsing through Junketsu. What she was planning had the potential to injure the Kamui yet she bitterly had little choice in the matter. With her mother's forces assaulting the city, slaughtering anyone they came across, they didn't have the luxury to remain cautious.

She needed to walk into the lingering effects of the Bleach Bomb... for better or worse.

Her black hair lay matted against Junketsu's uniform from the pouring rain as she leapt into the dissipating white haze hugging the ground without a second thought. Marching across the cratered and burnt landscape as the distant gunfire momentarily ceased, drawing her attention for the briefest of moments, Satsuki felt the Kamui tighten uncomfortably around her body when she reached the epicenter of the cataclysmic explosion, the figure laying prone upon the ground all too familiar.

"Isshin Kurosaki!"

Isshin ignored the metallic taste of copper as he struggled onto his feet. Actual pain... now *that* was something he hadn't experienced since encountering that thing hibernating beneath Ragyo's manor. And to think he'd missed the human sensation of having his body wracked by the most excruciating pain imaginable. Arms trembling as he propped himself onto one knee, trails of blood oozing down the burnt skin of his face, Isshin stiffened at the scrap of cloth growing damp in the puddle between his hands.

*Rei...*

As streams of bitterly cold water trickled down her body, causing Junketsu's armor to glisten slightly from the moisture, Satsuki landed next to the crouching man with a loud clack of her heel. Ignoring the strand of black hair laying against her face as she stared at Ichigo's father, the guilty expression in his eyes momentarily shattering her well-honed discipline and disposition, Satsuki's voice contained not a single trace of her conflicting emotions despite the Scissor Blade quivering slightly in her fingers, "How did my mother transport a Bleach Bomb into Karakura Town?"

"Your concern about my health is appreciated, Satsuki."

Isshin ignored the suspicious glare from Ragyo's daughter as he staggered back onto his feet. One hand callously wiping away the blood oozing from the corner of his mouth, the man winced at the pain lancing through his body. He never expected his friend to sacrifice Hououmaru just to get to him. It went against everything he knew about the woman. But perhaps he had been deluding himself all these years about Ragyo if she was willing to stoop to such unfathomable depths in service of the Original Life Fiber.

"We don't have the luxury of time to worry about your condition," Satsuki replied, her tone firm and unyielding, as her attention shifted eastward, "You are the only person capable of defeating my mother. You may chastise my disrespectful behavior all you wish, Isshin Kurosaki, but refrain from doing so until Ragyo Kiryuin lies dead upon the ground."

Running a hand through his silver hair at the remarkably strange comment, Isshin exhaled loudly and muttered, "I'll be sure to remember that... but you need to get the hell out of here right now."

Satsuki's brow furrowed pensively when Ichigo's father extracted the same hardened Life Fiber blade he wielded against her mother from the tattered remnants of his jacket. The rest of his uncharacteristically serious warning was not necessary for her to understand the direness of the situation - her mother was hastily approaching. Even with Junketsu's full power at her disposal, Satsuki knew she stood no chance against the monster calling herself Ragyo Kiryuin. Nodding as she turned to leave, knees flexing in preparation of shifting back into Senpū, she looked over her shoulder when Isshin hurriedly added, "Find Kisuke and tell him he needs to get -"

"I'm disappointed, Isshin."

Every muscle in Satsuki's body tensed at the suave voice, the genial and nearly *motherly* tone sending a shiver down her spine. Floating gently above the ground, arms folded beneath her bosom as the rain actively avoided touching her clothing, Ragyo Kiryuin sighed in

disappointment, "You of all people should know better than to speak so freely around unworthy ears."

"And you should know it's rude to interrupt somebody when they're talking."

The suppressed vitriol tainting Isshin Kurosaki's voice was a startling departure from the childish and family-oriented man Satsuki had been living with for the last few weeks. Staring reluctantly at Ragyo's amused expression as lightning arced overhead, the former shinigami balanced the multicolored tachi in the palm of his hand and grumbled, "But you really had me going for a while, Ragyo. I never thought you would kill Rei just to take me down."

Ragyo's expression immediately soured at Isshin's unwarranted venom. While the man certainly had every right to speak his opinion on the matter of her tactics, the events that led to Hououmaru's raiment being rewoven into a fully functional Bleach Bomb were entirely *his* fault. But alas, trying to make Isshin follow even the most basic directives was a task unto itself. A melancholic sigh escaping her parted lips as she stood several inches above the ground, Ragyo tilted her head sideways and playfully mused, "Did you think I wouldn't notice your *obvious* correspondences with Hououmaru?"

Amused laughter echoed melodically across the park before Ragyo took a deep breath and smirked, "But I'm surprised you're still conscious, Isshin. That Bleach Bomb was designed with your level of stubbornness in mind. It seems I've underestimated just *how* stubborn a man like you can be..."

"Ragyo Kiryuin!"

The Kiryuin matriarch's attention lazily shifted to her petulant daughter at the *completely* childish outburst. Absentmindedly observing both the furious expression etched in Satsuki's eyes and the terror circulating through Junketsu's quivering Life Fibers, Ragyo shook her head in disbelief when Isshin grumbled inaudibly under his breath. Did he honestly think she couldn't hear every word that left

his mouth? Humoring Isshin by pretending she hadn't heard his flagrant and admittedly *rude* insults, she stood silently in the torrential downpour as the man gathered his wits and decided to speak normally.

"So you're going with this little act, huh?"

Isshin held a heavily burnt arm in front of Satsuki, preventing the teenager from interfering as he locked gazes with Ragyo, "You knew a Bleach Bomb wouldn't be enough to take me down."

"True..."

Rainbow light spilled through the decimated park as the Kiryuin matriarch placed a hand against her cheek and chuckled darkly, "Yet it's clearly taking your full concentration just to remain standing. You're nothing more than a shadow of your glorious self, Isshin, a weakened husk that even my foolish daughter and her treacherous Kamui could defeat. And while you'll regain your full power soon enough, as of right now..."

Trailing a finger down Isshin's neck when she abruptly closed the distance between them, Ragyo smirked at the shocked expression in her daughter's eyes before whispering, "... even *you* cannot hope to stop me."

The Kiryuin matriarch's smile noticeably faltered when Isshin rudely leapt away, leaving her standing slightly embarrassed in front of her foolish daughter. Her heel clacking upon the air when the man darted forward and swung the hardened Life Fiber weapon at her neck, the killing intent behind the strike momentarily taking her off guard, Ragyo angrily narrowed her eyes before snapping her arm upwards and grabbing Isshin's wrist.

"Pardonnez-moi, mon amour," Ragyo muttered before smashing her hand into the man's stomach.

An explosion of multicolored energy disintegrated the already decimated landscape the instant Ragyo's fist connected with Isshin's stomach, forcing Satsuki to stab the Scissor Blade into the muddy soil lest the overwhelming intensity of the technique send her flying backwards. Junketsu's armor glowing with a fierce blue light as the Kamui deepened their level of synchronized, Satsuki found the additional power greatly appreciated when the shockwave accompanying her mother's unholy blast rippled across Karakura Town. Ignoring the sharp ringing in her ears, the former heiress broke out in a cold sweat when Ichigo's father *vanished*, his body crashing through multiple building in an expanding trail of destruction leading out of the city.

"Now, with *that* particular matter settled..."

Ragyo's tone returned to its previously mirthful state as she casually reached over her shoulder. Manicured fingers clasping firmly around the hilt of Isshin's tachi, which the man had accidentally discarded prior to his impromptu departure, she turned half-narrowed maroon eyes to her daughter and smirked, "... there's only the matter of *you*, Satsuki."

"Don't underestimate me! Junketsu Zenkan!"

An aura of spiritual energy enveloped Satsuki's body as Junketsu eagerly transformed into Zenkan, the immense power radiating from the advanced configuration vaporizing the rain coating her body. The ground cracking beneath her Kamui's heels as she refused to give the monster in the guise of her mother a single moment of respite, the former heiress couldn't suppress a snarl when she swung the Scissor Blade only for Ragyo to effortlessly dodge at the very last second.

"Come now," the regal woman mockingly chastised, her tone devoid of worry as she easily evaded or countered every attack Satsuki used, "Did you think wearing Junketsu would be enough to stand at my level?"

Accentuating the difference between their powers by deflecting the Scissor Blade before casually leaping upwards, Ragyo's eyes widened in genuine surprise when Satsuki tensed her knees before following suit. Now *this* was an interesting development. How did Isshin teach her foolish daughter such an intriguing ability? It might have been a mistake on her part if her eldest daughter was capable of learning such techniques. Grinning smugly when Satsuki arrogantly attempted to take advantage of her introspection, Ragyo's heels clacked against the solidified air as she continued avoiding her daughter's easily telegraphed strikes.

"Although I will admit your strength *has* improved since our last reunion."

Ragyo quirked an eyebrow when Satsuki abruptly ceased attacking, rings of condensation rippling beneath her heels with each step. Watching dispassionately when both her daughter and the Scissor Blade were enveloped within a deep blue aura, the Kiryuin matriarch frowned at the name Satsuki gave Junketsu's signature attack. Tenrai Kagai certainly possessed a marvelous symbolism befitting that of the first Kamui. Her silver hair rustling slightly when Satsuki shouted passionately and rushed forward, blue spiritual energy coating the Scissor Blade, she waited until her daughter was nearly upon her before stabbing Isshin's tachi straight through one of the hardened Life Fiber blade's circular holes.

"But you're just a poor girl who doesn't know her limitations..."

The potent spiritual energy encompassing the Scissor Blade exploded harmlessly into the surrounding storm as Ragyo stared deeply into her daughter's furious expression, "My blood might run through your veins but you're still only human. And a human can never hope to truly wear Kamui!"

Ragyo didn't hesitate upon finishing her explanation to promptly kick her petulant daughter directly in the stomach, the amount of power contained within the restrained strike enough to send Satsuki violently crashing to the ground where she belonged. Taking a brief

moment to examine the underlying intricacies of Isshin's blade as she patiently waited for the dust to settle from her daughter's indignant landing, Ragyo smirked at Satsuki's defiant glare, "Speaking of Kamui, I believe it's time Junketsu returned to where she truly belongs."

"You shall never touch Junketsu!"

A single stream of crimson trailed down Satsuki's face as she stood unflinchingly in the rain, her attention focused upon her mother's monstrous visage. Her expression tensing at the terror radiating from Junketsu at her mother's insinuations, Satsuki tightened her grip around the Scissor Blade and sneered defiantly. As a blue-white backdrop of holy light burst into existence, bathing the scorched landscape with its glory, she clasped both hands around the weapon and fiercely declared, "I'm aware of the gulf between our powers! Isshin Kurosaki demonstrated that concept quite clearly! Even with Junketsu's full strength at my fingertips I don't stand a chance of defeating you!"

Ragyo arched an eyebrow at the childish statement, "And yet you still harbor delusions of stopping me?"

"Lying is unbecoming of you, mother."

The corners of Satsuki's mouth curled faintly into a smirk at the faltering of her mother's sadistic expression. Flicking the Scissor Blade through the air as a writhing aura of deep blue spiritual energy once more enveloped her body, she ignored the small amount of satisfaction pulsing through her chest at Ragyo's visible astonishment when the weapon transformed into an identical replica of Ryuko's Decapitation Mode.

"Your entire plan is nothing more than a desperate gamble!"

Lightning flashed across the heavens as she raised the transformed Scissor Blade to her shoulder, a metallic ringing echoing across the landscape. As streams of water cascaded down Junketsu's armor,



the backdrop of holy radiance grew increasingly brilliant, "You can hide your nervousness beneath a paltry veneer of confidence but this battle was predicated upon a quick victory! For once Isshin Kurosaki's Life Fiber Barrier is restored, both you and your army will be rendered powerless!"

The spiritual energy radiating from the former Kiryuin heiress, bolstered by her nearly perfect synchronization with Junketsu, exploded outwards as she defiantly proclaimed, "I might fall beneath your power, Ragyo Kiryuin, but -"

"You talk *far* too much..."

Manicured fingers clasped firmly around her daughter's mouth as the Kiryuin matriarch closed the distance between them in a single step. Easily lifting Satsuki off the ground despite her feeble attempts to counter the sudden shift in momentum, Ragyo's lips curled in sadistic pleasure at the fear in her daughter's blue eyes, "Grandiose speeches are wonderful when used appropriately, Satsuki. Speaking down to the plebeians... asserting your dominance over humanity... killing Quincy. The middle of a battle, on the other hand, is certainly *not* the proper place for such avocations."

Squeezing a modicum tighter when Satsuki's heel slammed into her stomach to absolutely no effect, Ragyo's maroon eyes narrowed fractionally as she calmly stabbed Isshin's sword into the ground, "However, your little act of disobedience was anything *but* a fight. Your thoroughly annoying attempt at stalling for time, while quite commendable, has amounted to absolutely nothing. A few minutes wasted on a meaningless conversation against a young girl who *still* cannot comprehend the truth of the world."

Ragyo decided to accentuate her point by delicately trailing a finger down her daughter's bare stomach, eliciting a muffled shout of defiance. Easily intercepting Satsuki's wrist when she foolishly swung the Scissor Blade at her heart, she chuckled before knocking the weapon out of her daughter's unworthy grasp. Amused eyes watching the work of her former and unimaginative husband twirl

through the air before stabbing blade-first into the mud, the rainbow undertone in her hair shone menacingly as she shook her head and sighed, "Today's youth simply have no respect for their elders..."

The simultaneous widening of both her daughter and Junketsu's eyes as several Life Fibers emerged from her fingers, the rainbow threads weaving dangerous through the air, brought endless satisfaction to the Kiryuin matriarch. Heroic willpower and determination aside, her daughter was *still* nothing more than human. An exceptionally gifted and powerful human born of her flesh and blood but nothing compared to Life Fiber Hybrids. And with Satsuki's allies and Nudist Beach preoccupied with Xcution and her COVERS, she had all the time in the world to reweave her daughter and Junketsu into obedient servants.

Having Satsuki slaughter her former comrades, the utter betrayal stinging deep as they lay dying in the rain, would be *well* worth wasting another few minutes.

"Now isn't this quite the surprise..."

Maroon eyes widened fractionally at the distinctly masculine voice penetrating the pouring rain, the entirely unexpected presence momentarily taking her by surprise. Just *how* did this man manage to avoid her senses? Quickly recomposing herself with all the grace afforded to a woman of her social standing, Ragyo ignored her daughter's continuing petulant actions as she glanced impatiently over her shoulder at the source of the unwanted interruption. As rain trailed down his black cloak in thick streams, the hood hiding everything but the lower half of his smirking visage, the man continued in the same calm tone.

"It seems I owe Kisuke Urahara an apology. I assumed his rhetoric born of unnecessary apprehension, the continued result of a previous irreconcilable difference of opinion. But your presence in Karakura Town helps explain his sudden change of heart."

Lightly disturbing the growing puddles of water covering the ground as he took several deliberate steps closer to the Kiryuin matriarch, the man held up a hand and commented, "This isn't a situation where one can allow their judgment to be clouded by emotion. Even determination can be detracting if expressed improperly. After all, you are someone who contorts the concept of 'power.' Intelligence, strength, speed... these concepts cannot describe you, Ragyo Kiryuin. For how does one compare anything to the woman who has been touched by the Original Life Fiber?"

Ragyo ignored the feeling of utter *disgust* trailing down her spine, "And who are you?"

There was something inherently wrong about her unwanted guest, a mixture of discontent and antipathy increasing with every second that passed. And despite her legendary patience, for some reason she wished nothing more than to immediately skewer the man through the heart. Casting one final look at her daughter before callously tossing her away without a second thought, the Kiryuin matriarch removed Isshin's hardened Life Fiber sword from the ground before turning her full attention upon the man, "From your familiarity with that annoying shopkeeper I can only presume you're another one of Isshin's clandestine colleagues."

"Isshin Kurosaki..."

The amusement in the man's tone caused Ragyo to narrow her eyes, "You might say we are well acquainted. In fact, your chance encounter with him would never have happened if it weren't for my personal involvement."

Lightning pulsed through the heavens, bathing the deluged city in shades of purple, as the Kiryuin matriarch sneered. It was annoying enough that the man felt the need to speak to her in a condescending fashion, completely ignoring the fact she was only humoring him, but claiming he had anything to do with Isshin was simply too much. There was confidence and then there was suicidal disrespect, " *Your* involvement?"

"Perhaps you don't believe me," the man, completely unperturbed by the sudden rise in spiritual energy, noticed Satsuki crouching against a fallen tree. This was the first time he was able to personally observe a Kamui, one of the pure Life Fiber beings. Putting aside the matter of its appearance around Satsuki Kiryuin, the power radiating from its advanced state at a surprising level, he casually added, "But I wouldn't expect a woman of your position to simply take my word at face value. Needless of your beliefs, Isshin's encounter with Masaki Kurosaki would never have occurred without *my* direct involvement."

Maroon eyes widened briefly at the insinuation before narrowing in growing fury. It was abundantly clear the man was taunting her, using her loss to that woman in a futile attempt to enrage her. But just because she refused to *fall* for the tactic did not mean she would allow the man to continue speaking... or standing. The rainbow undertone from her silver hair brightening dangerously as she clacked a heel against the air, a pulse of spiritual energy rippling outwards from the point of contact, Ragyo tightened her fingers around Isshin's blade and smirked coldly, "Is that right?"

Wisps of rainbow energy wafted from the hardened Life Fiber weapon as her tone grew increasingly sinister, "Assuming you're telling the truth, my dear *étranger*, there is something about you that piques my interest. You're neither human nor are you one of those Quincy scurrying in the shadows. And you're certainly *not* a vampire. So tell me, just *who* are you?"

"What an interesting question..."

As streams of water cascaded from the man's raised arm, a faint wind began blowing through the park, "Would knowing my name depreciate your desire to end my life?"

"I simply wish to inform your next of kin," the Kiryuin matriarch explained with a distinct lack of amusement as she marched towards the boorish man, "But my patience with your baseless slander has reached its limit. I *do* have a schedule to keep."

"Is that so?"

A brief moment of silence followed the rhetorical question, punctuated only by the pealing of thunder, before a katana abruptly shattered into existence between the man's fingers. As the hood of Kisuke Urahara's spiritual-concealing cloak was blown away by a gust of wind, revealing swept-back brown hair, Sosuke Aizen's calm demeanor didn't falter at Ragyo's unimpressed quirking of her eyebrow. It would have been presumptuous to assume a woman of her caliber, who's witnessed the truth of the world with her own eyes, would find such a mundane display remarkable.

"Then by all means try to kill me," Aizen smiled amiably at the monstrous spiritual energy lurking beneath Ragyo Kiryuin's false skin. Jagged arcs of lightning illuminating the storm deluging Karakura Town when he raised his power, causing the woman's eyes to widen fractionally and her daughter to wisely leap several dozen meters further away, the traitorous shinigami shifted into the most basic of zanjutsu stances. His calculating mind simulating nearly a dozen variations of attacks the woman would attempt in the next five seconds, each difficult to counter for anyone other than himself, Aizen ruminated on the question he asked Kisuke Urahara not an hour ago.

Just *how* did Isshin Kurosaki allow the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet to progress to such an extent?

## Turn Back the Pendulum

*Here is the next chapter of **To My Death I Fight** and boy, is it a large one. While other chapters have TECHNICALLY been longer, the content and material contained below is rather important in the long run. That's the reason it took so long to write. I wanted everything to be perfect (or nearly so) for you, my readers, to enjoy.*

*And from the title of the chapter I know some of you are going to be disappointed by the lack of a fight between Ragyo and Aizen. It is something I REALLY want to write, and will do so in the next chapter. But note that this chapter isn't filler. In fact, I would go so far as to say this chapter explains the reasons and motivations behind not only a lot of the main story - including Ragyo's background - but also a large portion of Bleach's pre-timeskip events.*

*With that said, I would like to give a few shout outs to some artists on Deviantart:*

*(1) **that-booky-chick15**: for her continued fanart of my story, its characters, and the amazing artwork of Nui Harime in Tite Kubo's style of manga that is my current avatar.*

*(2) **grocamol**: for commissioning a manga adaptation of my story by **ardeearollado**, which is currently eight pages long. Please go to his deviantart page to see the entire manga so far and, if you truly wish, help keep the manga going.*

*I would also like to thank my beta reader for his continued tolerance of my stupidity and sometimes atrocious grammar and spelling errors. Who knows where I would be without his constantly blunt, but always helpful, honesty.*

*Be sure to check out the tvtropes page for **To My Death I Fight** . Now with all of that out of the way, I hope you enjoy the latest chapter of my story.*

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## **Chapter 54 - Turn Back the Pendulum**

**July 23rd, 1916**

An agonizing screech warbled across the bone-white dunes of the boundless desert of the damned as a large Hollow collapsed limply onto the sand. Sharpened claws curling violently into the ground as glowing blue eyes widened beneath its lizard-like mask, the twisted soul convulsed spasmodically when torrents of bubbling spiritual energy began wafting from its body. Taut muscles and veins bulged grotesquely as the barely contained energy radiating from the depths of its corrupted soul grew increasingly chaotic, coloring its once pale flesh an unhealthy shade of crimson. Emitting a torturous wail as blood began oozing from cracks across its inhuman body, the Hollow hunched its back before exploding in a violent burst of flesh and gore.

Standing calmly upon a nearby dune, his white haori flapping lightly in the phantasmal wind constantly blowing across the expansive desert, Sosuke Aizen's mouth curled into a faint smile when the Hollow's corpse slowly dissolved into its component spiritual particles. His pleasant expression unfaltering as the twisted creature's spiritual energy was drawn toward the shimmering orb sitting delicately in the palm of his hand, the ambitious shinigami was unfettered when his creation's normal coloration shifted into a deep sapphire tint. Soft eyes narrowing introspectively, Aizen's thoughts turned inward as he lightly curled his fingers around the sphere.

Contrary to what his associates believe, he was never one to shy away from the prospect of failure.

Yet he couldn't help but feel the slightest hint of annoyance that these particular Hollows, which he painstakingly gathered over the last year, were abject failures. Despite his original hypothesis, none

of them possessed any unique characteristics or abilities that visibly differentiated them from the rest of their brethren. Even their most powerful specimens, a pair of Hollows with strength comparable to low-ranked seated officers, could not survive the Hōgyoku's influence without quickly undergoing Soul Suicide. But most disconcerting was the undetermined *reasoning* behind the growing list of failed results.

Perhaps it was time to adjust the parameters of the experiment.

"Yet another failure..."

Kaname Tōsen softly expressed his mild disappointment at the experiment as he stood to the immediate left of the bespectacled captain. Milky-white eyes narrowed contemplatively behind the clear goggles concealing his disability, he took notice of the spiritual environment surrounding the blood-soaked dunes before continuing in the same calm tone, "Sixty-two Hollows yet none of them survived the transition to a higher state of purpose. It's quite likely attempting to continue this line of experimentation will be a waste of time. Shall I finish off the rest of the specimens?"

A trace of a smirk appeared on the captain's features at the sound of a zanpakuto slowly leaving its sheathe, "Do you doubt my methods, Kaname?"

"N-No, of course not..."

With a metallic clink Tōsen snapped his zanpakuto back into his scabbard before kneeling reverently, "Please forgive my insolence, Captain Aizen."

Aizen's expression didn't falter at the obedient behavior of his subordinate despite his perturbed thoughts. While Kaname's deference to his authority and knowledge on the Hōgyoku was appreciated to a certain extent, if one possessed the necessary acumen to form a legitimate opinion then they should freely speak their mind. Blind obedience can only take one so far before fervent



demeanor overwhelmed logic. Kaname's strength might have risen to the level of a standard captain under his tutelage but power was meaningless of one lacked the proper motivation and rationality.

It was common knowledge that an opponent experienced in the basics of psychology can easily twist zealot fanaticism to one's disadvantage.

"There's no need for apologies, Kaname."

The mischievous smirk plastered upon his lieutenant's face at the measured response did not escape Aizen's attention. Purposefully remaining ignorant to the way Gin Ichimaru stared intensely at the Hokyoku, his amusement twisting darkly for a fraction of a second, the captain carefully placed the shimmering sphere within its specially crafted container. It was too dangerous to leave his creation exposed to the spiritually rich environment of Hueco Mundo for extended periods of time. In its currently incomplete condition, allowing the Hokyoku to absorb too much ambient spiritual energy could lead to catastrophic consequences.

Tucking his arms within the folds of his shihakusho, the captain's tone remained affable as he slowly walked away, "Your opinion holds a grain of truth. Initial judgment would imply these Hollows are nothing but trash. However, there are still several things I wish to test before deeming the current series of experimentation a failure."

"I'm beginning to get worried, Captain Aizen. At the rate we're going through Hollows we might just start running out soon..."

Gin Ichimaru smirked playfully, his cavalier expression unchanging despite the venomous glare sent his way courtesy of Tousen. Hands clasped together against the small of his back as he sauntered after his captain, the recently promoted lieutenant chuckled before offhandedly commenting, "Although I suppose it is quite fortunate for us so many people are dying over in Europe. Perhaps I should pick up some more Hollows next time I'm in France."

"That won't be necessary, Gin," Aizen sensed the slight consternation on the youth's face at the response. Briefly pausing as Tousen fell into step, the blind shinigami's anger at Gin's behavior reluctantly abating, his voice contained not a hint of annoyance, "As my new lieutenant your duties in Verdun will be heavily scrutinized by the Twelfth Division. Restricted, one might say, to the battlefield. It would be unwise to draw the Gotei 13's attention to gather a few Hollows."

"I suppose ya got a point there..."

Half-listening to the conversation as the lieutenant rubbed a hand against the back of his neck out of embarrassment, Tousen's expression twisted slightly when something plucked on the edges of his mind. It was an old thought, a perturbing notion he'd been constantly pondering for the last several weeks. Blind eyes narrowing fractionally as he raised a hand to his chin, he collected his thoughts in the most appropriate manner before turning to Aizen and calmly inquiring, "Something's troubling me. Four years ago our research was moving at a pace that could only be called breakneck. We experimented upon enough Hollows to draw the notice of Baraggan Louisenbairn. Nothing was off limits. Yet these last few months you have reversed course. Is there something we should know?"

"It's nothing more than a minor change of pace, Kaname."

The captain's glasses shimmered opaquely in the perpetual moonlight as he continued walking without the slightest hint of concern. His brown hair blowing in the nonexistent wind as the bleached structure in the distance - the seat of power for the self-proclaimed God-King of Hueco Mundo - rapidly came into view over the expansive dunes, Aizen smiled affably at the intriguing question, "Our plans hinge upon dozens of interconnecting variables. At certain points the pace of our research may quicken. That is a fact. However, your concern is the result of incomplete data, arising from fragmentary knowledge. With that said, I will presume your next question involves asking why I wish to continue experimenting upon

these particular Hollows despite the lack of progress. The answer to that question is quite simple -their souls came from Tokyo."

His two subordinates immediately shared mutual expressions of confusion at the answer. Aizen didn't expect them to understand the intricate motivations behind his reasoning. As far as the Seireitei was concerned, the geographic origin of a Hollow played no role in determining its starting spiritual energy or techniques. It was a supposedly proven fact, determined by decades of research even before Kishime Urahara founded the Shinigami Research and Development Institute.

"Captain Aizen..."

Gin casually leaned forward as he interrupted Aizen's train of thought, a conniving smirk once more stretching across his features. Pointing curiously at the Hōgyoku concealed inside the captain's haori the silver haired shinigami's blue eyes opened minutely, "It's been on my mind for quite some time now... twenty years as a matter of fact... but what exactly *is* the Hōgyoku? I know what it *does* but its power feels completely different from spiritual energy."

Despite Tōsen immediately chastising Gin for his impertinent question, the bespectacled shinigami's smirk never faltered. Removing the safely contained Hōgyoku from his pocket, the orb glowing with a deeply enchanting coloration, he pleasantly explained, "Although Kishime Urahara and myself individually created our own Hōgyoku, each with nearly identical powers and abilities, they are composed of diametrically opposite yet fundamentally similar materials. Yet despite our knowledge it is physically impossible to replicate our work and create another Hōgyoku."

A wistful sigh escaped the lieutenant's mouth at the enigmatic answer, his features falling as Aizen pocketed the Hōgyoku before proceeding to stab the air with his zanpakuto. As the dimensional gateway leading back to the Seireitei opened, the metaphysical wooden doors sliding open with a burst of light, Gin hid his

disappointment behind a smirk. Oh well, there was still plenty of time to learn about the Hōgyoku over the next few decades.

The wooden floorboards creaked as Aizen walked into his captain's quarters. With the Great War enveloping most of Europe and her colonies, surveillance across the Seireitei was at an absolute minimum. And thanks to the millions of souls lingering around the battlefields, their pain and suffering rapidly transforming them into Hollows, none of the other captains noticed his absence these last five days. His compatriots were far too busy trying to hold back the inevitable flood of Hollows across the world to pay attention to his actions. Grinning faintly when Kaname and Gin left his chambers without another word, Aizen suppressed the growing urge to chuckle.

It was always amusing to watch the latter searching for information. Perhaps he should make their little game more interesting by telling his lieutenant the secret of avoiding the effect of Kyōka Suigetsu's illusions. He was looking forward to seeing how Gin used that against him.

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## **August 11th, 1857**

The sweltering August heat was nearly unbearable for the thirteenth seat of the Fifth Division.

Wiping a forearm against his sweaty brow, Sosuke Aizen ignored the blistering sun looming overhead as he continued observing the singular focus of his attention. As the faint breeze blowing inland from the nearby bay wound its way through the forest, granting him a momentary reprieve from the heat, he deftly leapt to another branch when his target stood up and moved out of sight. Convincing his captain that he was patrolling the outer districts of the Rukongai hadn't been difficult. The man was inattentive to the most mundane

details on the best of days. By playing the role of an average seated officer willing to help his captain with the division's extensive paperwork he gained extensive leeway to move between the Soul Society and the World of the Living.

It was necessary for his long-term plans he continue the charade of being nothing more than an average shinigami.

A thin sheen of sweat slowly covered every inch of his body as he spent the next few hours patiently watching his target - a middle-aged woman possessing regal features and beauty unmatched - sitting in the shade cast by her extravagant manor. Leaning forward at the sound of voices, one hand lightly clenching a smaller branch for added support, Aizen ignored his parched throat when the woman chastised her eldest daughter for pushing her sister onto the ground. Sighing when she sat back down, one of her servants offering her a cup of tea to calm her nerves, the shinigami's mouth pursed in mild annoyance.

For the last month he had diligently observed every aspect of the woman's life, watching her movements from the moment she woke at dawn. Not a single action or conversation went ignored. Yet he couldn't shake the suspicion something was missing, a variable he must have overlooked. And it wouldn't be the first time. The innocent laughter of the woman's two daughters as they ran around the yard caused Aizen to narrow his eyes introspectively. Perhaps two generations of observations weren't enough to deduce a pattern. However, both the woman's mother and maternal grandmother had already succumbed by this point in their lives. There must be something different about *this* generation that -

An abrupt tensing of the matriarch's posture nearly caused Aizen to slip off the branch.

Seconds stretched into minutes as the shinigami watched the unfolding scene with bated anticipation. Taking note of the sudden silence in the surrounding forest as the once incessant droning of the summer insects vanished, Aizen frowned when the Kiryuin matriarch

stiffly rose to her feet and turned towards the manor. Something was wrong. He hadn't sense any changes in either the woman's spiritual pressure or the ambient spiritual energy, which would explain the shift in behavior. For all intents and purposes she was exactly the same *now* as she was several hours ago.

It didn't follow the basics of logic and reasoning.

Carefully listening to the inflections in the matriarch's emotionless voice as she ordered her prostrating servants to watch over her daughters, he wiped the sweat from his brow before proceeding to the next stage of his plan. With expertise born from years of practice Aizen slowly extended his left arm, streams of ribbon-like spiritual energy shimmering in the air as he twisted his wrist clockwise. Kneeling as the illusionary array wrapped around his body, the Bakudo concealing both his spiritual pressure and physical presence, he waited until the Kyokko settled into place before using Shunpo to catch up with the Kiryuin matriarch as she stepped into the manor

Aizen knew better than perhaps anyone that the Kiryuin's could not be defined by the word *normal* . Scarce reasons existed that adequately explained how every member of the family possessed greater than average spiritual energy without having Quincy or shinigami ancestry.

And that strength was slowly growing with each generation.

The rush of cold air carrying the faint scent of mildew did little to alleviate Aizen's sudden nervousness as he carefully followed the matriarch into the catacombs beneath the Kiryuin manor. It took but a single discerning observation of the surrounding architecture to notice that the walls of the musky stairwell were old. Almost *impossibly* old judging from how the stone blocks were carved. Yet that wasn't the origin of the suspenseful chill racing down his spine. Staring attentively into the encroaching darkness as he perfectly timed his footsteps with the woman's, the warm light from the candle

in her hand flickering against the walls, he frowned at the strange sensation permeating the atmosphere.

Even *he* could sense the inhuman spiritual energy coming from deeper within the catacombs.

Lingering behind when the matriarch reached the bottom of the stairs, her bare feet echoing softly against the stone floor as she continued forward, Aizen's eyes widened in restrained intrigue at the ancient doors barring further passage. How extraordinary. They might have once been constructed from mundane materials such as wrought iron and stone but whatever lay behind the closed threshold had twisted them into something unique. It would require both an immense amount of spiritual energy and inhuman physical strength to leave anything more than a small scratch upon the surface.

Which only made it stranger to comprehend.

A nervous tremor caused the fingers on his right hand to spasm when the Kiryuin matriarch placed her own hands upon the uncannily smooth doors. Watching with bated breath when the otherwise normal woman pushed gently on the sealed gateway, which slowly opened without any further impetus, Aizen felt a chill race down his spine as the darkened catacombs were bathed in a harsh orange-red light.

This... this was *it* .

After more than fifty years of preparations, patiently observing the Kiryuin family slowly amass increasing amounts of power and influence, he finally managed to lay his eyes on the Original Life Fiber. This should have been a momentous occasion, the culmination of decades of painstaking work and planning. Yet Aizen quickly found himself forced to brace his hand against the wall when an overbearing pressure began pressing down on his soul. He hadn't expected *this* either. Most shinigami would have instantly succumbed to the spiritual pressure of the eldritch creature floating in the middle of the sanctum. In mere *seconds* their spiritual forms would have

broken down, absorbed by the blanket of Life Fibers covering every inch of the chamber.

But *he* was far above the level of his fellow shinigami.

His mouth twisting into a disturbed grimace when the spiritual energy constructing the Kyokko was abruptly stripped away, devoured by the innumerable Life Fibers writhing several meters away, Aizen waited a moment before cautiously approaching the glowing threshold.

Pausing on the edge of the sanctum, his sandals inches from the Life Fibers covering the floor, Aizen tensed when everything suddenly *pulsed* . No, he quickly realized upon observing the dust coating the walls hadn't shifted, that was an incorrect assumption. His attention snapping back to the Original Life Fiber when the creature's coloration changed, the ominous glow illuminating the chamber transforming into vibrant and burnt crimson, he instinctively leapt backwards when every Life Fiber in the chamber *moved* . Bundles of threads, each as large as his body, were unraveling before his eyes, splitting into thousands of smaller tendrils far too numerous for his to count.

Unable to avert his gaze as the thousands of Life Fibers converged upon the woman praying fervently beneath the Original Life Fiber, Aizen carefully reached for his zanpakuto when the massive creature split sickeningly down the middle, exposing a large and glowing jagged maw.

Nothing he researched could have *possibly* prepared him for the scene unfolding before his eyes. While most of the last five decades had been dedicated to observing the previous two matriarchs, he hadn't dared step foot within the catacombs underneath the manor. It would have been suicide without the guiding presence of the current Kiryuin matriarch. Yet those trivialities were the least of his concerns. He had anticipated the Original Life Fiber would be inherently different and exponentially stronger from the minuscule traces of Life Fibers he painstakingly managed to collect.



But *this* was beyond his wildest dreams. It was almost inconceivable that an existence such as this could -

An agonizing scream pulled him back to reality.

The sight of the Kiryuin matriarch getting pierced by hundreds of Life Fibers, blood pooling on the glowing floor as she was devoured both body and soul by the alien threads, nearly gave Aizen pause. Yet he refused to allow such a sickening display of inhuman gluttony prevent him from achieving his goal. Swallowing the bile in his throat as the woman's scream devolved into barely audible moans, he silently slipped a faintly glowing glove onto his right hand.

While he couldn't physically enter the deeper catacombs of his own prerogative, lest he wish for his soul to be painfully devoured by Life Fibers, monitoring the Original Life Fiber's guardians had exposed something rather interesting. For the briefest of moments during the ritual, when the current matriarch of the family willingly surrendered her body and soul to the creature, the eldritch being's impervious defenses faltered. It only lasted a few seconds - the length of time necessary for the Original Life Fiber to devour its latest meal - but that was more than enough to grant him the opportunity needed to see his plans come to fruition.

It was unfortunate that his ambitions required an innocent woman having her body and soul ripped apart and devoured by the Original Life Fiber.

With a single usage of Shunpo he crossed the imposing threshold, careful to refrain from touching the writhing mass of Life Fibers. His heart pounding rapidly in his chest as he stood in the air directly above the Original Life Fiber, its burnt crimson coloration returning to a comparably normal orange-red, Aizen didn't hesitate before cutting through a small tendril of the eldritch creature with his zanpakuto. Quickly grabbing the severed threads before they could rejoin the Original Life Fiber, the specifically invented glove briefly preventing the alien fibers from devouring his spiritual energy, Aizen turned

around and used a second application of Shunpo to reappear back outside the sanctum.

"Amazing..."

Aizen refrained from speaking any louder than a whisper as he carefully placed the stolen Life Fibers into the small container previously hidden within his shihakusho. Wincing when the glove protecting his hand disintegrated into nothingness, exposing patches of burnt skin, there was a soft hiss of pressurized air as he sealed the specialized reliquary. There was no time to waste. This would only contain the Life Fibers for a few hours. He needed to return to his laboratory in the Seireitei before the Life Fibers ate through the spiritual glass.

Smirking profoundly as he began ascending the stairs, Aizen stiffened when an inhuman roar echoed inside the confines of his mind. Did it *know* ? Zanpakuto quickly flashing into his hand, several Kido ready to buy him enough time to escape the Kiryuin Manor if needed, he watched as hundreds of Life Fibers wrapped themselves around the doors leading into the sanctum. Preemptively leaping away when the Original Life Fiber's presence once more resonated deeply in his soul, Aizen narrowed his eyes when the alien threads pulled the doors shut with a resounding slam.

"That... went *far* better than I anticipated."

Despite several complications and variables his plan had been a genuine success. He'd calculated the probability of the Original Life Fiber detecting his presence, forcing him to fight the creature in order to escape. But after experiencing the indirect weight of its unworldly presence, there was not a doubt in his mind how such an encounter would have ended. Even *he* didn't stand a chance against that eldritch abomination. Illusions and sensory confusion were useless against a creature like the Original Life Fiber.

His glasses shimmering in the flickering light as he silently recast Kyokko, the Bakudo once more hiding his presence from those he

wished to avoid, Sosuke Aizen's smirk grew with every echoing step towards the surface. Things were *finally* starting to work in his favor.

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## **August 6th, 2001**

"Sorry about that," Gin Ichimaru shrugged nonchalantly, an amused smile plastered across his face at Ichigo Kurosaki's unexpected return to Sokyoku Hill, "I didn't think you wanted me to interfere, Sosuke. So I let the Ryoka get by."

Aizen smirked at the lackadaisical excuse offered by his subordinate. It would have been simple for someone of his power and experience to prevent any interference until he finished retrieving the Hogyoku hidden within Rukia Kuchiki's soul. Yet he refrained from doing so, allowing Ichigo Kurosaki to assist Renji Abari in rescuing their friend, all for the purpose of personally observing the youth's unique existence.

It wouldn't be wrong to state that an increasing number of his fellow captains viewed Ichigo Kurosaki as nothing more than the latest human to miraculously obtain shinigami powers, an existence that would be tolerated until his usefulness to the Seireitei ended. Yet such a theory was factually incorrect. Since that night sixteen years ago, when his mother fought off Ragyo Kiryuin, Ichigo Kurosaki hadn't possessed either patriarchal shinigami powers or matriarchal Quincy and Hollow abilities. Every feat achieved by the teenager, whether it was the rapidity of his growth to the sudden appearance of an Inner Hollow during his fight against Byakuya Kuchiki, was due to his Life Fibers.

What was the evidence to support his assertion?

One simply needed to note the peculiar appearance of the youth's *Bankai* - Tensa Zangetsu.

Properly obtaining Bankai requires that a shinigami materialize and subjugate the spirit of their zanpakuto after years of arduous training. This final release almost universally takes on the form of an enormous spiritual construct or a large-scale effect. His Kyoka Suigetsu was no exception. And while there existed a few Bankai that seemed to break this unstated rule to an extent, namely Genryusai Yamamoto's Zanka no Tachi, Ichigo Kurosaki's was inherently different. No records existed within the archives of the Daireishokairo of a shinigami's Bankai transforming into a smaller form while covering their body in an entirely new outfit independent of the normal shihakusho.

Byakuya Kuchiki had been correct, although for the wrong reason, when he declared that Ichigo Kurosaki's Bankai wasn't a 'true' Bankai. For even though the Life Fibers composing the teenager's body remained dormant, at least for the time being, their influence upon his 'shinigami powers' were obvious to those aware of their existence.

"No matter. It's fine."

His glasses shimmered as he uttered the exact words necessary to draw Ichigo Kurosaki and Renji Abari's attention, "When you're cleaning the house, it doesn't make any difference whether there's one piece of dirt or two."

Aizen half-heartedly listened to the whispered conversation between the two shinigami following his purposefully threatening comment. He knew neither of them would allow such a slight to go unpunished considering their attachment to Rukia Kuchiki. They would stand and fight, foregoing the pragmatic solution of using Ichigo Kurosaki's faux Bankai to escape Sokyoku Hill. But perhaps he should credit their intelligence. From their determined expressions and rising spiritual energy, it was clear they realized running away wasn't an option.

One step of Shunpo would be enough to instantly cross Sokyoku Hill on the chance they foolishly attempted to escape or he deigned to take the offensive. From there, it only required a single strike to

Renji's already injured left shoulder to deal with the heavily wounded shinigami. The stubborn lieutenant of the Sixth Division might have exceeded his expectations but he wasn't special. It didn't concern him in the slightest whether or not Renji perished protecting Rukia Kuchiki as he vowed to do only a few minutes ago. Ichigo Kurosaki, on the other hand, was a significantly more interesting subject.

It was quite the stroke of luck the teenager's Life Fibers remained strangely dormant. Dealing with an awakened Life Fiber Hybrid would have been complicated even for someone of his strength and intelligence. All but the most powerful Hado and Bakudo would have little to no effect, their spiritual energy devoured by the hybrid's Life Fibers, while Zanjutsu and Hakuda were out of the question. The only conceivable way any shinigami could defeat someone like Ragyo Kiryuin or her Grand Couturier was through powerful techniques, attacks that could vaporize every Life Fiber in their bodies.

Of course, it was prudent *nothing* survived. Only a few Life Fibers were required for the hybrid to regenerate, *adapting* and *evolving* to the technique in the process.

Yet Aizen couldn't help but ruminate on the potential reasons leading to Ichigo Kurosaki's current state of being. The Grand Couturier of Revocs, who Ragyo had symbolically called Nui Harime, had demonstrated distinctly inhuman abilities long before the woman decided to take a more active role in her 'development.'

Perhaps four Life Fiber Hybrids weren't enough to make any accurate predictions.

"Here we go! Zabimaru! Higa Zekko!"

Aizen watched in faint amusement when the pieces of Renji zanpakuto scattered across Sokyoku Hill began glowing with violet spiritual energy, the shattered portions of Zabimaru's Shikai hovering directly over his head. Higa Zekko, was it? How interesting. He hadn't expected the brash and reckless lieutenant to use such a self-

damaging technique. Unflinching when the segments simultaneously shot towards the ground in a massive explosion, the captain nevertheless praised Renji's surprising ingenuity. While Higa Zekko was ineffective as a straightforward attack, the smoke and dust released in the aftermath *would* limit his visibility.

Truthfully, he couldn't see anything more than a foot away from his face.

Yet Renji's strategy immediately faltered against those who had mastered the ability to detect spiritual energy. And while his sight was indeed limited, a smokescreen did not stop him from *hearing* Ichigo Kurosaki's approaching footsteps.

It was admittedly disappointing he only required a single finger to halt the momentum of the youth's false Bankai. Whether they were dormant or not was irrelevant. He assumed that Ichigo Kurosaki's Life Fibers would have granted him more power than *this* . But given the teenager's strange nature - from his lack of regeneration to faux human anatomy - perhaps his expectations had been too unrealistic. Smirking amiably as he gently curled his finger around the black weapon, Aizen didn't hesitate before slashing the youth's abdomen.

"Well now... I thought I had succeeded in cutting you completely in half."

Aizen ignored the subsequent spray of blood as Ichigo Kurosaki struggled to remain standing. For just a moment, vanishing faster than it took the signal to reach his brain, there was a flash of sapphire light inside the teenager's body. The truth of the matter was that he *never* intended to completely bisect Ichigo. That would be an extremely dangerous move. Even if Ichigo Kurosaki were ignorant of his unique existence, there was the distinct possibility cutting him in half would be enough of an incentive for his Life Fibers to awaken.

And dealing with a Life Fiber Hybrid in the middle of the Seireitei would be quite detrimental to his plans.

"But I guess I didn't strike deep enough..."

Softly releasing his grip upon the artificial Bankai, the bespectacled captain didn't bother waiting for Ichigo Kurosaki to collapse to the ground before using Shunpo to instantly cover dozens of meters. Rivulets of blood dripping down the length of his zanpakuto as he severed Renji's left shoulder nearly to the bone, the stubborn lieutenant's eyes quivering in barely expressible anguish before he finally fell unconscious, Aizen subtly smirked at the accuracy of his earlier assumption.

It *had* only required one strike to the lieutenant's shoulder.

His footsteps deliberately paced and methodical as he slowly approached the only remaining obstacle in his path, Aizen paid no attention to the terrified expression in Rukia Kuchiki's eyes, "Come now. Stand up, Rukia Kuchiki."

Grabbing the collar around her neck when she demonstrated the inability to follow his orders, Aizen effortlessly hauled Rukia onto her feet before offhandedly commenting, "Hmm? I see... my spiritual pressure has caused your body to go limp."

The captain's amiable smile was momentarily replaced by a perplexed expression, which vanished as quickly as it arrived, when Rukia Kuchiki's attention flickered toward something over his shoulder. Now this was interesting. Despite decades of study and preparation, he still underestimated the potency of Ichigo Kurosaki's Life Fibers. Even dormant they granted him the inhuman strength to remain conscious and fully aware of his surroundings. But then again, the threads inside a hybrid were *vastly* different from those woven in every piece of Revocs clothing. So such surprises were to be expected.

This was, after all, still the first time he'd been able to personally observe a Life Fiber Hybrid. And it was far from a disappointment.

"Poor doomed *thing* . Is he actually still conscious? Your stamina is amazing but your spine is barely connected to your body," Aizen smirked condescendingly while slowly sheathing his zanpakuto, "You should lay still. At any rate, you have each served your purpose. Your job in all this is done now."

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### **September 9th, 1985**

Kaname Tousen didn't know what to expect as he stepped through the Senkaimon.

The heavy rainfall accompanying their arrival to the World of the Living felt almost poetic to the self-proclaimed follower of justice, a noticeable contrast to the serene evening in the Seireitei. Yet the inclement and worsening weather was unimportant, secondary in terms of both severity and concern to his growing confusion. For despite his best efforts to keep an open mind to new possibility, to avoid falling prey to the same arrogance befalling the rest of his fellow shinigami, he could not understand the suddenness of their departure from the Soul Society.

"Captain Aizen, what is this place?"

Thunder echoed softly over the horizon as Tousen respectfully addressed the only other person standing on the roof. Frowning at the strange construction of the complex, his spiritual energy allowing him to 'see' the architecture of the surrounding buildings and central structure, he couldn't recall any of their previous experiments taking place near this location. At first glance the area seemed relatively normal, albeit possessing a spiritual presence that felt enigmatically nostalgic, Tousen stiffened at the unnatural stillness in the air.

It was... disconcerting.



Rain dripped from the hood of Aizen's spiritual concealing cloak as he walked forward, his attention focused on something in the distance, "Revocs Headquarters. Or rather the future headquarters of their global conglomerate."

"A textile company?"

The blind captain didn't care for most events concerning the World of the Living aside from his required duties. Yet he was begrudgingly aware of the company's popularity thanks to the lieutenant of the Tenth Division. The woman's tendency to purchase dozens of unnecessary outfits during her rare assignments away from the Seireitei, which usually consisted of dealing with a particularly vicious Hollow, was legendary. But such unprofessional behavior wouldn't bother him if Rangiku Matsumoto didn't flaunt her new clothes in his division's barracks, barraging Hisagi with pointless questions about her beauty.

Revocs was simply the brand she bought during her last mission seven months ago.

His blind eyes narrowing in the general direction of the Revocs headquarters when a dull thump echoed in the distance, " *This* is where our sensors detected them?"

"Interesting, isn't it?"

Aizen smirked at the question as he stood upon the edge of the roof, the rapidly shifting wind causing his cloak to rustle, "Less than an hour ago Masaki Kurosaki and Isshin Shiba left Karakura Town without delay, rushing toward Revocs headquarters at frightening speed. What could have caused such changes in their behavior? I was aware of their friendship with Ragyo Kiryuin yet their actions precluded any sort of benevolent intentions. Such a development had to be seen with my own eyes."

A series of progressively heavier pulses of spiritual energy, possessing the same alien consistency and presence as the

surrounding complex, drew the blind shinigami's attention even before Aizen finished speaking. Quirking an eyebrow at the mention of Ragyo Kiryuin - a woman who never came up in their plans yet seemed to have garnered his superior's vested interest - he stared off into the distance, "I was not aware of Isshin Shiba's relation with -"

The rest of Tousen's inquiry went unsaid when a *massive* explosion of spiritual energy erupted from the top floor of the central building.

"What the... this power is..."

As Tousen staggered when shards of chaotic spiritual energy crashed into the surrounding buildings, filling the air with an unnatural static that caused chill to race down his spine, the other captain's attention never wavered. Aizen was enraptured, *enthralled*, by the unexpected scene unfolding before his eyes. To think they had come to Revocs under the assumption there was nothing important to observe, a false alarm that would waste a few hours of their time. But watching *this* made the unplanned trip worthwhile.

He never expected something as magnificent as *this* to occur!

Masaki Kurosaki nearly screamed her throat raw as she furiously chased Ragyo Kiryuin into the raging storm. Drawing back the phantasmal string of her spiritual weapon upon taking her first step into the pouring rain, the normal cheerful woman's expression was twisted in absolute hatred as she fired a barrage of Heilig Pfeil with all the power at her disposal. Eyes narrowing when the other woman nimbly dodged her arrows, the arrogant smirk on her face never faltering, Masaki prepared to launch another barrage only to suddenly lurch forward as intense pain radiated from the very core of her soul.

Blood and spittle spewed from between clenched teeth when Masaki collapsed onto her knees, the spiritual bow dissipating into its composite energy. Wiping away the blood oozing from the corner of her mouth, she tightly clenched her hands and *shouted* as a pair of

ethereal angelic wings burst from her shoulder blades, multicolored ribbons shifting gently in the feathery constructs.

"Quincy: Letzt Stil!"

The massive and *sudden* eruption of spiritual energy accompanying her transformation vaporized the surrounding landscape, utterly infuriating Ragyo in the process. But that was the least of her concerns. Surprised by the change in the other woman's appearance, the power rolling off Masaki incomprehensible, she failed to notice the first barrage of Heilig Pfeil as they pierced through the smoke. Reflexively flinching when the projectiles shattered against her skin, leaving no trace of damage in their wake, Ragyo's smugness vanished when the *next* arrow carved a thin gash across her cheek.

How did she...

Fingers clenched tightly around the Needle Blade as the wound stitched shut, the rainbow light of her Life Fibers quickly vanishing, Ragyo snarled at the other woman's audacity and arrogance. Masaki *dared* try and tarnish her flawless skin? Maroon eyes narrowed in growing fury as she danced through the subsequent storm of Heilig Pfeil, the hardened Life Fiber weapon in her hand wantonly deflecting the projectiles into the surrounding buildings without care, the Kiryuin matriarch angrily curled her free hand into a fist and sneered.

"Such an *affreux* form!"

Ragyo smirked as she punched Masaki squarely in the jaw before the woman could register she'd even moved, the powerful blow enough to dispel the surrounding storm. Her elation quickly turn to confusion, however, when she realized the Quincy hadn't budged despite the strength of her attack. Eyes widening at the faint pattern spreading across Masaki's cheek from the point of impact, she gagged and then growled when the other woman fired an arrow clear through her stomach.

"Blut Vene..."

Holding her stomach as the wound rapidly knitted back together, Ragyo snarled at Masaki, "What?"

Another arrow passed through her shoulder, nearly taking her left arm off in the process, before the Kiryuin matriarch regained her composure. Hastily deflecting the rest of Masaki's assault with the Needle Blade, rainbow light arcing from the edge of the hardened Life Fiber weapon, she gasped wetly when a Heilig Pfeil lodged itself in her throat. Staggering away from the Quincy, blood seeped down the front of Ragyo's once white dress for several seconds before she angrily shattered the projectile between her fingers. Hunched forward as the wound on her neck sealed shut and her raiment returned to its proper coloration, Ragyo clenched her teeth at the other woman's infuriating expression.

"It's a defensive technique," Masaki answered, her normally blue-white bow shimmering with several exotic colors, before leveling the weapon at Ragyo's forehead. As the light from her wings brightened and overwhelmed the rainbow undertone of the Kiryuin matriarch's silver hair, she pulled back the string of her bow and sneered, "Licht Regen!"

Hundreds... *thousands*... of Heilig Pfeil exploded from Masaki's bow, lighting up the stormy skies in a vibrant display of colors. Maroon eyes narrowed in rising fury at the continuous embarrassment, Ragyo screamed incoherently as her arm blurred into motion, deflecting each and every arrow with the Needle Blade before they could touch her body. She would not suffer such mockery for another second! Heels clacking against the air when she darted forward, her body flickering as she dodged most of the projectiles while regenerating from the rest, Ragyo prepared to stab the Needle Blade through Masaki's beating heart only to stiffen upon noticing the woman was *gone* .

Then she felt her right arm - and the Needle Blade - falling towards the ground hundreds of feet below.

"I-Impossible!"

The blood gushing from her stump of an arm abruptly ceased, flowing back into her body as the missing limb regenerated in a flash of rainbow light. Her mouth slightly agape when she looked over her shoulder and found Masaki standing only a few feet away, the Kiryuin matriarch felt the unfamiliar sensation of fear in her heart. This couldn't be happening! She was one of the Original Life Fiber's prophets! Chosen to lead humanity towards their ultimate fate as sustenance for Life Fibers! So why was -

A single arrow, innocuous in appearance, shot forth from Masaki's bow without any warning. Thick streams of blood oozing from her mouth when the momentum from the projectile carried her forward, slamming her against the façade of her headquarters hard enough to leave her temporarily dazed, Ragyo stiffened when the arrow vanished yet she still felt blood oozing down her back. Running a hand against the slowly regenerating wound, her finger tracing the ugly star-shaped scar marring her flawless skin, an immense amount of rainbow spiritual energy exploded from the Kiryuin matriarch right before she vanished in burst of speed.

"How dare you!"

Ragyo felt no catharsis when she smashed her fist into Masaki's nose, the woman's vaunted 'defense' crumpling under her superior strength. She no longer cared that the woman stole Isshin's heart, forcing her into a marriage with a pathetic man who couldn't even create the basic stitching for a Kamui! Souichiro was a second-rate *hack* that could never compare to the skill possessed by the only man she would ever love! Punching the Quincy repeatedly in the face, droplets of blood splashing against her skin with every blow, she was determined to make Masaki *suffer* for daring to scar her flawless body!

But simply beating Masaki to death wouldn't be good enough.

"A worthless... insignificant... *ant* !"

She purposely ignored the second arrow when it fired from one of Masaki's outstretched wings, lodging itself in her left shoulder and leaving behind a slightly smaller scar. Whatever technique the Quincy was using to bypass her regeneration seemed to require a lot of energy, leaving the other woman increasingly exhausted. So even when a *third* Heilig Pfeil stabbed into the small of her back in a shower of blood, Ragyo did not stop attempting to *strangle* the other woman, her manicured fingers squeezing ever-so-roughly around Masaki's throat.

"You... human... *bitch* !"

Rage consumed the Kiryuin matriarch as she tightened her grip around Masaki's throat. Laughing sadistically at the torturous expression on the other woman's face as she struggled to breathe, her mouth open in a breathless scream despite the ugly pattern flashing across her throat, Ragyo flinched when another two Heilig Pfeil burst from Masaki's wings and into her back. But even with the rampant pain coursing through her body, causing the multicolored undertone of her silver hair to brighten magnificently, she did not relent in her efforts to kill the other woman.

Her teeth clenched in blinding fury, unadulterated hatred for the woman bubbling within the depths of her soul, Ragyo noticed only a moment too late Masaki's arm swinging upward before the reformed spiritual bow smashed into her nose.

Thick streams of blood gushed from her broken nose as Ragyo staggered backwards, involuntarily releasing Masaki in the process. Gasping deeply as she hunched forward, one hand pressed firmly against her face, the Kiryuin matriarch's eyes widened in shock when her opponent rushed forward and *punched* her.

*Hard* .

Blood and spittle flew from between Ragyo's lips at the strength behind the blow. Her head snapping backwards from the strike hard enough to snap a normal human's neck, she had barely enough time

to notice the different pattern across Masaki's hand before a second punch shattered her jaw. Using her considerable speed to avoid the other woman's third strike, the blood coating the front of her face vanishing alongside her wounds, Ragyo nimbly avoided the next series of blows before getting caught off guard when Masaki changed tactics.

So determined was she to break the other woman's neck, to tear her apart limb from limb, that Ragyo never noticed Masaki's weapon vanish until it was too late. And then she felt the pair of hands gripping the back of her neck, *ripping* into her glorious silver locks - the proof of her status as the Original Life Fiber's prophet, the one thing she still shared with Isshin even after Masaki stole him from her. She screamed when Masaki *pulled*, the other woman's expression twisted with nearly as much anger as her own, before attempting to return the favor by stabbing her hand through her former friend's heart.

Gasping when she missed, her fingers passing through the afterimage left behind by Masaki's Hirenkyaku, Ragyo screamed when two more Heilig Pfeil pierced her back, sending her careening down to the ground below in a violent display of rainbow spiritual energy.

"This... can't... be..."

The Kiryuin's matriarch's raiment was dirtied, rips and tears blemishing the fabric as she struggled onto her feet. This was a *nightmare* ! Holding a shaking hand to her face, the blood a sharp contrast to her normally pale skin, Ragyo's anger was replaced by building terror at the prospect that she might actually *die* . Her breathing coming out in shallow pants as the rain pelted the seven fresh scars on her back, her scalp still tingling from its recent abuse, she abruptly stiffened when Masaki suddenly appeared in a flash of speed. Fearfully staring at the woman when she dismissed her bow, Ragyo had only enough time to register the patterns spreading up both of Masaki's arms before she screamed angrily and began punching her with every ounce of power at her disposal.

On the far side of the Revocs compound Sosuke Aizen didn't react when an errant gust of wind, kicked up by Ragyo Kiryuin's crash to the ground, knocked off his hood, threatening to expose their presence. The captain of the Fifth Division half-heartedly noted Kaname's perfectly understandable reaction to the inhuman spiritual energy of the woman currently on the defensive. Such trivial matters didn't register in the face of much more pressing matter. Ragyo Kiryuin - a Life Fiber Hybrid - was losing against a *Quincy*. The form was similar to the Quincy technique *Letzt Stil* but its power was on a completely different level compared to her fight against White eight years earlier.

It was an impossible scenario. And yet...

"I now understand your interest in Ragyo Kiryuin."

Kaname's voice might have been steady yet there was no mistaking the underlying fear. While the battle might be advancing in a specific direction the monstrous potency of Ragyo's spiritual energy was staggering. It felt completely inhuman, different from anything he'd ever encountered. The woman might be losing against Masaki Kurosaki yet her power hadn't decreased more than normal. The current situation was the result of psychological warfare and inexperience, a terrifying mixture that allowed her opponent to hold the advantage. But there was something else that unnerved the normally stoic captain, an underlying familiarity to Ragyo Kiryuin's eldritch presence.

Yet most disturbing, or perhaps concerning, was the possibility of the woman's attention somehow bypassing the protection afforded by their spiritual cloaks.

"The battle unfolding has nothing to do with us, Kaname."

A flash of lightning arced across the heavens as Aizen ran a hand through his hair, water falling onto the roof as he replaced the hood a moment later. It was only thanks to decades of research, using what little scraps of Life Fibers he'd been able to acquire, that he sensed



the subtle nuances. Spreading throughout the extensive compound at a growing rate that could only be called exponential, the hundreds of men and women employed by Revocs were having their memories devoured by the trace Life Fibers in their clothing. Every single thought pertaining to the battle between Ragyo Kiryuin and Masaki Kurosaki was being systematically erased.

Even those who lost their lives as a result of the battle would soon be forgotten.

"Do not forget why we are here, Kaname. Our purpose was determining why Masaki Kurosaki and Isshin Shiba left Karakura Town," the bespectacled shinigami's tone possessed his standard amiable and patient tone as he continued observing the multicolored smoke rising in the distance. His expression tightening into a mild frown when Masaki refused to deliver the finishing blow to Ragyo Kiryuin, her spiritual energy decreasing despite her advantage over the fallen matriarch, Aizen briefly paused before adding, "And now that we've learned why they departed Karakura Town there is no longer any reason for our presence."

"Such a being cannot be allowed to exist."

Kaname's fingers tightly gripped the hilt of Suzumushi as his tone hardened, "Justice demands the eradication of inhuman monsters. Yet we cannot inform the Captain Commander of our discovery without earning his suspicion. That leaves us with but one option - we must strike down Ragyo Kiryuin where she stands, killing her when she's at her weakest. It is the only way to ensure she does not pose any threat to our plans."

"At her weakest, you say?"

Aizen smirked at the fervent display of loyalty from his subordinate, "One can easily sense that Ragyo Kiryuin's spiritual energy is currently less than my own. In a normal scenario it would be quite the advantage. Yet I have not given any weight to the notion. Why, you ask? The answer is because her defeat came not from a

difference in strength, instead it was the result of extraneous circumstances. The combination of inexperience in properly utilizing her power alongside the dramatic shattering of her worldview, the result of Masaki Kurosaki damaging her body, made Ragyo Kiryuin overly susceptible. Yet there is no such opening for us. Not even Kyoka Suigetsu's illusions would grant us the slightest chance of victory if we attempted to interfere."

"There is also the fact that drawing Ragyo Kiryuin's attention will undoubtedly jeopardize our plans," Aizen added the last statement halfheartedly, a jovial smile on his face while he turned away from the finished battle. Of course, he purposely didn't tell Kaname the *other* reason why he decided not to strike the woman down despite his deep-seated desire. Ragyo Kiryuin was a being composed of Life Fibers. That much was obvious from first principles. Attempting to touch the woman, even with one's zanpakuto, would immediately cause her Life Fibers, which were woven directly from the Original Life Fiber, to devour their spiritual energy.

It would take a shinigami possessing massive amounts of spiritual energy to survive the process long enough to escape.

"Very well..."

The blind shinigami's measured tone intrigued Aizen yet he refrained from continuing the pointless argument pertaining to Ragyo Kiryuin. His face illuminated by an arc of lightning as he turned around, he stabbed Suzumushi into the air before turning his wrist counterclockwise. As the Senkaimon rapidly formed, the wooden doors sliding apart and exposing the dimensional gateway within, he stared contemplatively at the ground, "Still... I find it unlikely such a beast wouldn't take an interest in our affairs. We should adjust our plans in case Ragyo Kiryuin decides to intervene in the future."

Aizen smirked in amusement at the comment as Kaname walked through the Senkaimon, his body disappearing into the light. Moving to follow his subordinate, the shinigami's eyes widened when something completely unexpected prickled against his mind.

Droplets of water jumped from his cloak as he spun around, his attention focused on the familiar presence leaving Revocs headquarters. It made perfect sense why Isshin Shiba hadn't attempted to fight Ragyo Kiryuin. In his current state he was nothing more than an average human due to the actions of White.

Yet that was not what drew his attention.

He could sense the unique spiritual energy radiating from the two small bundles held protectively in the man's arms. This would force the acceleration of his plans. After the failure to induce hybridization in her own daughters, born after her conversion by the Original Life Fiber, Aizen assumed it was impossible to create an artificial Life Fiber Hybrid. But the two infants were physical proof that he was wrong. And while one child was undoubtedly Ragyo's, perhaps a daughter that escaped the notice of his admittedly insufficient surveillance of the company, it was the other that garnered his *full* attention.

Ragyo Kiryuin transformed Isshin Shiba and Masaki Kurosaki's son into a Life Fiber Hybrid.

"This is quite the unexpected development."

Aizen ruminated on the new development as he stepped through the Senkaimon. It required adjusting several variables now that Ichigo Kurosaki was a Life Fiber Hybrid. He couldn't allow the opportunity to study an artificial hybrid slip through his fingers. Yet something still troubled the normally unfettered shinigami. If Ragyo Kiryuin determined the method for properly inducing hybridization in humans, than what other experiments was she secretly conducting in the name of the Original Life Fiber?

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**June 23rd, 1982**

Sosuke Aizen stared at the monitor while the faint humming of electronics filled the laboratory, basking the darkened room in a blue-white glow.

Five years ago the screen would have displayed nothing but information relevant to ongoing experiments, data pertaining to thousands of experiments and tests ranging from granting Hollows the ability to hide their spiritual presence to inducing artificial Arrancar evolution. Files on every experiment conducted over the last hundred years were safely secured in his laboratory. Yet the majority of his recent work had been focused on something different - recreating the experiment symbolically called White.' Or at least that was the name Kaname designated the sample.

In the aftermath of its defeat and subsequent self-destruction in Naruki City, when it purposely chose a Quincy for Soul Infiltration instead of a shinigami, he had spent days searching for an explanation behind the Hollow's reaction. It was a puzzle with an interesting solution, one that could change the course of his future research. And the simplest approach to this conundrum was recreating White from scratch.

But progress on that front had proven more difficult than initially anticipated.

Ignoring the intricacies necessary to perfectly replicate its original personality, another decade of research was required at the very minimum to reconstruct the sample's physical body and spiritual essence. White might have been created using the souls of dead shinigami as templates, hence giving it an inner 'whiteness,' but reconstructing the being that fought with Isshin Shiba was a most daunting task. Yet that challenge was currently the furthest thing from his mind. Although his ongoing fascination with the sample's decision to target Masaki Kurosaki, an Echt Quincy and its complete opposite, for hollowfication hadn't waned, at the moment Aizen was focused on something with *far* greater significance.

With a soft press of his finger the video on the screen shifted to another of the thirty-six cameras surrounding the Kiryuin Manor at strategic locations. At times Aizen wished he could install surveillance equipment within the manor. The benefits certainly outnumbered any possible disadvantages. But he was aware, perhaps better than anyone else, that such pursuits were naïve daydreams hinging upon an optimistic view of reality.

Things involving Life Fibers were *never* simple.

The Original Life Fiber had grown increasingly active in the decades following his appropriation of its Life Fibers, choosing to remain in whatever passed as 'awareness' in the years between sacrificial pilgrimages from the Kiryuin matriarchs. But whether his actions more than a century ago bore responsibility was irrelevant at this point. Over the last three cycles he had noticed evolutions the creature's defenses, changes perfect for detecting and eliminating someone attempting to conceal their presence. And to make matters more complicated the wards were now woven throughout the entire manor, making it impossible for any spiritual being to enter the premises.

For the fifth time that hour Sosuke Aizen lamented the haste in which Kisuke Urahara was exiled from the Seireitei.

It was only after years of research that he determined the man's groundbreaking spiritual-concealing Gigai was the *only* solution for bypassing the Original Life Fiber's wards. Normal artificial bodies could not withstand the defenses encompassing the Kiryuin Manor, leading to death within seconds of entering the property. But if a shinigami used a Gigai designed to hide both their spiritual energy and presence, transforming them into a 'human' in the process, they could enter the catacombs without getting devoured.

Theoretically, of course...

He first needed to track down Kisuke Urahara before putting such a theory to the test.

Aizen narrowed his eyes, annoyance visible alongside mild exhaustion, when the screen flickered before switching from the front gate to an outcropping on the southern corner of the property. Installing surveillance equipment and spiritual sensors within the Kiryuin Manor might be impossible but everything had loopholes, even the Original Life Fiber's seemingly impenetrable defenses. It didn't matter if he couldn't enter the manor. There were already workarounds in place, albeit inferior to what he originally planned. The cameras installed at strategic locations around the property were programmed to exclusively detect Ragyo Kiryuin's spiritual energy, allowing him to observe her external movements.

Yet until recently his interest in Ragyo Kiryuin had been halfhearted, nonexistent in favor of more important experiments. While important in the long run, it would have been a waste of time when the woman hadn't displayed any of the necessary characteristics to warrant more prudent observations.

Typing rapidly into the keyboard as he manually changed to a different camera feed, the current viewpoint offering little benefit, Aizen's glare tightened when a pulse of multicolored light briefly flickered through the darkness.

He had been teaching calligraphy at Shin'o Academy when the spiritual sensors scattered around his laboratory first noticed an artificial increase in the ambient luminosity. On its own that would normally have not warranted a warning. Several experiments could easily be the source of the change in brightness. But when subsequent pulses were registered, each with identical coloration and duration, the room was hermetically immediately sealed to prevent anything from leaving. At the same time an untraceable signal was sent to a small device in his captain's chambers. Nobody, not even Gin or Kaname, could unravel the Bakudo sealing the room until he dealt with the situation.

However his duties as captain of the Fifth Division had prevented him from returning to his personal chambers until early the next morning, nearly twenty-four hours after the original detection.

It had required an hour of preparation before he walked out of the Fifth Division barracks, strolling past several shinigami without raising suspicion. Using Kyoka Suigetsu's power he had left behind an illusionary clone, albeit one developing a fever. Constant manipulation of Momo's emotions made it all but certain she would leave his illusion in peace, delegating his normal duties to both herself and the rest of the division until 'he' recovered. But Aizen felt neither guilt nor remorse for warping Momo Hinamori's mind. It had been a necessary sacrifice to ensure success.

Hours of uninterrupted observations, unburdened by a headstrong and independent lieutenant, were required if he wished to counter any potentially dangerous problems.

"How strange." Aizen quietly ruminated while rubbing his chin, the screen displaying the back of the Kiryuin Manor completely barren of life. This was turning out to be anything but what he expected. An event possessing such far-reaching consequences should have already made itself apparent, its effects upon the surrounding landscape obvious. Yet there hadn't been any sign of Ragyo Kiryuin during his observations. While an interesting and notable departure from her usual behavior, it was not enough to draw any conclusions.

It was immensely frustrating that, despite his infallible intuition and vast intellect, all of the evidence was purely *circumstantial* .

Despite years of experiments on the sample of Life Fibers he severed from the Original Life Fiber, which was substantially *less* than what he needed, the alien threads still possessed a seemingly infinite number of secrets. Their origins and overarching goals remained obscured, hidden behind the veil of their eldritch nature. How, for example, did that *thing* intend to devour humanity? The logistics and resources required to spread billions of Life Fibers around the world was staggering. But more importantly *why* did the Original Life Fiber always summon the Kiryuin matriarch only to absorb both her body and soul?

There *were* answers to those questions but Aizen hoped he was wrong or, at the very least, his information pointed to an erroneous conclusion.

Because being wrong meant he still had *time* .

If he truly was mistaken about the situation unfolding in the World of the Living than all of his precautionary measures were unnecessary. This would simply be an aberration, nothing more than an anomaly useful for improving future predictions and calculations. But Aizen did not get to his current position, eliminating both enemy and ally alike, by being naïve nor foolhardy. He needed absolute certainty on what exactly happened, if anything *did* happen, to Ragyo Kiryuin during those first twenty-four hours before making assumptions. Perhaps the Original Life Fiber devoured the woman like her predecessors, inadvertently eliminating its final guardian and bringing the Kiryuin family to extinction.

But if it *hadn't*...

Aizen discarded that unsubstantiated notion from his thoughts. It was detrimental to foolishly assume Ragyo Kiryuin was unique, different from her predecessors, without the slightest hint of conclusive evidence. Tirelessly resuming his observations as the night slowly changed into morning, the tense silence in the room constantly interrupted by the light clicking of the keyboard, he stiffened when the screen shifted to another camera feed.

Something had changed.

His pulse quickening as he leaned forward in growing interest, the electronic glow from the computer reflecting brightly off his glasses, Aizen grimaced in bitter distaste when Ragyo Kiryuin emerged from the manor. It was obvious what happened to the woman during those initial twenty-four hours. From her resplendent silver hair, the rainbow undertone shining in the early dawn, to the unnatural beauty flauntingly displayed with every sauntering step onto the veranda, the evidence was clear.



Against overwhelming odds the Original Life Fiber had chosen Ragyo Kiryuin as its puppet.

"What makes Ragyo Kiryuin different?"

That was a question the captain could not answer. There were several possible reasons why the Original Life Fiber chose Ragyo Kiryuin above her predecessors but as he watched the newly transformed woman stare forlornly at Tokyo Bay in the distance, the cameras recording every subconscious twitch and pulse of her spiritual energy, Aizen resisted the growing urge to frown. It didn't fit the pattern. He had spent the majority of the last century extensively documenting the lives of the previous *six* matriarchs from their childhoods to the exact moment they were summoned by the Original Life Fiber.

Whatever method that *thing* used to convoke the matriarchs never occurred until *after* they had children... always daughters.

Yet Ragyo Kiryuin, the one chosen to be its puppet, wasn't even married.

Softly tapping a finger against the desk as he watched Ragyo Kiryuin walk back into the manor, her steps measured and exact, Aizen ignored the multicolored light radiating from the opposite side of the room and frowned, "This is quite the problem."

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**November 1st, 2001**

"What's wrong, Aizen? It is my imagination or are you getting slower? Perhaps you've reached your limit."

Aizen's breathing was slightly labored as he hunched forward, his one pristine uniform ripped and heavily burnt. Sweeping a hand

through his brown hair, the single bang falling back into place nearly instantaneously, he chuckled airily, "Well now that I think about it, you may be right about my speed. I may have actually reached my limit as a shinigami."

A tense silence enveloped the rubble-strewn streets of the fake Karakura Town as the traitorous captain's posture slowly straightened, "But then again, the limits of a shinigami aren't something *you* have to worry about, Isshin Kurosaki."

Isshin Kurosaki, his features marred by wounds sustained over the last few minutes, twitched at the comment, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you really need to ask such a ridiculous question? In any case, please accept my sincerest appreciations," Aizen politely smirked while casually stabbing Kyoka Suigetsu through the rubble at his feet, "By forcing our battle away from both Gin and Ichigo Kurosaki, you've granted me the rare opportunity to talk with you on a rather sensitive matter. A subject, I feel, you're quite familiar with."

Isshin ignored the thin stream of blood slowly oozing down his cheek, the result of consciously suppressing his regeneration, and stared incredulously at the former captain, "Hold the phone... you want to talk? What's with the sudden change of heart?"

"I first realized something strange when I avoided your earlier attack and countered with Raikoho."

It took an insignificant amount of self-control to keep his tone measured and voice stoic, a stark departure from the interest quickly growing within his mind. Extending a hand toward Isshin Kurosaki, the older-looking man tensing imperceptibly at the gesture, Aizen closed his eyes before smoothly continuing, "With my skill and expertise, an incantation-less Hado of that level should have injured all but the strongest of captains. Yet you escaped the technique without taking any damage, an improbable scenario but not impossible. After all, your skills as the former captain of the Tenth

Division are well known throughout the Seireitei. It's quite possible you evaded my Raikoho using Shunpo, perhaps an original interpretation of Utsusemi."

"So I'm faster than you thought. Big deal," Isshin scoffed before shifting into a Kendo stance, "Now is there a point to this or are you going to keep talking nonsense, Aizen?"

"Nonsense?"

Aizen's disarmingly pleasant smirk widened at Isshin Kurosaki's absurd declaration. The sheer ridiculousness of the man's continuing denial was actually quite amusing. However he didn't have any time to waste on pointless conversation. Pointing a finger at the tachi gripped tightly in Isshin's hands as a cloud passed in front of the sun, temporarily enveloping the city in twilight, the shinigami's eyes narrowed, "Perhaps on its own that would be considered, in your words, nonsense. But I find your lack of cooperation rather disconcerting, Isshin Kurosaki. There is no need to continue this charade. All my suspicions were laid to rest the first time Kyoka Suigetsu parried your weapon."

"My weapon, huh?"

An aura of light blue spiritual energy wafted from Isshin's shihakusho, "That's a funny way to talk about Engetsu."

"Do you expect me to believe that *blade* is a zanpakuto?"

The nearly imperceptible change in Isshin Kurosaki's spiritual energy alleviated the last of Aizen's doubts. It appeared he finally managed to break through the man's mental barriers, obtaining definitive proof of the answer he suspected. Pulling Kyoka Suigetsu out of the ground before sheathing the zanpakuto in one swift motion, he returned his attention to Isshin and politely commented, "It might resemble Engetsu's sealed state but that sword is simply a facsimile. While quite dangerous in the hands of a being like yourself, it's certainly *not* a zanpakuto."

"Which leads to a very interesting question..."

Aizen's tone didn't falter despite the eldritch spiritual energy starting to permeate the surrounding landscape, "When were you transformed into a Life Fiber Hybrid? Was it, perhaps, the night Ragyo Kiryuin was summoned to the Original Life Fiber's sanctum?"

Mockingly polite clapping shattered the subsequent silence before Aizen calmly added, "There's no reason to be alarmed, Isshin Kurosaki. Despite observing Karakura Town for over a decade, I was unaware of your altered physiology until only a few minutes ago. Your acting skills were rather impressive. I never questioned your status as an exiled shinigami. But then again, you never displayed any of Ragyo Kiryuin's more prominent characteristics."

The wind blowing through the streets abated as Isshin relaxed his shoulders, "What can I say? Silver really isn't a good look for me."

"I see. Well then, let me ask you another question..."

Aizen was briefly silhouetted in shadow when an explosion of black spiritual energy erupted skyward in the distance, "Is Ichigo aware of the truth?"

Isshin ignored the sinking feeling in his gut, "What are you talking about?"

"That he possesses neither shinigami nor Hollow powers," Aizen found Isshin Kurosaki's reaction quite interesting but the traitorous shinigami was acutely aware he was approaching a dangerous precipice. Knowing any further attempts at provoking someone identical to Ragyo Kiryuin was inherently risky, he stealthily adjusted his tone, "I've known of his altered heritage for quite some time. Ichigo's miraculous abilities are derived from the Life Fibers composing his body, are they not?"

"... Lucky guess."

The former shinigami shrugged nonchalantly, his bluster replaced with mild consternation. There really wasn't a point in continuing to play stupid if Aizen already knew about Ragyo and the Original Life Fiber. Frowning as his attention shifted to the pulsating Hogenyoku embedded in Aizen's sternum, the cross-like lines extending outwards from the point of fusion shimmering with a disturbing purple light, Isshin relaxed his guard and grumbled, "You've got some serious guts, Aizen. I'm surprised you're not dead."

Aizen's expression twitched when the Hogenyoku suddenly dimmed, "Fusing with the Hogenyoku was a necessary gamble."

"Is that right?" Isshin scoffed at the answer. He had to give Aizen credit. The man had one hell of a poker face, "I'll admit I didn't see this coming. But if you're so smart, you already know I can easily tear that thing out of your chest."

"Such a thought has crossed my mind," Aizen wasn't perturbed by Isshin Kurosaki's subtle threat. While it was true the man could easily accomplish such a feat, especially if he were to remove the veil concealing his eldritch spiritual energy, the odds of that occurring were nearly astronomical, "However, our goals completely align. Your actions over the course of the last twenty years imply you harbor no loyalty to the Original Life Fiber. Therefore, the question one should ask is *why* you haven't tried destroying that being. The obvious answer would be Ragyo Kiryuin. Her power is more than enough to deter any straightforward assaults. But that's not the true reason, is it? You haven't attempted to destroy the Original Life Fiber because you *cannot*. Whatever method that *thing* used to transform both you and Ragyo Kiryuin into Life Fiber Hybrids implanted a subconscious directive into your mind that prevents you from actively rebelling. Am I correct?"

Isshin rubbed the back of his neck, "I never did grow out of my rebellious teenage years."

"*You* of all people should understand why I implanted the Hogenyoku within my body," Aizen's eyes narrowed fractionally at Isshin, "It's the

only way to prevent the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet before it can begin."

"By killing the Soul King, right?" Isshin needed to thank Kisuke whenever the enigmatic bastard decided to show his face. The shopkeeper had explained everything they knew about Aizen's plan to forge an Ouken and destroy the Soul King, the 'linchpin of existence,' which meant the Original Life Fiber's mental influence was minimized. Two decades of dealing with that thing preventing him from telling anyone about its plans for humanity meant he was *really* good at discovering loopholes. Damn it. Now he needed to also thank *Aizen* . With an exaggerated sigh, Isshin scratched his cheek and grumbled, "You know... that's a really stupid plan."

That was not the response Aizen expected, "Oh?"

Isshin stared at the explosions of spiritual energy in the distance before begrudgingly explaining, "I'm going to guess you spent most of the last one hundred years obsessing over Life Fibers. And it's pretty damn surprising you found out about the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. But there are a few benefits from encountering that thing underneath Ragyo's house."

"I figured as much," Aizen grew increasingly relaxed despite the unexpected development. It appeared they were finally coming to an understanding, "There is only a finite amount of knowledge one can learn through second-hand sources and observations. Experimenting with only a few strands of Life Fibers had limitations, especially when physical contact needs to be kept to an absolute minimum."

"So why fuse with the Hogenyoku?"

Isshin suppressed the venomous disgust in the back of his mind at the darkened sphere embedded firmly in Aizen's sternum, "You must have known the odds of surviving the process were basically zero. Don't tell me the great 'Sosuke Aizen' couldn't think of a better plan."

"The reason I undertook such a dangerous gamble is rather simple," Aizen placed a hand over the Hogyoku, his voice deepening slightly, "By merging my Hogyoku, created from the Original Life Fiber, with Kisuke Urahara's, I recreated a power seen only once in the last hundred millennium. It is a strength that surpasses Life Fibers. You know what I'm referring to, Isshin Kurosaki. No matter their spiritual energy, it should have been impossible for a Quincy to defeat a Life Fiber Hybrid. Yet sixteen years ago Masaki Kurosaki bested Ragyo Kiryuin with contemptible ease."

A grimace stretched across the former shinigami's face at the reminder, "And you're hoping to use that same power?"

"Failure to act before Ragyo Kiryuin finishes consolidating her strength will undoubtedly lead to humanity's annihilation," Aizen found Isshin Kurosaki's obfuscating behavior rather puzzling. The man knew every detail concerning the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet yet refused to divulge any useful information. Perhaps his earlier assessment was inadequate. From the man's ambiguous answers and short responses it seemed the Original Life Fiber's subconscious directives weren't limited to merely physical rebellion.

"You might believe I'm a monster for laying waste to the Gotei 13. After all, the strength possessed by Genryusai Yamamoto's Bankai could theoretically overwhelm the regeneration of a Life Fiber Hybrid like Ragyo Kiryuin. However, my primary objective has always been the destruction of the Soul King. Therefore, that begs the question of *why* you are forcibly suppressing the Hogyoku."

"Because your plan won't work," Isshin grumbled and stabbed the Life Fiber replica of Engetsu into the ground, "In fact, destroying the Soul King will only make things worse."

"Oh? How so?"

Aizen's normally impassive expression briefly faltered when Isshin Kurosaki's eyes shifted into a familiar shade of maroon, "You're going to make me explain everything, huh? Let's just say defeating

the Royal Guard and destroying the Soul King won't change anything in the long run. It'll be a complete waste of your time."

The traitorous shinigami resisted the appreciable urge to frown. It was simple for someone of his intelligence to read between the lines. There was no reason to believe Isshin Kurosaki spoke anything but the truth, which suggested decades of planning and research had been for naught. Countless experiments to further his knowledge, pushing the boundaries between shinigami and Hollow, amounted to little more than a waste of valuable time. But Aizen felt neither annoyance nor despair.

"I see... then perhaps a small change of plans is in order."

Isshin frowned, his eyes returning to their normal coloration, "What are you saying?"

Aizen swept an arm forward, "It's quite simple really. Taking your explanation at face value suggests destroying the Soul King is currently impossible. Likewise, you are incapable of harming the Original Life Fiber. If I understand your logic correctly, the opposite must therefore also be true. But what if I were to cast a guiding light into the future?"

Several long seconds passed before Isshin furrowed his brow, "... I'm listening."

The distant sounds of battle were eerily absent as the traitorous shinigami calmly surmised, "Ichigo Kurosaki's status as an artificial Life Fiber Hybrid means he's not beholden to the Original Life Fiber. There is no eldritch willpower controlling his actions. However, he currently believes he's simply a human who obtained shinigami and Hollow powers through a series of coincidental events. From your expression it appears you've already given this a considerable amount of thought. As long as that notion remains firmly in his consciousness, his Life Fibers will not awaken. But therein lies the answer. If Ichigo Kurosaki believed victory could only be achieved



through sacrificing those same powers, there would be nothing stopping his Life Fibers from awakening. Am I wrong?"

Isshin remained silent as the traitorous shinigami finished speaking. Contrary to Aizen's expectations, he *never* wanted Ichigo involved in the fight against Life Fibers. Figuring out a way to stop Ragyo and permanently destroy the Original Life Fiber was his problem. But he wasn't stupid. Rescuing Ururu might have temporarily brought the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet to a screeching halt but that didn't stop Ragyo from continuing to distribute Life Fibers across the world in the form of Revocs clothing. And it was only a matter of time before she turned her attention towards Ichigo.

It was painful even *considering* the idea but awakening Ichigo's Life Fibers was the only way to prepare his son for whatever Ragyo had planned.

"Alright..."

Pulling his sword out of the ground, a faint multicolored light briefly visible along the length of the weapon, Isshin frowned in bitter disdain as he stopped suppressing the Hogyoku's disgusting presence. Aizen might have been a coldhearted bastard with a body count in the thousands but he had a *point*. And that pissed him off more than anything else, "But let me give you some friendly advice, Aizen. You do *anything* to Ichigo and the Hogyoku won't stop me from killing you."

"There's no need for threats, Isshin Kurosaki. After all, we share the same objective," Aizen slowly unsheathed Kyoka Suigetsu as the Hogyoku embedded in his sternum pulsed with a shimmering blue-purple light, "In any case, it appears our conversation is just about finished. For my plan to succeed, I need you to convince Ichigo that sacrificing his powers is the only conceivable method of defeating me. I shall do the rest..."

Aizen's smirk didn't falter when Ichigo Kurosaki abruptly crashed into a nearby building, the explosion prematurely ending their

conversation. Deigning not to speak as the teenager parried Gin's Bankai before landing next to his father, an expression of annoyance in his eyes, the traitorous shinigami's eyes narrowed when a mocking voice commented, "That was a very nice move there. Fascinating just how effective sheer luck can be."

Ichigo snorted as he rubbed the corner of his mouth, "You're stupid to think that was luck."

"I-Ichigo?"

"What is it?!"

The annoyed response caught Isshin completely off guard. Tensa Zangestu gripped tightly in his hand as he glared at Gin Ichimaru, the silver haired shinigami smirking broadly as he landed nearby, Ichigo scoffed and added with a small amount of irritation, "Leave me alone! I'm just getting warmed up! I'll defeat him soon! I don't want you to interfere!"

"Sorry about all this, Captain Aizen," Gin Ichimaru held the wakizashi form of Kamishini no Yari loosely between his fingers, "I hope I didn't interrupt your conversation."

"It's alright..."

Aizen smiled as tendrils of white matter emerged from the Hōgyoku in his chest, "I had pretty much finished explaining myself."

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**May 28th, 1790**

"Hey, isn't that Sosuke?"

A young woman, long auburn hair falling past her shoulders, turned in the direction her friend was slyly motioning with her hand before responding in a hushed whisper, "I heard he's graduating an entire year early. They say he's a genius!"

Her friend's brown eyes narrowed suspiciously as she leaned closer, "Rumor has it Sosuke was offered a seated position only to politely turn it down! Right to the captain's face!"

"Really?"

The young woman stared curiously at the brown haired man on the other side of the courtyard, "Hmm... I wonder if Sosuke will continue tutoring after he graduates? My Zanjutsu still needs a lot of work..."

Sosuke Aizen ignored the audible whispers filtering across the courtyard as he stared pensively into the depths of one of Shin'o Academy many ponds, the crystalline waters reflecting the late spring sunlight. Despite the rumors circulated throughout the academy, some of which were bolstered by exaggerations and outright lies, he didn't possess the slightest desire to graduate early and matriculate into the Gotei 13. It simply wasn't something he preferred, which he fully realized was a dissenting opinion. Most students would have been ecstatic if a captain personally requested they join their division but Aizen remained conflicted. Unlike his classmates, who constantly professed their goals for the future, he lacked ambitions of his own.

A small pebble balancing precariously on the edge of the pond fell into the water with a noticeable ripple.

Any other shinigami in his position would have unanimously worked towards the rank of captain. He couldn't find fault in such logic. It was a noble goal if sought for the right reason but leading one of the thirteen divisions wasn't something he personally wished to achieve. It meant nothing to him. And while his fellow students would most likely find the answer both confusing and shocking, their opinions held very little weight.

Why should he allow the expectations others placed upon themselves dictate his actions?

Aizen stared somberly into the tranquil waters as a light wind blew across the courtyard, carrying with it the dry afternoon heat. There was no point dwelling on alternate possibilities and past events. The Gotei 13 recruiting him into their ranks was a fact and something he needed to accept. But perhaps he was overanalyzing the situation, giving unnecessary weight to evidence nobody apart from himself would notice. To the Gotei 13, or rather that persistent captain, he was a somewhat gifted student with greater than average spiritual energy and talent in Zanjutsu and Hakuda.

But given enough time and lack of discernable improvement in his abilities, the captain's expectations would rapidly be tempered by disappointment. In order to save himself from the embarrassment of personally recruiting an average student, the captain would leave him either as an unseated shinigami or a low ranked officer, which was perfect. The lack of formal oversight and responsibility was necessary for solving his existential dilemma.

Several relatively uneventful years patrolling the World of the Living and Rukon Districts, cleansing the occasional Hollow entering his jurisdiction, should be more than enough time to determine his future prospects.

Perhaps he would decide to seek the position of captain.

With a small frown Aizen expertly drew his zanpakuto from her scabbard. The constant presence in the back of his mind was yet another indication of his unnatural talents. Unlike the rest of the academy's students who still wielded nameless Asauchi, he already evolved the undifferentiated blade into a zanpakuto. Kyoka Suigetsu was truly *his* sword. Less than two years after passing Shin'o Academy entrance examination he heard the first whispers of Kyoka Suigetsu's voice. It had required another six months of Jinzen and conversing with his zanpakuto's spirit to learn Shikai.

His expression tightened at the recollection. The far-reaching ramifications of Kyoka Suigetsu's technique becoming known to the Gotei 13 was the main reason he had decided *not* to reveal his full strength.

Less than two days of contemplation had been necessary to reach that conclusion.

Kyoka Suigetsu was unique, different from any zanpakuto throughout the previous eight hundred years. She did not gain enhanced physical attributes or elemental techniques when he activated her Shikai. Neither did his zanpakuto change shape or functionality. On the contrary, her release possessed a far more insidious nature. Anyone witnessing Kyoka Suigetsu's release would instantly be ensnared within her proclaimed Kanzen Saimin or 'Complete Hypnosis.' It was an admittedly dangerous technique, one that he found disconcerting due to its permanence. There was no method to counter Kyoka Suigetsu's hypnosis even if one were aware of his zanpakuto's power.

It would be impossible for any person who witnessed his Shikai to fully trust their senses.

Aizen's fingers twitched around his zanpakuto.

The Gotei 13's standard response throughout the centuries towards perceived threats wasn't taught within Shin'o Academy. Intentions and benevolence wouldn't matter to the Central 46. Merely the *assumption* that his zanpakuto posed considerable danger to the Seireitei would be enough for them to sentence him to the Nest of Maggots.

Such ignorance bothered him tremendously.

Only those with limited imaginations would view Kyoka Suigetsu as inherently dangerous. Everything was a matter of *perspective*. The abilities possessed by one's zanpakuto had no correlation with their morality.

A ripple expanding across the pond's surface reminded Aizen why he was standing in the courtyard.

It was a theory so simple he could not help but chastise himself for not considering it sooner. Several nights ago in the midst of his studies a stray thought appeared in his mind. Since Kyoka Suigetsu was capable of controlling all five senses, rendering his opponents vulnerable to his subsequent actions, was the opposite also true? If there existed another zanpakuto with sensory manipulating powers was his sword capable of shattering their illusions? Would Kyoka Suigetsu render him immune to their hypnosis or vice versa? It was an intriguing concept worth pursuing if not for a single disadvantageous fact.

To the best of his knowledge Kyoka Suigetsu was the *only* illusion-type zanpakuto in existence.

Hence why he slightly modified his original intentions.

Waiting patiently until the last student vacated the courtyard, Aizen held his zanpakuto perpendicular to the ground before calmly announcing, "Shatter: Kyoka Suigetsu."

There was no momentarily flickering or noticeable change in the surrounding landscape upon release his zanpakuto. One moment the courtyard was quiet and the next a flock of birds native to the World of the Living were roosting in the nearby trees, courtesy of Kyoka Suigetsu manipulating his optical and auditory nerves. This was the first time he used Absolute Hypnosis on himself. But while the results were interesting, the overall experiment was a failure. Despite the authenticity of the illusion, from the feathers on the birds to their familiar chirping, he could easily differentiate it from reality. The illusion seemed almost superimposed upon the tree, a constantly shifting abstract painting he subconsciously rejected.

Perhaps being Kyoka Suigetsu's wielder afforded him immunity to her hypnosis or allowed him to instinctively view the underlying reality.

"I suppose that settles that particular question," Aizen mused as he prepared to reseal his zanpakuto, "Still, I wonder if..."

"Sosuke!"

He recognized the particular inflections - a fourth year student whom he tutored in Hakuda. Smiling softly as he turned around to greet the small entourage of underclassmen walking across the courtyard, Aizen stiffened when he noticed something *different* flickering on the edge of his vision. This... was unexpected. Yet despite attempting to quickly rationalize the situation as a side effect of Kyoka Suigetsu's hypnosis, which was technically still active, he immediately dismissed that notion. What he was witnessed bore no signs of falsehoods or delusions, which made the only logical choice more difficult to comprehend.

Although they possessed differing levels of spiritual energy, every one of their Asauchi shimmered with a disturbing blue-green light.

"I suppose congratulations are in order, Sosuke!"

One of his fellow fifth year students, a larger man from the outer Rukon Districts, laughed jovially, "We were taking bets on when you'd graduate. I personally thought you'd leave a year ago!"

"It wasn't like I had much of a choice," Aizen laughed nervously, a placating gesture to hide his tumultuous thoughts, "You really can't turn down a captain when they personally ask you to join their division..."

His mind scrambled for an answer that was not forthcoming. Perhaps Kyoka Suigetsu's hypnosis truly was absolute, even to him. If that was indeed the case, his previous assumptions were the unfortunate result of subconsciously creating an illusion with the sole purpose of being analyzed. Subtly turning his attention toward Kyoka Suigetsu when the focus of their conversation drifted to the Gotei 13, Aizen's confusion deepened upon noticing his zanpakuto *lacked* the same blue-green glow as the Asauchi.

"I haven't given it much thought..."

Aizen smiled politely as he sheathed his still released zanpakuto with a soft click. There was a connection, albeit unknown, between Kyoka Suigetsu and the shimmering Asauchi. He had only noticed the blue-green illumination surrounding the blades *after* personally succumbing to his zanpakuto's hypnosis. From that single piece of evidence, it stood to reason the phenomenon wasn't visible to the majority of shinigami.

So what exactly was the source of the strange anomaly?

"But I was considering joining the Fifth Division," Aizen chuckled as they walked across the courtyard, his mind still focused on the unexpected development, "Their captain seemed quite insistent I join his division."

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## **November 1st, 2001**

Sosuke Aizen watched the aftermath of his Frigor with detached interest.

He was content with the current progression of events even with the unexpected changes induced by the Hōgyoku. It was a rather interesting phenomenon. Despite spending decades researching the Hōgyoku's potential, sacrificing countless souls in search of its limitations and full abilities, the inner machinations of Life Fibers eluded his grasp. Not a single one of his experiments, Hollows and shinigami alike, demonstrated how the Hōgyoku restructured one's soul if they survived the implantation process. Masaki Kurosaki's brief ascension to the same plateau of power hadn't influenced her appearance, instead merely altering the density and coloration of her spiritual energy while in Letzt Stil.



His eyes narrowed at the shadowed figure slowly emerging from within the flames.

Something wasn't *right* .

For a brief moment, when Ichigo Kurosaki managed to wound his previous form, he had experienced a strange mixture of anger and indignation. That the teenager could stand against the Hōgyoku's power wasn't surprising. He anticipated Isshin Kurosaki, someone who had been directly influenced by the Original Life Fiber, teaching his son the proper 'technique' necessary to achieve victory in this battle, destroying his self-proclaimed Hollow and shinigami abilities in the process. He had *expected* suffering injuries obtaining that goal. But his outburst and final transformation upon teleporting away from Ichigo Kurosaki was disturbing. While he took the evolution in stride, purposely informing Ichigo that the Hōgyoku did not wish to lose to a mere human, Aizen knew the cause behind his temporary loss of composure.

The Hōgyoku was beginning to influence his mental state, an outcome he'd predicted but failed to truly account for as it overwhelmed even his own considerable mental defenses.

Aizen allowed a snarl to twist his transformed appearance. He needed to act quickly and force Ichigo Kurosaki into using whatever 'technique' Isshin Kurosaki taught him. The longer the fight progressed the more likely the Hōgyoku, or more specifically the Original Life Fiber, would obtain a greater presence in his mind. He *refused* to allow that *thing* to have any influence over his decisions and actions.

"I see you were able to withstand my attack with very little damage," Aizen conceitedly declared, condescension and arrogance purposely accentuating his tirade. Staring at the burns covering Ichigo Kurosaki's left arm from the point-blank attack, the former captain mentally noted the resilience of the youth's hibernating Life Fibers, "However, your left arm is no longer usable."

In a burst of motion Aizen leapt into the flames, one clawed hand tightly gripping Ichigo Kurosaki's throat before the youth could react. Pushing the teenager out the other side of the superheated flames, wisps of fire clinging to their bodies, he purposely emitted a savage growl as his transformed wings suddenly encircled Ichigo. But despite purple spiritual energy condensing into three concentric rings as the eyes on his wings widened, Aizen was not fooled by Ichigo Kurosaki's limp form. From his breathing pattern to his grip upon his Bankai, it was clear the teenager was still conscious.

"Can you hear me, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

Aizen ignored the whispers in the back of his mind as he arrogantly boasted, "I have to give you credit. For one brief moment you broke the boundary between Hollow and shinigami to become a transcendent being. But that power is no more! It has completely dissipated... and not a trace of it remains! You're not even worth *trying* to understand anymore! Now it's my turn! I, a true transcendent being, will cause your death!"

He observed Ichigo Kurosaki's limp form, fully aware the teenager was listening to his every word, "I must say, it will be quite a victory. By eliminating you I will completely break free from shinigami and Hollows alike!"

Tightening his fingers around Ichigo's throat hard enough that the teenager flinched, he indulged in the urge to gloat, proclaiming his superiority, "It's over, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

"Is it, Aizen?"

The transformed shinigami's eyes widened at the question. For a brief instant he felt control of the Hogyoku slip from his grasp. But that was impossible. Ichigo Kurosaki might have obtained great power but his Life Fibers were still hibernating. Was there something he missed? If he considered the improbable scenario that Isshin Kurosaki prematurely awakened his son's Life Fibers, perhaps through a technique usable only by those influenced by the Original

Life Fiber, he would have detected their distinct spiritual energy the moment Ichigo emerged from the Dangai.

It wasn't something easily forgotten.

Yet he felt *nothing* from the teenager. Even now Ichigo Kurosaki's spiritual pressure still mimicked that of a shinigami and Hollow.

So how did he synchronize with the Hogyoku?

"This the best you can do?"

The amount of confidence in Ichigo Kurosaki's voice took the traitorous captain off guard, surprising him long enough for the teenager to disperse his Ultrafragor into wisps of purple spiritual energy with an almost careless swing of Tensa Zangetsu. Pushed backwards through the air by the concussive force of the strike, Aizen's blank eyes widened in astonishment when Ichigo slowly raised his zanpakuto, "Aizen... let's end this already. All this rambling you do? Well, I'm sick of it."

"So prepare yourself..."

Aizen felt a small modicum of satisfaction at the declaration. This was it. His choreographed battle with Ichigo Kurosaki for the presumed fate of Karakura Town and inhabitants was reaching its climax. If he took Ichigo's comment at face value while eliminating all other possibilities, he was preparing to unleash whatever 'technique' Isshin taught him during their time in the Dangai. There was nothing else he needed to do.

Twisting his skull-like visage into an expression of false shock, Aizen watched Ichigo calmly brace his burnt hand against his right arm, "I'll show you my final... Getsuga Tenshou."

A magnificent eruption of chaotic white and black spiritual energy extended into the heavens mere moments after Ichigo Kurosaki's statement, the power concealing his form inside a brilliant pillar of

blinding light. Aizen could *feel* the youth's spiritual pressure on his skin, the weight of the energy causing the very air to tingle with electricity. Yes... everything was going according to plan. Ichigo Kurosaki, through his own actions, was using a 'technique' he assumed required sacrificing his Hollow and shinigami abilities. In the end he would be left as an ordinary 'human,' thereby allowing his Life Fibers to slowly awaken.

And while Ichigo Kurosaki prepared for his confrontation with Ragyo Kiryuin and the Original Life Fiber he, Aizen, would go into hiding. Through careful manipulation of the battle and detailed understanding of Isshin Kurosaki's thought processes, most of which was information rendered outdated in the last hour, he would fake his death at the hands of Ichigo's so-called final Getsuga Tenshou. Every aspect of this fight had been planned from the moment he sensed the full weight of Ichigo's spiritual energy. His erratic behavior and inability to fight against the teenager was necessary to trick the Gotei 13, but more importantly Kisuke Urahara, into believing his death was valid.

The lack of scrutiny was necessary if he wished to eventually destroy the Soul King.

"What is that? What is that form he's taking?"

So why was he growing increasingly frustrated with Ichigo Kurosaki? It didn't make sense. The Hogyoku's influence should still be minimal and easily suppressed. But he refused to leave anything to chance. Every few seconds he checked his thought patterns for inconsistencies, determining whether they were genuine or originated from another source. Why had the Hogyoku chosen *now* to increase its foothold in his mind?

Aizen was stunned when the torrential outpouring of spiritual energy dissolved into wisps, allowing him to see Ichigo Kurosaki once more. Wait a minute. This was the so-called final Getsuga Tenshou, the 'technique' Isshin Kurosaki taught him during the extended time in the Dangai?

Streams of midnight black spiritual energy clung to Ichigo's body like smoke, taking on the appearance of flames slowly wafting upwards into the sky. But such a trivial effect wasn't what drew the traitorous captain's undivided attention. Everything below Ichigo Kurosaki's eyes, which now displayed a familiar maroon color, apart from his left arm was covered in blue-gray bandages while his previously orange hair was now waist-long and pitch black. This wasn't merely a sacrificial technique.

It was a complete transformation.

Through some miracle Ichigo Kurosaki was using the spiritual energy of his slumbering Life Fibers to bolster his strength.

Yet he was subconsciously *rejecting* them?

The Hogyoku pulsed with a resplendent multicolored light.

That didn't make sense. Despite his unique origins Ichigo Kurosaki was a Life Fiber Hybrid. But he hadn't anticipated this outcome. Against all odds, including his own calculations, Ichigo was subconsciously accessing the spiritual energy of his hibernating Life Fibers for the final Getsuga Tenshou. It was amazing. There no longer existed any distinction between him and Ragyo Kiryuin. He had ascended to the same plateau stood upon by the Kiryuin matriarch and Isshin Kurosaki. His physical appearance proved that notion!

Aizen felt his consciousness falter under foreign indignation.

It was inconceivable! Ichigo Kurosaki was *still* rejecting his origins despite the power coursing through his body, which far exceeded anything remotely possibly by either Hollows or shinigami? Aizen found it impossible to comprehend. The teenager firmly believed that underneath his false powers lay the heart and body of a normal human. Normal? *Human* ? Such blasphemy!

To reject both his existence and the Original Life Fiber with such trivial excuses was abhorrent! And he wished to defeat *him* ?!

"No! No! No! No! No! No! NO!"

Aizen felt the inhuman presence originating from the Hōgyoku, an eldritch willpower born from the darkest depths of reality, increasing exponentially with each declaration until none of his consciousness remained, "It's absurd! A mere HUMAN can't surpass me! It couldn't possibly be!"

His incoherent ranting was interrupted when Ichigo raised his right arm, a serene expression visible on his masked visage. Startled into silence by the power contained within the pure black spiritual energy condensing between the teenager's fingers, Aizen flinched backwards when everything suddenly snapped back into focus. What just happened? A few moments ago the Hōgyoku had nearly subsumed his mind, leaving him struggling for conscious control over his own body. Yet for some reason the Hōgyoku's eldritch willpower receded in the wake of Ichigo Kurosaki's final Getsuga Tenshō?

Blank eyes widening as the final vestige of the Hōgyoku's presence left his mind, Aizen had only a second to process Ichigo Kurosaki swinging his arm downwards before everything faded to black.

"Mugetsu."

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**July 31, 1894**

"You've been awfully quiet, Sosuke."

The suddenness of the comment took the normally collected lieutenant off guard. Brow furrowed into a thoughtful frown as he turned towards his captain, who was slouched forward while

nonchalantly scratching his back, Aizen quirked an eyebrow and politely inquired, "What ever do you mean, captain?"

"Don't give me any of that polite nonsense," Shinji Hirako, captain of the Fifth Division and his direct superior, replied without bothering to turn around. Remaining completely silent when his captain answered, deigning instead to think about more important matters, he didn't need to wait much longer before the man grumbled under his breath, "That was your cue to answer, Sosuke. Anyway... these last few weeks you've been rather withdrawn. Well, more than usual at least. I don't think you've commented once about my impeccable sense of fashion."

"My apologies, captain," Aizen smoothed a crease on his shihakusho before bowing his head slightly, "If you wished for my criticism of your fashion sense, than all you needed to do was ask. Perhaps I should start with your lack of -"

"Goddamn it, I was kidding!"

Shinji's left eye twitched sporadically at the comment, a stark contrast to his lieutenant's serene yet vaguely amused expression. Deciding to take a moment to calm his nerves, lest he lose his cool and do something that would result in disciplinary charges by Central 46, he looked over his shoulder and scoffed, "That's no way to talk to your captain."

Aizen sighed before pressing a finger against his glasses, "If I recall, you *asked* for my opinion on the matter. Lying to you, even over something as trivial as the clothes you purchase when you visit the World of the Living, would be disrespectful. That's why I refuse to comment either way on your... peculiar... choice in music."

The normally flippant captain paused midstride at his lieutenant's unintended admission, anger coursing through his soul, before chuckling, "Heh... trying to change the subject on me, Sosuke? Not bad. But why don't ya tell me what's really on your mind."

"That's interesting coming from you, captain," Aizen allowed the barest trace of concern in his voice, which had the intended effect of catching the rightfully suspicious Shinji Hirako off guard. Running a hand through his slightly messy brown hair, sighing purposely once more at his captain's lack of recognition, he paused for an appropriate amount of time before hesitatingly asking, "Wait... don't tell me you forgot about tomorrow?"

"Huh?"

Shinji blinked in confusion, one hand scratching the back of his neck as he stared incredulously at his lieutenant. What was Sosuke talking about? As he mentally went through the list of important dates, the growing look of concern on his subordinate's face gravely worrying, Shinji dryly quipped, "What? Did the Captain Commander schedule a last minute meeting or something?"

Aizen had difficulty hiding his disbelief at Shinji Hirako's inattentiveness, "Tomorrow is Lieutenant Sarugaki's birthday. It appears you forgot about the date... *again* ."

"WHAT?!"

The ordinarily calm and collected Shinji Hirako, who refused to allow any of life's trivial problems get the better of him, felt his heart sink at the horrible, *terrible* news. How the hell did he completely forget about Hiyori's birthday? It was *literally* the most important date of the year! After her rampage across half the Seireitei last year, which sent nearly a hundred shinigami to the Fourth Division for treatment, he had circled the August on every calendar in the division's barracks. He ordered the entire division to remind him of August First one month in advance. He made *damn* sure there was no chance he would forget.

*And he still forgot?!*

His expression rapidly cycling through absolute terror and primal fear before finally settling on desperation, Shinji grabbed Sosuke by the



shoulders and passionately demanded, "You knew her birthday was tomorrow and didn't remind me? What the hell's wrong with you, Sosuke?!"

"After last year's... incident... I thought it wise not to get involved in your personal matters, captain," Aizen took his captain's subsequent series of curses in stride, his glasses shining menacingly in the afternoon, "Lieutenant Sarugaki can be quite frightening when angry, especially after you shifted the blame for last year's events onto my shoulders. But there's no reason to be worried, captain. There are still several hours left to buy her a mildly reasonable gift. I even took the liberty of collecting some Kan from your quarters for you to -"

He didn't have enough time to finish his sentence before Shinji grabbed the money from his outstretched hand and sprinted away, his fear-induced speed bolstered by judicious usage of Shunpo. As he watched his captain flee the scene, fragments of panicked phrases and words reaching his ears, Aizen's expression tightened imperceptibly. That had been close. He must have grown overly complacent with Shinji Hirako's suspicions if the man deduced a minor shift in his natural disposition. Shrugging his shoulders at several unseated shinigami walking across the barracks, their captain's strange behavior well known, he waited long enough for everything to return to relative normalcy before walking in the opposite direction, his thoughts focused on a singular topic.

Kisuke Urahara.

His initial opinion of the man had been lackluster. After several weeks of subtle observations, using Kyoka Suigetsu to hide his presence when needed, he had determined that Kisuke Urahara was potentially a genius comparable to himself. He was a man capable of simultaneously formulating multiple plans that account for unexpected variables and changes while flawlessly running mental simulations of his opponent's actions. Yet he hadn't given Kisuke Urahara much thought, instead dedicating himself to more important issues. The recently promoted captain might possess an intellect rivaling his own, but that did *not* make him a threat. After all, while

Kisuke Urahara was potentially the only person in the Seireitei able to counter his plans, likewise *he* could develop countermeasures for everything the man created.

It would be moderately troublesome killing the man if it came down to a battle of *simply* intelligence. But the vast difference between their spiritual energies, abilities and repertoire of techniques meant the outcome was already decided.

That mindset changed three weeks ago when he detected a familiar, yet subtle, spiritual energy radiating from the recently created Shinigami Research and Development Institute.

He hadn't originally believed the findings from his spiritual sensors. Something like *that* couldn't be true. It was *impossible*. Not a single Hollow or shinigami aside from himself had stepped foot anywhere close to the Kiryuin Manor since he first deduced its location decades ago. While an ordinarily unbelievable scenario given the unique spiritual energy clinging to the property, soaking into the very *fabric* of reality, nothing was impossible when Life Fibers were involved. But more importantly, the current matriarch of the Kiryuin family was only in her late teens. It was physically impossible for Kisuke Urahara to have entered the Original Life Fiber's sanctum. The creature's wards and defenses would have devoured him alive.

All of this was predicated, however, on Kisuke Urahara on visiting the World of the Living, eluding his surveillance of the Kiryuin Manor and stealing a sample of Life Fibers.

There had been rumors of Kisuke Urahara's peculiar behavior over the years. Thirteen years ago, long before Kirio Hikifune was promoted from captain of the Twelfth Division to the Royal Guard, the man had mysteriously vanished for several days without a trace. Yet that hadn't been enough to garner further observations. He had been more concerned with some promising Hollowfication experiments in the outer Rukon Districts, safely hidden from any prying eyes. But the series of miraculous inventions Kisuke Urahara created over the next few years, one after another in quick

succession, heavily suggested he'd somehow entered the Soul King Palace.

Aizen's pace quickened slightly.

But if he added the recent burst of spiritual energy into the equation, there was only one *possible* conclusion - Kisuke Urahara had created a *second* Hogyoku, one independent of the Original Life Fiber.

It required a considerable amount of self-control to restrain his growing exhilaration into nothing more than a pleasant smirk.

If Kisuke Urahara was intelligent enough to create a Hogyoku, than that could only mean he *understood* the truth lurking in the shadows of both the Soul Society and the World of the Living. Aizen never thought he would see this day. Creating an actual Hogyoku implied that Kisuke Urahara must also know the Original Life Fiber's terrifying plans concerning for humanity. The only question was broaching the subject of Life Fibers. Caution would be necessary to avoid any unwanted consequences. Gin and Kaname might be loyal towards his goal of rebelling against the Gotei 13 but that was because it conformed to their own interests.

They were merely subordinates, cast aside at the first opportunity.

Kisuke Urahara, on the other hand, had the potential to be a valuable ally - his first true comrade - in destroying the Original Life Fiber and saving humanity. All he needed to do was figure out the most appropriate method of speaking with the man. But that shouldn't be too difficult. Surely Kisuke Urahara, as someone who understood the truth behind Life Fibers, would be amenable to cooperation.

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**November 1st, 2001**

"It is the Hogenyoku's will."

Kisuke Urahara watched his adversary with a calculating gaze as the specialized Kido continued taking effect, "The reason the seal I shot into you is only now taking effect is because your powers have started to weaken. This is all thanks to Ichigo. The seal was able to take effect because he fought so hard and pushed you to your limit. The Hogenyoku... is saying it does not recognize you as its master."

Aizen stiffened at the implications behind Kisuke Urahara's explanation. He had known the inherent risk of implanting the Hogenyoku into his soul. Isshin Kurosaki had been telling the truth when he mentioned the chances of surviving were astronomically small. Yet even though he had severely underestimated the Hogenyoku's connection to the Original Life Fiber, it had been a necessary risk for his plans to reach fruition - freeing humanity from the tyranny of Life Fibers. But if Kisuke Urahara spoke the truth, and the Hogenyoku no longer saw him as its master, then the consequences were dire.

Those *things* were aware of his plans.

"You're wrong," he muttered, his lips trembling at the growing implications of his defeat, "It can't be! It's impossible! I control this power!"

He hunched forward, agony and pain coursing through his veins, when the sealing Kido embedded in his body suddenly strengthened. Struggling to remain standing when the spiritual energy transformed, forming into large crosses that stabbed completely through his chest, Aizen sneered defiantly. He *refused* to allow someone like Kisuke Urahara, who ignored the growing threat of Life Fibers plaguing humanity, to defeat him!

"Urahara... Kisuke Urahara!"

Such a decision defied common sense and reasoning! It was a betrayal of humanity itself! Even though he'd never gained the opportunity to speak privately with Kise Urahara one hundred years ago without risking throwing all of his plans to the wayside, he expected the man to have done *something* . Anything! By creating the Hogyoku, Kise Urahara should have known about Life Fibers and their plan to devour humanity! He should have spent the last century preparing contingencies to neutralize and counter both the Original Life Fiber and Ragyo Kiryuin! His invention and usage of a specialized Gigai able to conceal his shinigami powers meant he could safely interact with Life Fibers!

There was nothing stopping Kise Urahara from entering the Original Life Fiber's sanctum underneath the Kiryuin Manor!

So why in the world had he *refused* to stop them? It didn't make any sense!

"Do you know how much I despise you?!"

The uncaring expression on Kise Urahara's face bothered Aizen more than anything else. Ignoring the seal slowly creeping up his body, encasing his lower legs within an earth-like shell of matter, he gnashed his teeth in frustration and angrily demanded, "With your great intellect why is it you don't take independent action? Why in the world is it that you choose to subjugate yourself to that *thing* ?!"

"When you say 'that thing,' are you talking about the Soul King?"

Kise didn't recognize the source of his adversary's mounting anger as closed his eyes and calmly sighed, "I see... so you saw it, didn't you? Without the existence of the Soul King the Soul Society would split into pieces. The Soul King is the keystone to it all. Without that keystone in place the system would fall apart. That, my friend, is how the world works."

"That's an argument only a *loser* would make!"

Aizen tore furiously at the seal enveloping around his body in a desperate attempt to regain his freedom. How could he have been so blind? He *refused* to allow someone like Kisuke Urahara to emerge victorious. It spat in the face of everything he fought tooth and nail to achieve! The man might have created another Hogyoku but he was still utterly blind towards the truth of the world. Kisuke Urahara *never* encountered Life Fibers. It was an impossible contradiction that went against everything he believed!

But the other man's blatant ignorance in the face of reality suggested otherwise.

Snapping a piece of the growing seal, freeing his left arm in the process, he desperately motioned at the only person who could have possibly understood the atrocious but necessary actions he took over the last two hundred years, "A victor should speak of how the world should be! Rather than how the world currently operates!"

"I REFUSE to accept a world ruled by that thing!"

As the seal finished enveloping his body, instantly severing all of his senses in the process, Aizen's seemingly incoherent ranting contained all of his self-loathing and hatred at *failing* to create a future for humanity free from Life Fibers, "I am a victor! I shall decide how the world should be!"

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**November 9th, 2002**

The sound of Kisuke Urahara's footsteps reverberated through the darkness as he strode through the pitch-black void encompassing the lowest level of the Central Great Underground Prison - Muken. For several long and immeasurable minutes he walked through the shadows without uttering a single word, the miniature device sewn into the pocket of his dark coat constantly emitting the spiritual

frequency necessary to prevent the bypass into the normally impenetrable prison from sealing shut. Adjusting the brim of his bucket hat upon reaching his destination, Kisuke frowned at the swirling darkness stretching before him.

"From your silence I take it you already know why I'm here?"

Kisuke found the resulting silence somewhat concerning, a sensation compounded by the strange nature of the endless void composing Muken. As he stood unmoving in the darkness, the faint chill permeating the prison giving him goose bumps, the shopkeeper resisted the urge to sigh when the shadows slowly parted, revealing a smirking figure. Although his body was covered head to foot in thick black straps, sealing away his movement and immense spiritual energy, Sosuke Aizen's single visible eye nevertheless narrowed in amusement from Mayuri Kurotsuchi's uniquely crafted chair.

"That all depends, Kisuke Urahara," Aizen grinned smugly at the other man, "Have you come all this way, breaking some of the Soul Society's most ancient laws, simply to learn my motivations? My background and reasoning? Or perhaps you grew concerned about the condition of the seals binding me to this chair?"

"My, oh my. You sure do like taking apart my hard work, don't you?"

His expression twisted into a calculating frown as he stared at the nineteen seals etched into the floor, cracks and splinters indicating what transpired, Kisuke slowly shook his head in disappointment, "In less than a year you've already removed more than half of the seals placed upon your body by Central 46. Well now... that's quite the impressive feat. And in any other situation I'd be shaking in my boots. But I'm curious, Aizen. Is this due to your own ingenuity and intellect... or the Life Fibers comprising the Hōgyoku fused with your soul?"

Aizen closed his uncovered eye at the question, "Life Fibers, you say?"

Raising his right arm, the only limb he managed to free from the powerful seals constraining him to the chair, he motioned politely at Kisuke, "While a notably accurate conclusion, it is long overdue from a man of your intellect. From what I remember, during our last encounter you were still blind to the concept of such things. The truth of the world remained lost to you. A regrettable, if understandable, excuse if we were speaking about anyone other than yourself. It's truly disappointing, Kisuke Urahara, it took you over a century to realize the existence of Life Fibers."

"Well..."

Kisuke purposely drawled out the word, allowing it to mask his embarrassment, "I don't know about *your* Hogyoku, but the one I created wasn't made with Life Fibers. It's actually a very long story. One, I assume, you're already quite familiar with. However, you're wrong about one small thing. During your battle against Ichigo, even before you departed from the fake Karakura Town, I already knew about Life Fibers."

The brief but noticeable widening of Aizen's single eye at the admission intrigued the shopkeeper. Deciding to press the advantage, he sighed gently, "You can thank Uryu for that. A few days after you escaped from the Soul Society with my Hogyoku his father sent him to Revocs headquarters for a two-week internship. During those fourteen days Uryu met some rather interesting people... including a woman by the name of Ragyo Kiryuin."

"And then things became complicated..."

Ignoring the constant chill permeating Muken, the former captain narrowed his eyes, "Uryu still hasn't explained all the details but a few days after his internship ended he returned to Revocs. He broke into their high security research laboratories and stole a large quantity of Life Fibers, which he gave to me for safekeeping. While I was shocked by his behavior, the strange spiritual energy coming from those threads piqued my interest. I promised Uryu I wouldn't tell anyone where I obtained the Life Fibers. Unfortunately..."



Kisuke sighed as he removed his hat, allowing his shaggy light-blond hair to fall freely, "... I was preoccupied with more important matters at the time. I didn't truly start researching Life Fibers until a week after you were defeated by Ichigo."

"And what have you found?"

Aizen's condescending smile returned, although not as wide as before, "Given the specialized Gigai you're wearing, it should have been relatively safe for you to handle Life Fibers."

"You're right on the nose," Kisuke frowned, pausing briefly as he mulled over his words, "Are you familiar with the concept of Kamui?"

"God Robes?" Aizen chuckled softly at the concept, "That does sound like something Ragyo Kiryuin would create from Life Fibers. From the inflection in your voice am I to assume you've created one of these Kamui? Perhaps one designed to be worn by a Life Fiber Hybrid like Ichigo Kurosaki?"

"Your intuition is quite frightening," Kisuke sighed as he placed the bucket hat back on his head, "But you're correct. It took some effort but I created a Kamui for Ichigo - a sentient, living uniform capable of transforming into more powerful forms. It's similar in some regards to a shinigami's zanpakuto. And ironically enough, he chose to name her Mugetsu."

"Did he now?"

Aizen closed his eye and smirked at the memory of Ichigo Kurosaki's technique neutralizing the Hōgyoku's growing influence on his mind, "While an interesting admission, I believe we're getting off topic. You never explained why you came here, Kisuke Urahara. Perhaps you wish to free me from Mūken. But as you can see, I'm not in need of your assistance."

He accentuated his answer by clenching the fingers on his right hand, "Ten of the seals specifically created to seal my spiritual

pressure while constraining me to this chair are already broken, unraveled by the Hogyoku's power. I simply need to patiently bide my time and eventually the remaining seals will shatter. From there, it's a trivial task escaping Muken into the World of the Living or Hueco Mundo without drawing the Gotei 13's notice."

Kisuke's eyes were framed in darkness as he listened to Aizen's explanation, "Is that right? Well then... I'm afraid I'll have to disagree with you. If you truly wanted to escape Muken, you could have done so months ago..."

Crouching down onto the floor, the shopkeeper ran a finger against one of the broken seals, "You were right about one thing, Aizen. The Hogyoku's power *is* eating away at the seals keeping you bound to that chair. But upon closer examination of the still functioning seals, including their inconsistent rates of decay, it becomes obvious you've been holding most of your power back, exponentially delaying your eventual escape from Muken."

Unconcerned by Aizen's perplexed frown, Kisuke calmly dusted off his hands and stood back up, "The only question is 'why.' It cannot be because you fear incurring the wrath of the Captain Commander. Due to the Hogyoku's power killing you would require his Bankai, a tactic Genryusai Yamamoto is notoriously adamant against using. No, the truth of the matter is much simpler. You fear leaving Muken because the moment you step outside its boundaries the Original Life Fiber - and by proxy Ragyo Kiryuin - will instantly become aware of your location. There would be nowhere in the World of the Living, Hueco Mundo or the Soul Society you could hide."

"That, my friend, is the downside of fusing with the Hogyoku."

Nearly half a minute passed in absolute silence before the corners of Kisuke's mouth curled into a smirk, "Fortunately, luck seems to be on our side. With her attention split between Nudist Beach, four Kamui and their experienced wearers and Karakura Town, it's almost certain Ragyo Kiryuin won't notice your presence."

Aizen leaned backwards, resting his head against the chair, "You appear to have put some thought into this, Kisuke Urahara. When did you first plan on visiting me? Surely coming to this dreadful place wasn't just a passing fancy."

"You give me *far* too little credit, Aizen. I always plan for all eventualities, no matter how improbable. After Ichigo and Ryuko left for London I immediately assumed Ragyo Kiryuin might attack Karakura Town in their absence," Kisuke reached into his coat, removing a duplicate set of keys for the nineteen seals at his feet, "After all, it's easier fighting two Kamui instead of four. And while I didn't anticipate the Quincy getting involved to such an extent, it appears my suspicions about that woman were completely accurate."

The traitorous captain carefully eyed the keys in Kisuke's hand, "London, you say? I was growing curious about the status of the creature known as Alucard. If I remember correctly, the embargo on Revocs clothing in England should have ended a few days ago. I take it things didn't go the way Ragyo Kiryuin expected?"

"Is it that obvious?"

Kisuke carefully placed the first key into the proper lock, freeing Aizen's left arm and hand, "But you'll have to live without the details because, to be honest, we don't have any time to waste. As we speak Ragyo Kiryuin is preparing to attack Karakura Town. It's likely she'll use everything at her disposal - thousands of human-powered COVERS, the remnants of Xcution and the Grand Couturier. If she succeeds, there will be nobody left to stop the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet."

"And you wish for *me* to deal with Ragyo Kiryuin?"

With an energetic crackle of spiritual energy the two seals constraining Aizen's upper chest vanished, "Why haven't you asked Isshin Kurosaki, the *other* one touched by the Original Life Fiber, to kill that woman?"

Kisuke hesitated as he placed the next key into the respective slot, "Isshin's history and relationship with Ragyo Kiryuin makes it highly unlikely he would find the desire to willingly land the finishing blow. Not to mention the matter of Ragyo Kiryuin's frightening intellect. It takes a certain amount of acumen to successfully run the second largest company in the World of the Living, which most likely increased due to the Original Life Fiber. She's *not* someone we can afford to underestimate. Ragyo Kiryuin wouldn't risk all her cards directly attacking Karakura Town without something prepared to deal with Isshin's interference."

"And that is where *you* come in..."

The fourth to last seal, binding Aizen's left leg, vanished in a flash of spiritual pressure, "Despite failing to seal away the Original Life Fiber, the information gathered during my short visit to the Kiryuin Manor led to some interesting revelations."

Kisuke's eyes narrowed as he unlocked the seal binding Aizen's other leg, "What you said before being sealed... you were warning me about the Original Life Fiber, weren't you?"

"Among other things..."

Aizen smirked when Kisuke unlocked the second-to-last seal, the one constraining his waist, "My goal has always been to destroy the Original Life Fiber and the Soul King. Allowing Life Fibers to devour humanity under Ragyo Kiryuin's delusional beliefs was something I've worked two hundred years to prevent. So if you're wondering whether I'm willing to aid in your fight against the woman, the answer is, of course, yes."

An intense burst of spiritual pressure pulsed across the pitch-black void when Kisuke released the final seal. As the traitorous captain slowly rose from the chair, standing for the first time in nearly a year, the shopkeeper adjusted his bucket hat once more, "Well then, I don't think anything else needs to be said. Now if you'll kindly follow me, the exit to Karakura Town is five kilometers in that direction."

Installing a backdoor into this place without the Soul Society finding out was rather tricky."

"Of course..."

Aizen rubbed his sore wrists as he followed Kisuke Urahara through the darkness, "But there is one question I feel you should answer, Kisuke Urahara. Why didn't you simply ask the Soul Society for assistance in stopping Ragyo Kiryuin? Why come to *me* of all people?"

"Now that's a silly question, Aizen."

There was not a trace of amusement in Kisuke's expression, "You already know why I didn't bother going to the Gotei 13..."

Aizen's condescending smirk twisted into outright smugness at the shopkeeper's admission, piercing through the infinite void of Muken as they marched toward the distant exit.

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### **Kamui Tales #33 - Over Budget**

"This emergency meeting will now come to order!"

Genryusai Yamamoto, wizened and scarred from two millennia of fighting, tapped his zanpakuto loudly against the floor of the chamber. Staring intently at the twenty-five gathered men and woman representing the full military capabilities of the Seireitei, he waited until the last whispers died away before turning his attention towards the person patiently waiting in the middle of the room.

"Captain Aizen," the Captain Commander's tone deepened as he spoke, "Several hours ago you claimed to have evidence of a grave matter threatening the security and stability of the Soul Society.

Under your request, I convened this meeting to address your concerns. The floor is now yours."

"Thank you," Sosuke Aizen bowed respectfully at the elder shinigami, keeping his posture lowered just long enough to alleviate any suspicions concerning his motivations. Fixing his glasses as he raised the clipboard in his right hand, several sheets of papers fastened at the top, he cleared his throat before continuing, "As you are all aware, it is the Fifth Division's responsibility to correctly appropriate the Seireitei's annual budget among the thirteen divisions and various associations. It is a task that I treat with utmost seriousness, which is why during this year's standard audit we discovered some major... discrepancies."

"Don't look at me," Mayuri Kurotsuchi preempted the suspicious glances from his fellow captains with an annoyed scoff, " *I'm* not the one responsible. The Shinigami Research and Development Institute's budget remains the same inadequate value the feeble-minded members of Central 46 granted us for the last five years. I haven't spent a single penny more than that."

"Discrepancies?"

Toshiro Hitsugaya frowned at Aizen's peculiar choice of wording, "Are you trying to suggest someone, potentially a captain, has been stealing money, Captain Aizen?"

"It's nothing of the sort, Captain Hitsugaya. Truth be told, it's actually rather hard for me to explain," Aizen allowed a perplexed frown to cross his features, one that would convince the other captains of his false sincerity, "But after auditing the budget an additional two times while accounting for any potential private expenditures, I determined that a large portion of our annual budget is being spent on something called... Revocs."

"Revocs?"

Jushiro Ukitake couldn't help but quirk an eyebrow in curiosity at the strange name, "Why, I don't believe I've ever heard of such a thing."

"Perhaps we should let Captain Aizen finish his explanation," Shunsui Kyoraku smirked mischievously while nudging his friend in the ribs. He couldn't have been the only one in the room to notice several of his colleagues tense at the strange name, "After all, losing a large chunk of our budget would be rather terrible. If money keeps getting spent on whatever this Revocs sells, I won't have enough Kan to buy sake."

A slap echoed across the chamber as Nanao Ise angrily smacked the back of her captain's head before Yamamoto interjected, "Captain Aizen, do you have a list of the individuals and associations squandering our budget on something so frivolous?"

"Yes, Captain Commander," Aizen flipped to the second page on the clipboard, drawing the attention of his fellow captains and their lieutenants, and cleared his throat, "Starting with the most egregious spenders, last year the Shinigami Women's Association had a budget of two hundred and fifty thousand Kan. Of that budget, roughly eighty percent was spent on Revocs brand clothing."

"Wait just a damn minute," Kenpachi Zaraki's gravelly voice interrupted Aizen's explanation, "Are you saying you called this stupid meeting, woke me up at nine in the morning, all because some idiots decided to spend their money on clothing? Like I give a damn about Revocs or whatever. If you ask me, spending hours picking out clothes is stupid and - "

"It is not, Kenny!"

Yachiru Kusajishi angrily puffed her cheeks as she sat upon Kenpachi's left shoulder, "Don't you listen to anything I say? I told you dozens of times but you never listen, Kenny! The best and cutest clothes in the World of the Living are made by Revocs! And as president of the Shinigami Women's Association, it is my job to make sure we wear the latest fashions and trends!"

Kenpachi rolled his eyes at Yachiru's annoying explanation before something hit him, "Hey! That's why you put those locks on your room, right? It's full of clothing you bought with my money, isn't it?!"

Staring blankly in mounting confusion when the Eleventh Division's captain and lieutenant started bickering, Aizen coughed lightly before continuing down the list, "Roughly ninety thousand Kan was spend this year on Revocs clothing by the Tenth Division's lieutenant. And that's in addition to the eighty thousand Kan we discovered from the year before..."

"MATSUMUTO!"

Hitsugaya's left eye twitched furiously as sheets of ice began visibly forming at his feet. So THAT'S why his division had been strapped for money the last few years! It hadn't made any sense why he couldn't balance the books! Turning angrily towards the spot his lieutenant should have been standing only to notice her trying to sneak out the window, Hitsugaya suppressed the growing urge to strangle her, "Do you *care* trying to excuse your actions?"

"Uh..." Rangiku Matsumuto fiddled her fingers nervously as she stood in front of the window, one foot on the frame, "What can I say, captain? Revocs has the best designs! Whoever created them has excellent taste!"

The captain stared in disbelief when Matsumoto leapt out the window, vanishing moments later using Shunpo. Resisting the desire the chase down his lieutenant and make her pay for her crimes against the division, Hitsugaya turned back to Aizen and tensely muttered, "My apologies. Please continue with your report, Captain Aizen."

Aizen shivered at the growing chill in the air, which strangely enough *wasn't* coming from Toshiro Hitsugaya, and flipped to the next page on the clipboard, "Of course. Next on the list are Captain Unohana and Lieutenant Kotetsu of the Fourth Division. Their combined



expenditure surpasses the Shinigami Women's Association with a staggering - "

"I don't think we need to worry about that, Captain Aizen."

The deadly undertone in Retsu Unohana's otherwise cheerful voice sent shivers down everyone, including Yamamoto's, spine, "How I decide to spend my division's yearly budget is not your concern."

Aizen observed the ambient temperature of the room plummet several degrees when one of the only shinigami able to match him in battle publically dared him to speak up. Nervously flipping to the next page as the dense spiritual pressure vanished, he swallowed the lump in his throat, "Yes... there was also fifty thousand Kan spent by... Captain Tosen?"

Every captain and lieutenant collectively turned to the blind shinigami, who took the unseen attention in stride, "What can I say? I like the sensation of their fabrics against my skin."

"Um... yes," Aizen decided to hold off discussing the matter with his subordinate until later, "That was all the captain and lieutenants with expenditures above seven thousand Kan. If we account for the seated officers and unranked shinigami, the total amount spent last year on Revocs clothing comes to three million, four hundred and fifteen thousand Kan, roughly forty percent of our annual budget."

"I think I've heard enough."

Yamamoto's voice carried across the chamber as he slammed his zanpakuto against the floor, "It is clear from the evidence that Revocs has a detrimental effect on the Seireitei. Every Kan spent on frivolous fashions and accessories limits our ability to protect the Soul Society and World of the Living. Therefore, I am opening the floor to suggestions on countering this serious problem."

"Considering the scope of the matter," Aizen made sure to choose his words *very* carefully when Retsu Unohana's expression

tightened, "I suggest a complete ban on Revocs. While I understand my colleagues might find that somewhat drastic, the safety and protection of the Soul Society comes foremost. But if they truly wish to spend money on clothing, there are several stores in the Seireitei and Rukon Districts. For much cheaper prices, I might add."

"Hmm..."

Yamamoto stared intently around the room, ignoring the piercing stare from the Fourth Division's captain, before inquiring, "What is your reasoning for such a drastic decision?"

"Well..."

Aizen adjusted his glasses and shrugged his shoulders, "Considering we're already an old-fashioned and feudalistic meritocracy, why not go the whole distance?"

There was a tense moment of silence amongst the gathered shinigami at the admission. Leaning back in his chair as the ambient spiritual pressure originating from multiple sources in the room increased, Yamamoto tapped his finger against his disguised zanpakuto, "Fair enough. The motion carries! I hereby announce a complete ban on Revocs products within the Soul Society! Not a single Kan shall be spent on their clothing! You are all hereby dismissed!

A loud scream that could only come from Rangiku Matsumuto, who was currently hiding several rooms away, pierced through the air, "NOOO!"

As the captains and lieutenants departed for their respective divisions, some grumbling more than others at the declaration, Aizen's attention was pulled away from watching Toshiro chase down his fleeing lieutenant when Shunshi grabbed his shoulder and chuckled, "That was some meeting, Captain Aizen. You're a real lifesaver. I had a feeling Nanao was hiding something from me. Now

I have an excuse to go snooping around her room for illegal contraband..."

Ignoring the glare coming from the Eighth Division's lieutenant, her glasses shimmering angrily as she walked out of the room, Aizen resisted the urge to smirk in triumph. It seemed everything was proceeding even better than anticipated.

# Laughter in the Rain

*Here's the next chapter of **To My Death I Fight** and I would like to announce that it's NOT a flashback. There are no flashback scenes in this chapter. With that said, I would like to say I've wanted to write what happens in this chapter for a very long time. But pacing and proper character development forced me to wait. And that's a good thing, because it allowed the Bleach manga to finish (that's another topic I don't want to discuss) and showcase a lot of new and interesting abilities for shinigami.*

*So check out my story's tvtropes page and I hope you enjoy the chapter!*

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## Chapter 55 - Laughter in the Rain

"Round five starts now!"

Yasutora Sado darted backwards, the motion aggravating his broken shoulder, when Moe Shishigawara shouted at the top of his lungs and slammed his fist against the street. Quickly twisting to the right upon noticing the dangerous smirk stretched across the other teenager's face, the shattered pieces of his shoulder screaming loudly in agony, sweat trickled down Chad's back as Moe's punch blurred through the rain only a few inches from his jaw.

"What's the matter, Chad?"

Moe Shishigawara's disappointment at failing to shatter his opponent's jaw like glass vanished when Chad attempted to return the favor with interest. Grinning haughtily as he slipped away from the teenager, his head bobbing left and right as he dodged punches

powerful enough to send anyone else to the morgue, he couldn't help but boast, "Yo! I thought you said you were goin' to stop me! At this rate kickin' your ass will be a piece of -"

"El Directo!"

Spiritual energy *exploded* from the wing-like extension jutting from his right shoulder as Chad stoically answered Moe Shishigawara's comment with a powerful haymaker, the attack eliciting a shocked expression in the other teenager's grey eyes. Frowning when his opponent dodged at the last second, an embarrassed gasp leaving the Xcution member's mouth as he scrambled back onto his feet, Chad slowly lowered his arm as the building he unfortunately punched collapsed in an expanding cloud of smoke, "... sorry about that."

"Huh?"

Moe blinked in confusion as he leapt away from Chad, his recent embarrassment already forgotten, "Why the hell are you apologizin'? I'm tryin' to kill you, you know!"

Chad ignored the debris falling onto his shoulders as he turned around to face the Xcution member. Experimentally clenching his hand, the red and black armor covering his right arm glistening in the rain, he shifted stances as spiritual energy erupted from his broken shoulder, "... it took some time but I think I've figured out your raiment's ability."

Stomping his foot against the ground at the response, the Life Fiber bandages wrapped around his forearms crackling with spiritual energy, Moe angrily pointed a finger at Chad, "Like hell you did!"

His Loterie Raiment shone with a familiar multicolored radiance as he rushed Chad with the singular purpose of breaking every bone in the guy's body. So what if the guy thought he figured out his raiment? It wasn't going to save him from getting his ass beaten into the ground! Undeterred in the slightest when the black and red armor

covering the other teenager's right arm abruptly liquefied, flowing outwards before changing into something even more monstrous, Moe couldn't help but whistle. All right. He had to admit that Chad's armor was pretty awesome.

"Heh... you think that fancy shield's goin' to stop me?!"

Moe grinned savagely as multicolored spiritual energy gathered between his fingers, "Tough luck! Because it ain't going to stop me from kickin' your -"

His taunt was interrupted when Chad punched him squarely in the nose.

"God... damn... shit!"

Blood oozed from Moe Shishigawara's broken nose as he staggered backwards, one hand tightly gripping his face. As the taste of copper grew increasing prevalent in his mouth, Moe angrily glared at Chad. God damn it, the guy could throw one *hell* of a punch! The pink haired Quincy bitch at Honnouji Academy hadn't given him this much trouble, leaving only a few light bruises before he stomped her face into the ground. And she could punch straight through solid concrete! Chad wasn't anywhere *close* to superwoman's level of strength yet he managed to flat-out break his nose with only one punch?

And how the hell did he suddenly get *faster* ?

"I'm done messin' around, Chad!"

He slipped through the other teenager's guard in a burst of speed, one arm cocked over his shoulder. Sneering as the multicolored light radiating from within his raiment grew in both brightness and intensity, Moe shouted passionately while sucker punching Chad in the stomach, "Météore Grève!"

Spittle flew from Chad's mouth as a shockwave of multicolored spiritual energy exploded from his back, shattering every window on

the street. Hunched forward as Moe smirked and casually withdrew his arm, he grimaced at the excruciating pain radiating from his stomach. Several ribs were broken, possibly more, and it hurt to breath, but he refused to let Ichigo down. Looming over the teenager, spiritual energy crackling on his fingertips as his Brazo Izquierda del Diablo flowed into existence, Chad pushed through the pain as power coursed through his transformed arm.

"La Muerte!"

A resounding *crack* echoed alongside the concurrent peeling of thunder as the spiritual technique slammed into Moe Shishigawara's hastily risen guard, the outpouring of energy both shattering the pavement and gouging the image of a skull on the building across the street. Curses flowing profusely from his mouth as he skidded down the road, his sneakers leaving trails of smoking rubber in their wake, Moe froze in wide-eyed astonishment when the building behind him exploded into dust. Holy crap... was *that* the technique Chad was planning on using at Honnouji Academy? Staring at the damaged state of his raiment, rips and tears covering the Life Fiber bandages and jacket, Moe felt a flash of instinctive panic.

The Grand Couturier was going to be seriously *pissed* when she found out a human scratched one of her tailor-made raiment!

"Now that's more like it!"

Moe disguised his nervousness at the thought of showing the Grand Couturier his damaged raiment with false bravado, "La Muerte? That's Spanish, right?"

Rubbing away the blood oozing from his nose while countless explosions illuminated the skies above Karakura Town, Life Fibers floating in the rain as Nudist Beach decimated Lady Ragyo's army of COVERS, Moe Shishigawara sneered confidently, "I guess I'm real lucky you were holding back at Honnouji Academy! You could have kicked my ass if you used that attack when I was poundin'

superwoman into the dirt! But don't think I'm going to give you another chance, Chad! Humans like you only get one lucky shot!"

Chad tensed when Moe Shishigawara smashed his fists together, disturbing multicolored light leaking from within his raiment. Pushing spiritual energy through his Brazo Derecha de Gigante as he rushed the member of Xcution, who briefly shadowboxed in place before doing the same, his eyes widened when someone unexpectedly landed on the street directly in front of him, sending out a large shockwave that dispelled the surrounding storm.

"What the hell?"

Moe was surprised when someone crashed into the middle of the street, his arms flailing unceremoniously when the subsequent shockwave nearly knocked him off his feet. Pointing a finger at the figure crouching within the smoke rising from the newly formed crater, his anger rising at the unexpected interference, he furiously demanded, "Yo! Who the hell do you think you are interruptin' my fight?!"

The midnight black over coat clasped around her shoulders fluttered dramatically in the pouring rain as Mako Mankanshoku energetically leapt onto her feet. She couldn't believe her good luck! Adjusting her black and gold cap as the familiar crimson glow of Life Fibers shone from within her Goku Uniform, the normally carefree and cheerful girl matched Moe's accusatory pose before shouting in return, "Mako Mankanshoku is here to save *everyone* !"

"... Mako?"

"I'm sorry for interrupting your super important rematch!"

Mako motioned awkwardly with her hands as she pivoted around to face Chad, fully ignoring the confused member of Xcution staring blankly in her direction. Shifting poses with all the grace afforded to her by Mother Nature, she continued without missing a beat, "Lady Satsuki's friend stopped by this morning around breakfast with my



new Goku Uniform! But the instructions were really hard to understand! So I decided to just throw them away and hope for the best!"

Chad listened patiently to Mako's... explanation... as flashes of lightning arced overhead, "... so everything worked out then?"

"That's right! My shirt's no longer inside out and I remember to wear underwear this time!"

Her geta stomped against the street as she turned around to Moe Shishigawara, the green reed in her mouth shifting with every overdramatic syllable. Folding her arms over her chest, the golden brass knuckles emblazoned with her name glistening in the rain, she huffed at the confused member of Xcution as thunder rolled through the skies, "Mako Mankanshoku is fully dressed and ready to fight! With my new and improved Goku Uniform I will save Ichigo's hometown from Ryuko's mom!"

"HA! This is some kind of joke, right?"

Moe Shishigawara couldn't help but mock Mako for her fearless stupidity in the face of overwhelming odds. It was incredible. She actually *believed* her Two-Star Goku Uniform had the slightest chance of standing against his raiment, stitched personally by the Grand Couturier? It would take someone wearing a Kamui or Yoruichi Shihoin, who somehow managed to fight the Grand Couturier and *live*, to kick his ass! Smirking as the abrupt change in fortune, he shifted into another kickboxing stance.

It seemed luck was finally back on his side.

"Yo! Unless that ugly as hell Goku Uniform is actually a Kamui, you don't have a chance of defeatin' me," Moe boasted confidently, jabbing a thumb against his chest, "But consider yourself lucky! Right now I'm busy settling the score with Chad. So why don't you run away and maybe I won't kick your ass."

"Mako Mankanshoku refuses to run away!"

Mako motioned enthusiastically to herself, Chad and finally the surrounding buildings as she ignored every word that came out of Moe Shishigawara's mouth, "I refuse to let Ryuko's mom destroy Ichigo's hometown! He lives here! And it's a really nice place! My family has a house with a working refrigerator and everything! That is why I will step in for Chad! I won't let you hurt any more of Ichigo's awesome friends! Not when they spent most of their time rescuing each other over and over again!"

The green reed falling out of her mouth as she posed dramatically in the rain, Mako finished her speech by pointing at her increasingly perplexed opponent, "So a delinquent like you, who is working for a horrible woman like Ryuko's mom, cannot defeat me! Not when I have a date with Gamagori at the movies tomorrow!"

"Hey! You take that back about Lady Ragyo!"

It no longer mattered if Mako Mankanshoku's cheap and second-hand Goku Uniform couldn't measure up to his Loterie Raiment. He didn't even care that she called him a delinquent right to his face. *Nobody*, especially not a human, walked away after calling Lady Ragyo such demeaning names! Maybe a few broken bones and ruptured organs would teach Mako a lesson about respect.

Multicolored spiritual energy gathered around his fist as he furiously rushed Mako, intent on transforming the girl into a bloody smear on the ground, "Take this! Météore Grève!"

"MAKO CATCH!"

With an almost casual display of reflexes bordering on indifference Mako caught Moe Shishigawara's haymaker, her Goku Uniform rustling heavily as the subsequent explosion tore through the street. Holding onto her black cap for dear life as the super powerful punch sent tickling shivers racing down her spine, the street under her feet shattering in a cute pattern that reminded her of Art Club, she

ignored her opponent's astonished expression to focus on something more interesting. Such as whether she was always this strong. Mako blinked in confusion as Moe pushed more spiritual energy into his punch, desperately trying to break her hand. She remembered Ryuko putting up a better fight when she went nuts with power at Honnouji Academy. But Ryuko hadn't been using Senketsu's full power at the time. But on the other hand...

"The hell..."

Moe's mind screeched to an undignified halt when Mako Mankanshoku caught his punch like it was nothing. His eyes widening in astonishment when he tried breaking every bone in her hand only to realize he *couldn't*, he bent over nearly to the ground when Mako pulled a golden wrench out of her Goku Uniform and *threw* it at his face. All right, he remembered reading about *that* little ability of the Fight Club Goku Uniform. But how the hell did she block a punch from his Loterie raiment without breaking any bones in her arm? It would take someone wearing a Kamui to negate the special ability of his raiment. Even Chad's awesome armor couldn't withstand his punches! And she stopped his Météore Grève without even breaking a sweat?

"Damn it... I guess you hit the jackpot..."

Snorting as the multicolored light permeating his raiment intensified, Moe didn't give Mako Mankanshoku time to argue before unleashing a rapid series of punches and kicks. Maybe he was exaggerating the issue. After all, a lot of people at Revocs said he tended to get overexcited. Besides, the Grand Couturier managed to block his punches all the time when she tested his raiment. There was not a chance in hell a Goku Uniform could stand against something woven by the Grand Couturier. The girl was probably just lucky, nothing more. But everyone's luck had limits. He just needed to keep up the pressure.

It was the perfect -

"ATATATATATATATATATA!"

The repetitive sound echoed through the drenched streets as Mako Mankanshoku countered his punches and kicks, her shouting only stopping when she declared, "Ryuko and Ichigo are counting on Lady Satsuki to protect this town! And Lady Satsuki actually asked me - Mako Mankanshoku - to help out! So I won't let you or Ryuko's mom destroy this town!"

Moe Shishigawara's eyebrow twitched in growing frustration as the other teenager continued matching him blow for blow. What the hell was going on? The information Lady Ragyo downloaded from the Sewing Club said that Mako Mankanshoku's uniform granted her superior strength and speed compared to every other Two-Star Goku Uniform, maybe enough to fight against regalia. But this power was unreal! It was absurd that she was still standing against him! If he didn't know better, he would almost think Mako was wearing something greater than regalia. But that was freaking impossible!

"Alright! Now I'm seriously pissed off!"

Stumbling when Mako jumped into the air, her spiked geta digging into his shoulders, Moe spun around and shouted, "What kind of Goku Uniform are you wearing? How the hell are you counterin' my Loterie Raiment?!"

"Because the numbers don't make sense!"

Mako darted forward in the middle of her defiant proclamation and smashed her emblazoned brass knuckles against Moe Shishigawara's hastily crossed arms. One foot tucked against her back, tongue pressed against the inside of her cheek when the Xcution member remained standing, she was completely oblivious to the spiritual pressure tearing through the street as she pushed even *more* power into her punch.

"And everyone knows that luck fails against math!"

A resounding *bang* rang loudly in her head when Moe Shishigawara suddenly went bouncing down the road, his raiment cracked and damaged. Huffing proudly at the results from her hard work, she raised her fist and announced, "The proof stands for itself! Luck is for idiots who don't know how the world works!"

"... the hell's going on?"

Moe sneered as he deftly leapt back onto his feet, the cracks spreading across his raiment's armor glowing with a dangerous multicolored light. All right, he was done messing around with this girl! Dealing with Chad could wait. Right now all he wanted, *needed*, to do was beat Mako Mankanshoku's ass halfway to Honnouji Academy! Smirking when Mako rushed forward, a golden wrench held firmly in her fingers, he braced himself for the attack. He just needed to wait for the brief opening in her defenses, the one moment when her guard was done. The instant she swung that wrench at his face would be when he -

"MAKO HOME RUN DERBY!"

Every pane of glass in a three-block radius *shattered* when Mako passionately swung a golden baseball bat squarely into Moe Shishigawara's left temple, the resulting impact sending an explosive boom ricocheting across Karakura Town. His vision swimming from the blow in the brief moment before he was sent flying upwards into the rain, his body crashing into and through several dozen COVERS, Moe gnashed his bloody teeth when Mako appeared overhead, her left leg extended nearly to her shoulder.

Like *hell* he was going to let her pull off a combo!

Although his left eye was forced closed by the blood oozing down his face, the splitting headache disrupting his concentration, Moe Shishigawara wasn't down for the count! He took more damage sparring against the Grand Couturier than anything this... *human*... could dish out! Sneering viciously as he prepared to counter her

attack, his entire body froze when he noticed the *three additional stars* stitched across the back of her Goku Uniform.

She was wearing a *fucking* raiment?!

Stiffening when Chad appeared out of nowhere, crackling arcs of electricity gathered in his left hand, Moe cursed under his breath.

"Oh shit..."

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"Then by all means try to kill me."

Whatever amusement Ragyo Kiryuin still felt vanished at the boorish man's frustrating boast. Was he purposely attempting to provoke her into ending his pathetic life? Yet it was the growing disgust in the back of her mind that currently preoccupied her attention. For some inexplicable reason she had the strangest desire to savagely tear the man apart, to watch his blood mix with the falling rain. But Ragyo refused to listen to her instincts. This insignificant man was nothing more than a *pest*, an ant compared to giants. Giving him the pleasure of eliciting such an embarrassing reaction would be tantamount to declaring they were equals.

It was a ludicrous notion.

But that didn't mean she would allow his foolish taunts to go unpunished.

"La vie est drôle. You seem to be under the assumption that you have the ability to defeat me."

Despite her opponent's wry smirk Ragyo found her attention flickering toward her petulant daughter crouched against a fallen tree. *That* was another reason she despised the man. His

interference in their private, familial matters prevented her from Mentally Refitting both Satsuki and Junketsu, molding their minds to her will before unleashing them upon Karakura Town. Watching her eldest daughter destroy her allies, ripping them apart without hesitation, would have been *marvelous* . Yet the man's offhanded mention of Kisque Urahara ruined that transitory period of boredom, replacing it with unadulterated *hatred* .

Merely thinking about that blasphemous man, who dared to enter the Original Life Fiber's sacred chamber, made her briefly reconsider whether she should have *personally* dealt with him instead of sending dearest Nui and Amu.

"Which is why I must question your sanity," Ragyo's heel *clacked* loudly against the air when she stopped across from the man, her fingers caressing the hardened Life Fiber weapon she confiscated from Isshin's clumsy hands. She might loathe Kisque Urahara with every fiber of her being for having the *audacity* to create a Kamui and thinking he could seal away the Original Life Fiber, but Ragyo refused to underestimate the shopkeeper. *Not again* . His ability to weave Life Fibers made him one of the most dangerous people on the planet.

Caution was required when dealing with *anything* involving Kisque Urahara, a man who learned the deepest secrets of Life Fibers.

"For just *how* do you plan on stopping me?"

Ragyo snarled at her opponent's utter lack of concern, his tenuous connection to Kisque Urahara the only thing staying her hand, "Contrary to what you might believe, I can feel your disgusting and abominable, not to mention *weak*, power. You're not human... nor are you a Quincy. And you're *certainly* nothing like that annoyance of a vampire."

Bright flashes of lightning illuminated the park in shifting hues of white and purple as her tone darkened, "From your suicidal *fermeté* I

presume Kisuke Urahara invented yet another annoying Anti-Life Fiber weapon, created when he wasn't busy defiling Life Fibers."

"That's an interesting choice of words, Ragyo Kiryuin."

Sosuke Aizen wasn't perturbed in the slightest by Ragyo's monstrous spiritual energy. While stronger than anticipated, which was yet another consequence of Isshin Kurosaki's abject failure to put aside emotions and save humanity, fretting over something so trivial was nothing more than a waste of time. Beads of water dripping from Kyouka Suigetsu's blade, he looked at the pinpricks of crimson light floating over Karakura Town, "Defiling, that is. A man like Kisuke Urahara, who created both Kamui and hardened Life Fiber blades, isn't the sort of person to defile Life Fibers. Rather, he did far more with them than you believed possible, simply because his research was approached from a philosophical point of view. He didn't understand the underlying truth behind Life Fibers nor their connection to the Original Life Fiber, which allowed him to achieve remarkable feats."

"But perhaps I'm reading too much into your response," Aizen swept his arm forward and smirked at the Kiryuin matriarch's darkening expression, "It's equally likely your disdain is the result of nothing more than envy."

"Envy?"

Isshin's blade quivered between Ragyo's fingers at the flagrant insult. How *dare* this insignificant speck of a man suggest she was envious of Kisuke Urahara! That shopkeeper might have stumbled across the secret to weaving Kamui, a feat her failure of a husband couldn't achieve without copying Junketsu, but that was *nothing* compared to the divine knowledge possessed by those chosen by the Original Life Fiber!

"Hardly."



Ragyo accentuated the word with an arrogant scoff, her demeanor returning to relative normalcy at the lies spewing forth from the man's mouth, "While his knowledge on Life Fibers *far* exceeds my pathetic husband's, it still pales in comparison to my own."

"Now back to the matter at hand..."

The pealing of thunder deafened Karakura Town as Ragyo raised her sword until it was perfectly mirroring her opponent's stance, "I'm quite the busy woman, so I'm afraid whatever you're planning is doomed to fail. Please give my regards to Kiske Urahara... after dearest Nui and Amu send him to the deepest reaches of Hell."

"Since when were you under the assumption that my plan hasn't already started?"

Aizen swept his arm outward, the gesture obtaining the desired result when Ragyo Kiryuin's expression tightened fractionally, "You're already aware of Kiske Urahara's intelligence and abilities. What makes you believe all of *this* isn't part of his plan? Your monstrous power is well known, after all. So perhaps you are correct, Ragyo Kiryuin. Perhaps I was given an Anti-Life Fiber weapon created to kill a Life Fiber Hybrid of your caliber. Or maybe I'm simply stalling for time, waiting until the proper moment to unleash my full power."

Lightning flashed across the skies as Aizen finished with a calm flourish, "On the other hand, perhaps my objective is convincing you I'm not worth the effort, leaving you vulnerable to the Anti-Life Fiber countermeasures I activated before arriving. "

Ragyo's eyes narrowed as she searched for any sign of deceit from the boastful shinigami. She *highly* doubted even someone like Kiske Urahara could have anticipated her actions to such an extent. It was far more likely the shopkeeper placed Anti-Life Fiber traps throughout Karakura Town in preparation for any number of scenarios, which meant *this* annoyance of a man was either a terrific liar... or he wasn't bluffing. But a simple sweep of the burnt

landscape, wisps of white smoke still rising despite the pouring rain, assuaged any lingering doubts that the man wasn't lying.

There were only a handful of things that could withstand the destructive power of a Bleach Bomb... and crude inventions made by human hands weren't on that list.

"It's insulting that you thought I would fall for such an obvious bluff," Ragyo closed her eyes and chuckled, the corners of her mouth curling into a sadistic smirk, "But I'm afraid that your excuses hold no weight. You claim that Kisuke Urahara buried Anti-Life Fiber traps throughout Karakura Town? While that *may* be true... nothing created by human hands could survive the full majesty of a Bleach Bomb. Now..."

Spiritual pressure *exploded* from Ragyo as she opened her eyes, "... I think you've wasted just about enough of my time."

In a single step she closed the distance between herself and the man, Isshin's hardened Life Fiber sword arcing towards his neck. Yet to her astonishment not only did the shinigami's own weapon interject itself at the last second, it also *stopped* her attack without shattering. As her arm *quivered* from the unexpected arresting of her momentum, multicolored sparks of spiritual energy dancing through the rain, Ragyo glowered when the man spoke with only the barest traces of strain.

"How disappointing..."

Aizen smirked at the Kiryuin matriarch despite the bead of sweat dripping down his cheek. With one hand pressed against Kyouka Suigetsu, the additional strength helping to counter the power of her hardened Life Fiber blade, he strategically retreated when his opponent angrily increased her spiritual energy. Bounding away from the woman, his boots stepping on platforms of solidified air, he ignored the minute cracks tarnishing his zanpakuto, "Did you believe such a shallow strike would be enough to -"

Ragyo Kiryuin was upon him before he finished the question.

Blood sprayed through the rain when her initial strike cut deeply into his shoulder. Zanpakuto clashing fervently against hardened Life Fiber blade as he parried and countered Ragyo Kiryuin's assault, every ounce of his concentration focused on deflecting her attacks, Aizen was forced to constantly use Shunpo to stay ahead of her movements. He couldn't help but feel as if he underestimated the woman, a notion bolstered by the growing cracks across Kyouka Suigetsu. The Kiryuin matriarch was a much different... and *stronger*... woman from seventeen years ago.

This... might be a problem.

"You seem fond of that particular style of swordsmanship, Ragyo Kiryuin."

Aizen grunted when the Kiryuin matriarch slammed the appropriated weapon against Kyouka Suigetsu, the force immediately shattering the ground underneath his feet. Subtly noting Satsuki Kiryuin standing some distance away, her attention focused entirely upon her mother's ferocious assault, he pleasantly inquired, "I'm assuming from your current posture and altered stance you're aware of the three openings in your guard?"

"Au contraire, my dear man..."

Ragyo smirked as she flexed her fingers around the hardened Life Fiber blade, more than doubling the strength pressing against the man's sword. It was time she finished this farce of a fight. Her silver hair shimmering brightly when the shinigami's guard collapsed under the strain, spurts of blood spraying in the rain from the wound cutting across his chest, Ragyo took sadistic pleasure at the insolent man's pathetic attempt to escape before *vanishing* . One leg arcing gracefully upwards as she reappeared in front of the shinigami, hints of concern in his eyes, she frowned when he leaned sideways, the fingers on his left hand gently pushing against her ankle.

Maroon eyes narrowing when the man used his annoying technique to disappear into the wind, Ragyo waited until the tip of his blade was pressing against her spine before pirouetting around and *catching* his zanpakuto in her hand. Drawing pleasure from her opponent's astonished expression, his disbelief at failing to scratch her skin causing a shiver to race down her back, Ragyo smirked savagely before *smashing* her knee straight into his stomach.

"... I *have* no openings against someone as weak as you!"

There was a tense moment of absolute silence before a deafening *boom* reverberated across what remained of Tsubakidai Park. Multicolored stars twinkling brightly in the rain as his body contorted painfully around Ragyo Kiryuin's knee, Aizen's vision briefly faded to darkness when he found himself propelled skyward by the sheer physical strength contained in the attack. Forcefully snapping his attention downwards when he sensed a massive amount of spiritual energy collecting at one point, the traitorous shinigami stiffened at the rainbow light coalescing above the Kiryuin matriarch's finger.

"Lumière Divine."

Ragyo's silver hair whipped frenziedly as the gathered energy enveloped the petulant man, wiping him from existence in an explosion of multicolored light. Smoothing a small crease on her dress when a supersonic blast echoed throughout Karakura Town, dispelling the hazy smoke and allowing her to see that the shinigami was indeed dead, she sighed deeply and in great contentment, "Only a fool would dare stand against one chosen by the Original Life Fiber."

Her smirk widened maliciously when she sensed Satsuki approaching, the emotions coursing through Junketsu's Life Fibers a welcome change of scenery, "Don't think I've forgotten about you, Satsuki. There's still *just* enough time to properly introduce you and Junketsu to the pleasures of Life Fibers..."

"Have you forgotten something, Ragyo Kiryuin?"

"What?!"

Ragyo *gasped* when the blade of a man who should already be *dead* pierced straight through her heart. Wheezing in disbelief as blood spurted from the fresh wound, staining both the ground and her dress crimson, she gnashed her teeth when the foreign object tore itself from her body, cutting open what used to be her lungs in the process. One hand pressed against the gaping wound as she lurched forward, one foot almost touching the muddy soil, the Kiryuin matriarch furiously stopped the embarrassing behavior with a determined *clack* of her heels.

She *refused* to grant this insignificant speck of a man any satisfaction.

An intrigued smile stretched across Sosuke Aizen's features when the woman's body knitted itself back together, normally lethal wounds regenerating in seconds. Calmly flicking the blood staining Kyouka Suigetsu onto the drenched soil, the traitorous shinigami ignored the copious amount of crimson oozing from his stump of a left arm, "I didn't anticipate such a powerful technique. Without my zanpakuto's special ability I would have lost more than simply my left arm."

"Zanpakuto?"

The splatters of blood tarnishing her immaculate dress vanished as Ragyo gracefully stood at her full majesty. Slowly turning around to face the shinigami, she purposely downplayed her irritation with his continued survival under an annoyed scoff, "The Grand Couturier mentioned Kisuke Urahara's weapon transforming into a more powerful state. Shall I presume *your* zanpakuto can do the same?"

Aizen shrugged at the question, his eyes never leaving the Kiryuin matriarch, "It's an admittedly pretentious name for a weapon but one that successfully encompasses its purpose."

"Your delusional hopes of victory are refreshing."

A disappointed scoff left Ragyo Kiryuin's slightly parted lips as she tucked a strand of silver hair behind her ear, "However your *prétendu* zanpakuto appears to be damaged. Did you *honestly* think your inferior weapon could stand against a hardened Life Fiber blade? Your words are nothing more than empty threats. So I'm afraid despite your admittedly amusing efforts this battle has just about come to an end..."

Heels clacked sharply against platforms of spiritual energy as Ragyo sauntered away from the shinigami, her attention momentarily falling upon her rebellious daughter. There wasn't any reason to continue wasting time fighting the annoying man. His strength might have been more than she expected from someone not blessed by the Original Life Fiber but he was an insect compared to her greatness. He could stab her heart hundreds... no, *thousands*... of times with his zanpakuto, yet the result would never change. While he might have survived the glorious power of her Lumière Divine, a feat she *still* couldn't comprehend, it was only a matter of time until he bled to death.

Which meant she could focus her attention upon more important matters.

"Your tenacity is impressive but I've lost any interest in continuing this farce of a battle."

Ragyo punctuated her response by casually flicking Isshin's sword lengthwise across her body, removing the last traces of the man's filthy blood from the beautiful weapon. Noticing her daughter's expression of utmost fury, deep blue eyes burning with unbridled hatred, she nearly sighed at the unfolding tragedy. She had so been looking forward to spending some quality 'mother and daughter' time with Satsuki, "But I do have a schedule to keep... and killing a half-dead man and my failure of a daughter is rather low on the itinerary."

"This rain is quite nostalgic, Ragyo Kiryuin..."

A thin stream of blood oozed from Aizen's mouth as he stared into the pouring rain, his smirk widening when the Kiryuin matriarch stopped midstride, "Most people would find such weather boring and meaningless. Yet I cannot help but reminisce about a particularly tempestuous evening seventeen years ago."

Spiritual pressure, far more than anything previously unleashed, *blanketed* the decimated park, driving the air from Satsuki's lungs while subsequently forcing her onto her knees. The multicolored light radiating from her silver hair dimming slightly, Ragyo Kiryuin's hate-filled eyes were focused *completely* upon the shinigami as a single word escaped her clenched lips.

"What?"

"I was present the night you kidnapped Ichigo Kurosaki, transforming him into an artificial Life Fiber Hybrid," Aizen motioned with his remaining hand, entirely unconcerned by the oppressive spiritual pressure, "I witnessed everything that transpired... including your fascinating battle with Masaki Kurosaki."

Flashes of lightning illuminated Tsubakidai Park as Ragyo clenched her twitching hands, perfectly manicured fingernails threatening to pierce her skin, "Anecdotal evidence suggests your disdain for the woman arose from losing Isshin Kurosaki. But I find such an explanation insufficient. Your hatred of Masaki Kurosaki cannot be attributed to affection. That you lost the only man who could *possibly* understand your feelings was merely an excuse to conceal the true motivations behind your contempt."

"So one must ask - *why* do you loathe Masaki Kurosaki?"

The traitorous captain's condescending smirk widened with every word, "By all accounts the woman was friendly and understanding. Why would the CEO of Revocs, known through the world for her patience and self-control, focus her efforts upon something so *trivial*?"

Ragyo furiously gnashed her teeth when the man had the *audacity* to close his eyes, the damnable smirk never faltering, "I'm sure you know the reason, Ragyo Kiryuin. On that night seventeen years ago, hours after you kidnapped Ichigo Kurosaki, Masaki Kurosaki not only fought you... she *defeated* you."

"That seemingly ordinary woman destroyed the feelings of superiority woven into your mind by the Original Life Fiber," Aizen calmly observed the blood oozing from the upper half of his missing arm before continuing, "After all, a resounding defeat at the hands of someone you considered completely powerless is quite humbling. But that's still not why you hate Masaki Kurosaki. You despise her because she permanently scarred your otherwise flawless body."

"Ichigo's mother was the cause?"

The auburn Scissor Blade stabbed deeply into the muddy soil as Satsuki Kiryuin watched the shinigami slowly circle counterclockwise around her mother. Two months ago she would have thought such an assertion ludicrous, the unsubstantiated product of an unstable mind. Yet *everything* she witnessed since Ichigo and Ryuko arrived at Honnouji Academy - from the events of the Raid Trip to the unique abilities possessed by Ichigo's allies - had forced her to discard that limited point of view. She was *intimately* aware of the seven star-shaped scars marring her mother's back, their origin a point of interest since the day she grew aware of Ragyo Kiryuin's inhuman madness.

To think the woman Ichigo's father constantly recounted with reverence was the source of her mother's only shame.

"It must be a terrible feeling, Ragyo Kiryuin," Aizen grinned as he stood across from the barely contained woman, "To know the immense strength bestowed upon you by the Original Life Fiber wasn't enough to best a single Quincy. Even now, with your spiritual pressure leagues greater than seventeen years ago, that ignominious defeat still dictates your every -"



"You insolent man..."

Kyouka Suigetsu *shattered*, splinters of metal shimmering madly in the rain, when Ragyo closed the distance to the treacherous shinigami in a single step, hardened Life Fiber weapon cleaving through both flesh and zanpakuto with very little effort. As an astonished gasp escaped Aizen's mouth at the sight of his severed right arm, the limb cleanly sliced just below the elbow, he lurched forward when the Kiryuin matriarch *stabbed* her left hand through his heart.

An eruption of spiritual pressure momentarily dispelled the rain as Ragyo callously hefted the skewered shinigami into the air. Glaring venomously at the defeated man, his disgusting blood dripping from her splayed fingers like water, her sneer lessened into a cruel smirk, "Did you *honestly* believe I would allow to you bluster without consequence?"

Twisting her arm inside his body, which elicited a pained grunt from the man, she chuckled as lightning flashed overhead, "I'll admit your psychological ploy nearly worked but what did you *really* accomplish? You sacrificed your life to waste several minutes of my valuable time. And now you're nothing more than a broken and dying man, unable to stand against the power of Life Fibers. There is still *more* than enough time to retrieve what I came to this pathetic city for in the place."

"So that's the reason you attacked Karakura Town..."

The agonizing pain in Aizen's voice disappeared as he smirked at the Kiryuin matriarch, "How truly... fascinating."

Ragyo's eyes widened in disbelieving shock when the wounded shinigami shimmered before *shattering*, leaving her standing alone in the middle of Tsubakidai Park. What was going on? Focusing her attention upon her arm, which lacked the slightest trace of the man's filthy blood, the Kiryuin matriarch found herself at a loss for words when she attempted sensing his disgusting power only to realize it

was *gone* . She couldn't detect *anything* ! But that was impossible! She severed both his arms... destroyed his pretentiously named zanpakuto! For the man to have vanished he would need to -

A pulse of spiritual energy drew Ragyo from her thoughts.

How had she missed *that* as well?

Heels clacking loudly upon platforms of solidified spiritual energy as she turned around, lips pulled into a frustrated snarl, Ragyo *froze* when she saw a perfectly healthy and uninjured Sosuke Aizen standing across the scorched field, "How did..."

"You seem flustered, Ragyo Kiryuin."

Aizen's cloak rustled chaotically as he pointed his left arm at the Kiryuin matriarch, palm held perpendicular to the ground, "But I suppose that's the expected reaction. Hado Number Ninety Nine - Goryutenmetsu."

Ragyo took an uncharacteristic step backwards when an ephemeral dragon composed of blistering spiritual energy burst out of the ground, flashes of intense lightning arcing violently from its snake-like body. Scoffing under her breath as the ground shattered around her feet, pillars of unstable earth rising upwards, she stared at the insignificant man as multicolored spiritual energy enveloped her body. While the attack didn't possess even the slightest chance of killing her, only a fool would allow their opponent to hit them with something of that magnitude.

As she prepared to leap away, to wait in the shadows until the man exhausted himself on this pointless attack, the Kiryuin matriarch was caught completely off guard when twin bands of yellow light encircled her ankles, forcibly preventing her from moving.

"What is this?!"

"Those are special Anti-Life Fiber anklets, created by weaving several high-level Bakudo into their design," Aizen replied without hesitation, a sense of nostalgia in his voice, "But if you're looking to blame someone, might I suggest Kisuke Urahara? After all, they are *his* invention."

Ragyo didn't have the chance to respond when the spiritual dragon rushed forward with a deafening roar, its body curling through the rain. Raising Isshin's hardened Life Fiber blade just before the technique slammed into her body, she *screamed* as the subsequent explosion enveloped Tsubakidai Park in a burst of light.

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"Hup!"

In a flurry of nearly imperceptible strikes the entrance to the Urahara Shop exploded inwards, showering the front of the store with large splinters of wood. Singing softly to herself as she cheerfully sauntered into the abandoned building, streams of water dripping from her blonde pigtails with every bouncing step, Nui Harime stared in disappointment at the rows of familiar merchandise lining the darkened shelves, "Golly, I was expecting something new and exciting. But it looks like absolutely nothing has changed!"

The floorboards creaked underneath her pink boots as the Grand Couturier stood in the middle of the empty store, inquisitive sapphire eyes searching for *anything* strange or out of the ordinary. Looking curiously over her shoulder when Lady Ragyo's presence pulsed through Karakura Town, her emotions as apparent as her beautiful hair, Nui Harime was torn from her boredom by a very interesting question, one that required her full and undivided attention.

"Gee... now who could be stupid enough to seriously annoy Lady Ragyo?"

Nui curled her manicured fingers through the handle of the Needle Blade as she pondered the abstract question. There were very few people on this miserable planet that Lady Ragyo would give the time of day, let alone use anything close to her full strength. The first person that came to mind was the old goat... but that was impossible! She not only watched the Bleach Bomb stitched into Hououmaru's raiment with love by Lady Ragyo explode point-blank in his face - she also *felt* it! No way the old goat was recovering from a blast like *that* any time soon! That left only Satsuki...

She nearly slapped herself for even thinking something so utterly ridiculous. As if Lady Ragyo would ever waste the time and effort killing someone so pathetic!

"I wonder where that cowardly shopkeeper could be hiding..."

With a cute yet dignified pout the Grand Couturier returned her attention to the task at hand, blonde pigtailed bouncing with every step. She didn't have any time to daydream about the fun and interesting punishments Lady Ragyo was giving Satsuki and Junketsu. There were far more important things to worry about... such as torturing Kisuke Urahara for kidnapping Amu and brainwashing her into believing she was nothing more than a pathetic and worthless human.

The nerve of some humans!

Tucking the purple Needle Blade behind her back as she walked down an aisle, eyes scanning every darkened corner for the source of her irritation, Nui hummed thoughtfully, "Could he be... huh?"

The front half of the Urahara Shop *disintegrated* in an explosion of crimson red flames when the Grand Couturier stepped into the middle of the intricate seal carved into the floor. As pieces of smoldering wood and metal rained down onto the drenched neighborhood, car alarms merged into an incoherent cacophony from the shock wave, Nui Harime emerged from the sneak attack

smiling widely, not a single speck of dirt blemishing her cute pink dress.

"Now *that* was new and exciting!"

One leg curled against the hem of her dress when rain began pouring through the new hole in the ceiling, Nui giggled softly at the intimately familiar presence tickling in the back of her mind, "This might actually be interesting, don't you think?"

Puddles of water splashed beneath purple boots, identical in almost every fashion to her sister's, as Amu Harime walked into the partially destroyed store. Her duplicate Needle Blade held delicately in her fingers, she looked silently around the burning building before setting upon the floor, "I can sense Kisuke Urahara. He's..."

"... right underneath our feet," Nui finished with a cheerful flourish, sapphire eyes focusing on the somehow intact door leading to the back of the store, "It's really polite he's waiting for us in his super secret laboratory, you know! I thought we'd have to chase him down... getting involved in boring and predictable fights in the process..."

"... and upsetting Lady Ragyo when he fakes his death a second time," Amu concluded, ignoring the rain trickling down the back of her neck. It would be troublesome if they allowed Kisuke Urahara to escape, especially after all the horrible things he did to Lady Ragyo and the Original Life Fiber. A small tremor coursing through her fingers as lightning flashed in the heavens, Amu Harime looked at her sister and asked, "So what do you want to do to him first?"

"Hmm..."

Nui blinked owlishly at the question, one finger tapping cutely against her chin despite knowing *exactly* what her sister was thinking. Boy, sometimes she could be awfully envious of her sister's vivid imagination. Tilting her head sideways, blonde pigtails bouncing from

the movement, she lowered her hand and smiled, "That's a really good question! Do you think we should start with his arms or legs?"

"Legs," Amu answered, her attention briefly drawn towards a burst of spiritual pressure in the distance, "We don't want him running away again."

"Good point!"

The Grand Couturier swept the Needle Blade around her body, the hardened Life Fiber weapon effortlessly slicing through several shelves, and pouted, "But I don't think Lady Ragyo wants us to waste *too* much time torturing Kisuke Urahara. While I *really* want to make him suffer, there are other things we need to do before leaving!"

"We should be careful," Amu stoically chastised her sister, who stuck her tongue out childishly in retaliation, "His knowledge on Life Fibers is dangerous. He did weave a Kamui like Junketsu, after all. Kisuke Urahara might be an annoying man but..."

"... underestimating him would be *really* stupid. Gosh, it's almost like you forgot what happened the last time I fought the man," Nui joked as she skipped behind the register, gripped the door with her manicured fingers and *ripped* the reinforced metal off its hinges, narrowly missing her unflinching sister as the bent frame crashed into the building across the street.

A tense breath left the Grand Couturier's lips as she cautiously strolled into the former living quarters, the bedrooms and kitchen having long been converted into a storage facility for Nudist Beach's Anti-Life Fiber weaponry. She couldn't believe her sister once lived in such squalor. It was disgusting! Frowning as she lightly kicked a metal box, the power enough to send it flying across the room, Nui's fingers curled tightly into a fist. That settled it! She was going to torture Kisuke Urahara until he couldn't even scream for mercy. And *then* she would make him *suffer* .

*Nobody* treats her sister like a pathetic human.

"This is new..."

Amu, only superficially aware of her sister's rampaging emotions, stared inquisitively at the elevator sitting in the middle of the living room. How odd... Nui hadn't mentioned this in her report to Lady Ragyo. Perhaps Kisuke Urahara constructed it after her sister nearly killed him? Her expression etched into an emotionless facade as she effortlessly sliced through the equipment, shards of metal and plastic bouncing harmlessly against her skin, she watched the lift fall into the dark abyss stretching below and muttered, "I can sense him..."

The Grand Couturier entwined her fingers with Amu's, an unnerving smile on her face, "So let's not keep that annoying man waiting even a second longer!"

Without another word the sisters leapt into the darkness, drill-like pigtails fluttering lightly in the rushing wind as they breached the secret underground training room. Simultaneously holding one hand against the hem of their dresses for decency as the ground rapidly approached, pupils dilating in the artificial sunlight permeating the chamber, they waited until the last second before flipping forward, Needle Blades flashing into existence as their boots tapped softly against the floor with nary a sound.

"How odd..."

Nui Harime ignored the expensive equipment scattered across the newly converted Nudist Beach underground base as she searched for Kisuke Urahara, her expression growing darker when she *couldn't* sense the man. Looking over her shoulder at Amu, who was equally annoyed with the shopkeeper's cowardice, she pouted, "Can you sense -"

"Greetings and salutations, valued customers!"

Sitting comfortably in a very familiar chair perched upon one of the few remaining outcroppings of rock he successfully convinced Olivier Mira Armstrong *not* to destroy, megaphone in one hand and Benihime's released form in the other, Kishie Urahara waved enthusiastically at the two slightly annoyed teenagers. Raising the megaphone back to his mouth when the spiritual pressure began increasing, he cheerfully continued without missing a beat, "If I knew the Grand Couturier of Revocs wanted to pay my humble shop another visit I would have ordered Yoruichi to clean up the place. And it looks like you brought a new friend! How very interesting... not to mention exciting! But I'm afraid your rambunctiousness is too much for me to handle! So please vacate the premises or I'll be forced to call the police!"

"Humph! We weren't born yesterday, you know!"

Nui smirked at the atrocious man despite the undying hatred bubbling deep within her soul, "As if we're just going to let you escape! Not when..."

"... you need to die," Amu stoically finished the moment her sister trailed off, lips curling into a smile at Kishie Urahara's growing frown, "Do you think your tricks are going to work this time? It took everything you had to escape my sister. And we've gotten *a lot* stronger thanks to Lady Ragyo. So there's only one thing we're *really* curious about..."

The Grand Couturier grinned at the shopkeeper, purposely drawing his full attention, before *vanishing* in a burst of speed alongside her sister. Crossing the immense distance between them in the blink of an eye before a flash of purple severed Kishie Urahara's right arm, the limb flying away in a spray of blood, Nui laughed sadistically when Amu stabbed her own weapon into the annoying man's chest, "Did you *honestly* believe we'd let you sit around and think of a plan? We're not -"

She blinked in confusion, a surprised gasp leaving her mouth, when the dying shopkeeper's body suddenly inflated before *popping*,



showering them with pieces of colored plastic and clothing. Her ears ringing when the sudden shift in momentum caused the Needle Blades to scratch against the chair, the hardened Life Fiber weapons leaving jagged streaks of sparks yet failing to damage the strange material, Nui furiously gnashed her teeth. What just happened?! There's no way that annoying man managed to avoid their attacks! She saw muscles and bone when she severed his arm!

So why... *why* did he explode like an overinflated balloon?!

Blonde pigtailed bouncing as she landed next to Amu, her sister's growing frustration with the shopkeeper added to her own tempestuous emotions, the Grand Couturier twitched when a familiar voice yelled encouragingly in the distance, "Great coordination! If I wasn't this handsome and smart I *surely* would have been killed by your impressive teamwork!"

The former exiled shinigami didn't react when the two sisters launched into another attack. Waiting patiently when the Grand Couturiers charged forward with apparent recklessness and insanity, Kisuke grinned when a crimson barrier of rapidly circulating Life Fibers spun into being repelling their weapons in a display of vibrant colors. Holding a hand against his forehead when the synchronized twins crashed into the ground, their simultaneous impacts kicking up large quantities of dirt and smoke, the shopkeeper couldn't believe his luck.

And to think Isshin said his invention only had a ten percent chance of working!

Walking forward until he reached the edge of the Life Fiber barrier, one hand pressed firmly against the side of his mouth, Kisuke waited until the Grand Couturier emerged relatively unscathed from the rubble before shouting, "I know this might sound cliché and totally familiar... but did you honestly believe I'd let you attack me without having a plan in mind?"

Nui Harime sneered murderously at the shopkeeper as the abrasions blemishing her prim and proper appearance regenerated. She wasn't going to fall for his stupid tricks! Puffing her cheeks at the ridiculousness of the inverted situation, she stabbed the purple Needle Blade into the ground and pouted.

"Gosh! That sounds like something a nerdy know-it-all like you would say!"

She giggled excitedly when an extremely loud *boom* echoed in the background not a moment later, one leg curled backwards as the Life Fiber barrier protecting Kisuke Urahara from their attacks flickered out of existence, "But it looks like your little barrier wasn't any good! Breaking down after one measly little attack? And you call yourself a scientist?"

"Now that wasn't very nice," Kisuke sighed at the smoking remains of the Life Fiber emitter. It appeared miniaturizing the technology necessary to weave a stable personal Life Fiber barrier remained outside the realm of possibility for the time being.

"After all, I'm just a handsome candy-store owner who researches Life Fibers as a hobby," he ran a hand through his light-blond hair, the familiar bucket hat absent, "But it was still a good test run!"

Kisuke clapped his hands together before looking over his shoulder at the stoic visage of Ururu, a goofy smirk on his face, "So I'm curious about its effectiveness. When you attacked just now, did you experience any negative side effects?"

The subsequent silence, broken only by the dusty wind blowing through the mostly empty underground room, was all he needed to understand how much his deliberately childish and annoying mannerisms bothered Nui Harime and Ururu. From a cursory examination of their spiritual pressure, which possessed a quality unlike anything else, it appeared his previous hypothesis concerning Nui's psychological desire for a family, a dependency that could be attributed to her connection with Ururu, was completely on the mark.

His lips pursed into a frown as he tapped Benihime against the ground, priming the Anti-life Fiber explosives throughout the underground base, Kisuke sighed under his breath.

"But I think that's enough fooling around..."

A serious glint appeared in the shopkeeper's eyes as he focused his attention upon Nui Harime. As the Grand Couturier's expression tightened, rage and fury building underneath her saccharine façade, he slowly raised his zanpakuto, "When Orihime healed your eye back to its original state it appears she also restored your mind and spiritual pressure. Fighting both you and Ururu will be difficult, if not impossible. In fact, I dare say this battle might actually be too much for Benihime to handle."

"However..."

Kisuke didn't flinch when the Grand Couturier stiffened, her fingers twitching at her sister's *other* name, "I've seen both your fighting style and technique. During our last battle I not only memorized how your doppelgangers fought but also the movements required for summoning them. Every subtle twitch of your muscles when using the Scissor Blade was broken down and studied. Your body might be comprised of Life Fibers but you still *move* like a human. I've even accounted for the distinct possibility you possess abilities similar to Ragyo Kiryuin - including Mental Refitting."

Staring coldly at the Grand Couturier, her face hidden in shadows, he finished, "This is reality, Nui Harime. There is nothing you can do to surprise me. So I strongly recommend you surrender."

"That was a great speech..."

The shopkeeper frowned when Ururu appeared next to the Grand Couturier, her emotionless sapphire eyes staring into his soul as her sister finished with a condescending smirk, "But gosh, do you hear yourself when you talk? Surrender to you? Boy, you sure have the

annoying ability of knowing just how to piss us off! Especially when you're *bluffing*, you know!"

Leaning against Amu, their cheeks pressed tightly together, she stared intensely at Kisuke, "Like you *really* intend to use those pesky Anti-Life Fiber bombs on us! There's no way you would dare harm a single hair on my adorable sister's head!"

Kisuke tensed when the Grand Couturier cheerfully called his bluff, an unfortunate reaction that wasn't missed by either sister. As identical smiles pulled at the corners of her lips, the Needle Blades shining brightly in the artificial daylight, Amy tilted her head curiously at the shopkeeper, "We've learned a lot from Lady Ragyo over the last few weeks..."

"... just to kill you!"

Nui Harime laughed as they dashed across the underground chamber towards the infuriating man, his transforming blade ready to counter their attacks. How cute! He honestly thought his strange weapon could stand against Lady Ragyo's special Needle Blades! Leaping upwards while Amu continued forward, their eyes locking for a fraction of a second, she smiled manically at the shopkeeper, "So try not to die too quickly or this won't be fun at all!"

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Satsuki Kiryuin couldn't restrain herself from grimacing as the massive eruption of spiritual energy shook the entirety of Tsubakidai Park, the immense shockwave nearly sending her flying backwards. Yet as she stabbed the auburn Scissor Blade into the ground, armored fingers curled around the weapon's handle while Junketsu's heels dug sharply into the muddy soil, the intelligence her mother praised, the mannerisms she was forced to learn, focused upon one point of contention. It was a simple notion, born out of necessary paranoia.

What abilities did this shinigami's zanpakuto possess?

Her brow creased into a perplexed frown at the pertinent question. The proper name of the weapon used by shinigami - the spiritual soldiers protecting the Soul Society and World of the Living from Hollows and other supernatural creatures - was familiar, a foregone conclusion given the unique population of Karakura Town. Kisuke Urahara had demonstrated the initial release of his zanpakuto during their single training session, a phrase he called 'Shikai.' Zanpakuto were truly remarkable weapons. And given their versatility, the shopkeeper's detailed explanation of their abilities and the events that recently transpired, only one conclusion explained her mother's erratic behavior.

His zanpakuto could confound one's senses, tricking them into attacking illusions.

What else could explain why Ragyo Kiryuin, a woman capable of detecting a single errant stitch in an otherwise perfect article of clothing, attacked and conversed with someone who didn't exist?

Scowling when she attempted to contact the Elite Four only to realize the receiver in her ear was gone, destroyed during her mother's assault, Satsuki reflexively removed the Scissor Blade from its unconventional scabbard when the shinigami appeared at her side, his body blurring into existence. As lightning flashed through the skies, painting the rain with streaks of purple, she held her tongue when he politely inquired, "Your Kamui is rather extraordinary. From the subtle distinctions in its spiritual presence I'm assuming Ragyo Kiryuin's Life Fibers were used to create it?"

An unexplainable sensation of disgust pulsed through Junketsu's threads at the man's close proximity, the intensity of the emotions enough to penetrate the barrier between the Kamui and her mind. Noting the Kamui's rampant distrust of the shinigami, the minute writhing of her Life Fibers growing somewhat uncomfortable, Satsuki begrudgingly responded, "Your assistance against my mother is appreciated... Sosuke Aizen."

The formerly unnamed shinigami smirked at the suspicious undertone, "Oh? I'm honestly surprised Ichigo Kurosaki told you about me."

Satsuki frowned at the smugness permeating Sosuke Aizen's incendiary comment. Closing her eyes and breathing deeply as Junketsu reverted from Zenkan in a flash of brilliant blue stars, the exhaustion of maintaining the advanced configuration abating, she ignored Junketsu's unending disgust for the shinigami, "Ichigo and his friends spoke in great detail about his time as a shinigami, including the battles against your arrancar army in Hueco Mundo..."

Pointing the Scissor Blade at the man, its auburn surface shimmering wetly in the rain, she defiantly shouted, "So explain your presence in Karakura Town, Sosuke Aizen!"

"Do you need to ask such a simple question?"

Aizen continued smirking despite the hardened Life Fiber weapon aimed at his heart, "We share the same objective - destroying both Ragyo Kiryuin and the Original Life Fiber. Any reprehensible actions I might have done in the past have no bearing on the present. All that matters is preventing the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet from commencing. This, of course, requires your cooperation."

"You may have a point. Perhaps we do share the same goal," Satsuki suppressed an imperceptible shiver when Junketsu's disgust for the shinigami intensified, her Life Fibers rippling against her skin, before steeling her gaze, "But I do not trust you! It does not matter if you're cooperating to defeat my mother! One false step and I will personally end your life!"

"Of course."

The treacherous shinigami smiled at the teenager's spiritual energy - its potency comparable to Ichigo Kurosaki's after preventing Rukia Kuchiki's execution. Returning his attention to the smoke and dust obscuring the Kiryuin matriarch, he brushed imaginary dust off his

clothing before calmly adding, "But your trust is not required, Satsuki Kiryuin. Simply know that I have no intention of betraying Nudist Beach or your childhood allies. Furthermore..."

His smirk broadened at the familiar shade of sapphire in Junketsu's multicolored eyes, "It appears Ichigo Kurosaki's Life Fibers have grown quite powerful."

Satsuki stiffened at the underlying meaning behind the shinigami's comment, his condescending expression hinting at the full breadth of his knowledge. But as she pointed the Scissor Blade at his face, Junketsu's shifting emotions pressing against her mind, a familiar voice drew her complete and undivided attention.

"Merde..."

Ragyo Kiryuin staggered forward, wisps of smoke rising from her burnt body. Gasping deeply, bringing air into her non-existent lungs, the Kiryuin matriarch's fingers trembled at the state of her flesh. Her favorite dress was tattered, reduced to mere scraps of burnt cloth barely covering her damaged body. And her left arm was simply gone, blasted into oblivion by the man's attack. Glaring venomously from her single remaining eye at the source of her current appearance, blood oozing from her right eye socket, her breathing steadily improving with every passing second, "How *dare* you! You insignificant speck of a man!"

"It's fascinating you're still able to speak, Ragyo Kiryuin."

A hint of genuine disappointment crossed Sosuke Aizen's face at the woman's injuries. He honestly believed Goryutenmetsu would inflict significantly more damage, enough to force the Kiryuin matriarch onto the defensive. Shrugging his shoulders at the completely infuriated woman, Kyouka Suigetsu gently dragging across the surface of a puddle as he marched across the destroyed landscape, Aizen smirked pleasantly, "A truly remarkable feat. I suppose I'll just have to stop holding back during my next attack."

Ragyo laughed at the empty threat, a menacing sound that sent shivers down her daughter's spine, as the damage to her body regenerated, flesh and clothing stitching themselves back together out of nothingness. Sighing as she folded her arms, the posture accentuating her bosom, Ragyo glared suspiciously at the approaching shinigami, her intense gaze never once shifting to her rebellious daughter. She had already underestimated his intelligence and cunning, a tragic mistake that cost her no small amount of pride.

But his psychological tactics would only work *once* .

"I'll admit the breadth of your scheme was surprising," Ragyo's lips curled softly into a smile, hatred and disdain bubbling just beneath the surface, "But do you believe illusions cast by your zanpakuto will be sufficient to defeat me?"

The arrogant man's perturbed expression caused a pleasurable shudder to ripple down her spine, "Dearest Nui reported extensively on Kisuke Urahara's weapon. But I assumed some of the more fanciful details were the result of an artiste's imagination. Clearly I owe the Grand Couturier an apology..."

Aizen felt a hand clamp around his face, the soft fingers digging harshly into his skin, when Ragyo Kiryuin crossed the vast distance between them in a single step. His eyes widening at the Kiryuin matriarch's sadistic smirk, her expression twisting malevolently at his surprise, he felt gravity temporarily invert itself when the woman pushed spiritual energy through the palm of her hand, sending him soaring backwards with a supersonic eruption of rainbow light. Crashing through one building after another as his trajectory sent him flying across Karakura Town, Aizen stiffened at the sound of a heel clacking against solidified air.

Looking over his shoulder in mild bewilderment at the Kiryuin matriarch, her heels clacking loudly with every purposeful step, he wheezed when she spun around and drove her hand into his stomach. His body bending around the outstretching limb from the sudden shift in momentum, several ribs breaking or *shattering* from



the physical force, Aizen momentarily hovered in the rain before crashing into the middle of Karakura Community Park, his impact kicking up a large cloud of dust.

"How annoying."

Ragyo quirked an eyebrow when the dust dissipated, revealing the shinigami standing in the middle of a crater appearing little worse for wear. This was starting to get ridiculous. The man was persistent in his efforts, she would grant him that, but his illusions were the current problem. It was frustrating knowing she couldn't trust her eyes, ears, and, if his technique was as thorough as she assumed, the rest of her senses. But that wasn't what she loathed about the man. His zanpakuto might not possess the slightest chance of ending the fight in his favor - a victory impossible even if she allowed him to attack dozens of times - but the *embarrassment* of letting him blemish her appearance was unforgivable.

There was only *one* man allowed to caress her skin. And this annoyance... this insignificant and disgusting human... was *not* Isshin.

"That was the second time someone threw me across Karakura Town using nothing but physical strength," Aizen backhandedly complimented. Turning his attention back to Ragyo as lightning flashed through the skies, illuminating the outline of her body against the clouds, he brushed dust from his sleeves, "It's a rather ugly way to fight."

"Fitting words..."

Multicolored spiritual energy coalesced around her outstretched fingers as she scoffed at the shinigami's unimaginative critique. It didn't matter if the man could weave illusions from nothingness, confusing her senses with basic tricks. If she was unable to trust her eyes or ears, than she simply needed to destroy *everything* . And for that, she was immensely grateful the man was currently standing to

the south, "But I'm afraid these games, as fun as they might be for *you*, must come to an end..."

"Does something feel *off* to you, Ragyo Kiryuin?"

A sensation best described as vertigo overwhelmed her senses when the world abruptly *inverted*, leaving her floating in the air upside-down above Karakura Town. Looking around in utter amazement, maroon eyes desperately trying to comprehend the bizarre situation, she stiffened when the shinigami took advantage of her confusion, appearing in front of her with Shunpo, standing upside-down by her perspective.

"Welcome to the Inverted World."

Ragyo raised her stolen sword to counter the man's painfully obvious strike only to gasp wetly when her neck was sliced open, blood spurting through the rain. Gasping as the wound regenerated, leaving her skin once more perfectly flawless, she sneered venomously when she noticed the *bastard* out of the corner of her eye, his mouth curled into an arrogant smirk before turning around. Rushing forward in a burst of speed, Isshin's blade aimed squarely at the shinigami's neck, she twitched angrily when her attack passed through empty air.

"Up is down... left is right... back is front..."

Aizen concisely reiterated Shinji Hirako's boast as he stabbed the Kiryuin matriarch, his zanpakuto cleanly piercing her throat, "But that's not all to the Inverted World. Not only are your senses of direction reversed, so are your reactions and movements..."

He leaned to the right, avoiding Ragyo Kiryuin's leftward swing, before firing a Byakurai through the woman's heart. As the smoking wound regenerated seconds later, but not before causing her to stagger backwards, Aizen finished, "How do you intend to fight me in your condition, Ragyo Kiryuin? Your power as a Life Fiber Hybrid is formidable but within the Inverted World all of that is meaningless.

The skills and techniques you've learned - all to fight Isshin Kurosaki - are useless."

A strike at his neck, lethal in any other circumstance, was easily dodged when he reverted left and right back to normal in the illusion. Smirking in response to the unadulterated anger in Ragyo Kiryuin's eyes, the multicolored radiance from her hair shining ominously, he deftly leaned away from her second swing, "And in the likelihood you grew accustomed to the Inverted World, it's a simple matter to reverse individual directions."

Ragyo remained silent while the man explained his abilities, her lips pulled into annoyed snarl as the wounds adorning her flesh regenerated. His condescending behavior was starting to grow intolerable. Did he truly believe his so-called Inverted World was the perfect trump card? That it would turn the tides of battle in his favor? How foolish. There was nothing in his repertoire - no secret techniques or abilities - that granted him the capability to defeat one blessed by the Original Life Fiber. That he managed to extend the battle this long was a miracle.

But miracles, as they say, only happen *once* .

"An appropriate name for a fanciful technique."

Her breath hitched when the world shifted once more, up and down reverting back to normal without warning. Immediately concealing her surprise at the sudden inversion underneath annoyed indifference, Ragyo sighed wistfully as the streets of Karakura Town were once more underneath her heels, "But your constant posturing has grown tedious and boring. I did not willingly move this farce of a battle away from my foolish daughter only to fight a *coward* who relies upon illusions and tricks."

"A coward, you say?"

Aizen vanished in a step of Shunpo, his zanpakuto cleaving through Ragyo's taut stomach as the woman twisted in the opposite

direction. Frowning imperceptibly at the angle behind her counterattack, how she swung upwards rather than downwards, he watched the blood coating Kyouka Suigetsu dissolve into its composite Life Fibers before inquiring, "What an oddly hypocritical observation, Ragyo Kiryuin."

He accentuated his response by severing the Kiryuin matriarch's right arm several inches above the elbow, blood spurting through the rain before multicolored Life Fibers stitched the limb back together. Propping a hand against Kyouka Suigetsu's blade when Ragyo countered with an ominously accurate strike, sparks flashing from the point of contact as he gently redirected her sword's momentum, Aizen retreated with Shunpo before continuing, "After all, the action you took regarding Isshin Kurosaki displayed a level of cowardice far beyond anything I could have possibly achieved."

An incredulous scoff escaped Ragyo's throat at the asinine comment, "How I chose to deal with Isshin is hardly any of *your* business."

"Now that's an interesting answer..."

The treacherous shinigami's smile broadened at the minute fluctuations in Ragyo Kiryuin's spiritual energy, "How long did it take you to decide to nearly kill the only man you loved with the most powerful Anti-Life Fiber weapon on the planet?"

A sound akin to cracking glass pierced through the deafening storm when the illusion controlling the Kiryuin matriarch's senses *shattered*, the subsequent backlash of spiritual energy burning his exposed skin. Immediately leaping away at the subtle twitches in Ragyo's muscles, a jagged tear opening across his uniform when the woman covered dozens of meters in a single step, he expertly parried the succeeding thrust to the heart, his mouth pursed into a grimace at the unfortunate turn of events. His expression twisting into a frustrated scowl at the ferocity behind Ragyo's emotional yet focused assault, her unrelenting attacks preventing him from

countering, Aizen waited until she extended her arm backwards before silently rereleasing his zanpakuto.

The manipulation of Ragyo Kiryuin's human senses held momentarily - just long enough to confound her into believing he would counter her subsequent assault through an elaborate series of parries instead of strategically retreating - before shattering in a vibrant display of multicolored light. Surprised by the *suddenness* of the failure, Aizen's head snapped to the right when the Kiryuin matriarch's foot smashed into his cheek.

"How tragic."

Crimson momentarily stained her exquisite attire when Isshin's hardened Life Fiber blade blurred around the man's *nearly* perfect guard, cutting deeply into his forearm. Chuckling as she gracefully leaned around his vicious counterattack, lips twisted into a pleased smile when the shinigami's zanpakuto passed harmlessly several inches from her face, Ragyo's eyes widened sadistically at his frustrated expression, "It would appear you're *nothing* without those annoying -"

A thick gurgle prematurely ended the Kiryuin matriarch's comment when the man's zanpakuto sliced deeply through the side of her neck, torrents of pressurized blood spraying from the gaping wound. Glowering in disbelief at his *audacity* as her Life Fibers rapidly knitted faux flesh and muscle back together, Ragyo didn't hesitate to return the shinigami's flagrant blasphemy *with interest*, the shocked expression in his previously condescending eyes causing her heart to skip a beat. Caressing her cheek when the annoying excuse for a man leapt away in a burst of speed, one hand tightly gripping the tattered shreds of the uniform covering the bleeding wound on his chest, she removed his filthy blood from Isshin's sword with a flick of her wrist and sighed pleasurably.

"Fighting you has been an interesting experience..."

Ragyo's heels clacked loudly as she purposely turned away from the wounded shinigami, her attention drawn toward the thousands of brilliant explosions showcasing Nudist Beach's ongoing battle against her magnificent COVERS, "But I *do* have a schedule to keep... and it unfortunately does *not* involve continuing this farce of a battle."

"It appears my initial assessment was mistaken."

Aizen ignored the subtly threatening undertone in the Kiryuin matriarch's response as he held the tattered edges of Kisuke Urahara's specialized cloak over his chest, rivulets of blood seeping from between his fingers, "A naïve underestimation. But I suppose that's really my fault. Once I released my zanpakuto it was simply a matter of time before your Life Fibers adapted to Kyouka Suigetsu's perfect hypnosis. There was nothing I could have possibly done to prevent this inevitable outcome. Yet I'm still disappointed."

Ragyo frowned at the nonsensical statement, "Disappointed?"

"It took your Life Fibers approximately five minutes to adapt themselves to Kyouka Suigetsu's illusions," Aizen pleasantly explained without the slightest trace of concern. Allowing his focus to momentarily be drawn towards Kisuke Urahara's residence, the familiar spiritual energy escaping from the cracks in the man's nearly perfect barrier bringing a smug grin to his face, he turned back to Ragyo Kiryuin when her spiritual pressure pulsed with annoyance, "I projected at least ten minutes before immunization. Oh well..."

Rain dripped from Kyouka Suigetsu as he shifted stances, crimson staining the front of his uniform, "I'll simply need to defeat you the hard way."

"How amusing," Ragyo deadpanned, any lingering interest in the conversation disappearing under the weight of her busy schedule. There was no doubt in her mind the shinigami was planning to continue opposing the Original Life Fiber despite the grievous wound barely concealed beneath the tattered pieces of his atrocious

uniform. But she *would not* succumb to any further embarrassing taunts.

Not even about that *woman* .

"But let's be honest..."

Ragyo's voice was frigid, containing the sum total of her overwhelming disgust for the shinigami, as she raised her left hand, multicolored spiritual energy rapidly coalescing between her outstretched fingers. Smiling coldly as shadows danced across her body, painting her immaculate dress in shades of violet and green, she chuckled at the man's silence, "This fight won't end until *someone* is dead. And despite your best effort, a truly *laudable* performance, you simply cannot compare to someone blessed by the -"

She was unprepared when it pulsed through the deepest recesses of her mind - an overbearing sensation that caused her Life Fibers to shiver in absolute disgust. Mouth slightly agape when the man's bloodstained cloak fluttered open in the wind, exposing the glowing multicolored sphere embedded in his sternum, Ragyo felt the Original Life Fiber's inhuman anger permeate every thread of her body, twisting her shocked surprise into unadulterated hatred.

"What... is... that... *thing* ?"

Rendered speechless by the disgust radiating from the abhorrent object, quivering manicured fingers clenched furiously around Isshin's blade, Ragyo watched in complete bafflement when the sphere *pulsed* with tainted energy. How *dare* he! Restraining herself from immediately destroying the shinigami when multicolored cracks spread across his body, flesh and muscle regenerating and leaving his skin unblemished, she furiously gnashed her teeth.

"You... insolent... man!"

The shinigami's startled expression when she *vanished*, multicolored spiritual energy enveloping her body in a brilliant aura as she stepped between successive raindrops, brought the Kiryuin matriarch neither comfort nor pleasure. Human emotions could not convey her unmatched *loathing* for the profanely insulting man. Perfectly manicured fingers curled around Isshin's shimmering blade as she smashed her knee into the shinigami's exposed stomach, her body twisting counterclockwise as the subsequent explosion of spiritual energy repulsed the surrounding storm, Ragyo ignored the zanpakuto slicing diagonally down her chest. Pirouetting as the wound regenerated in a flash of rainbow light, Isshin's sword arcing through the rain with the intent of severing the man's head, she scowled when he ducked and pressed a hand against her stomach.

"Bakudo Number Seventy Nine - Kuyo Shibari."

Her muscles convulsed when nine spheres of pulsing spiritual energy flickered into existence, the high-level Bakudo completely arresting her ability to move. Fingers tightly gripping Isshin's sword as she strained against the invisible bonds, indignant fury causing the multifaceted brilliance from her silver to exponentially multiply, Ragyo focused her unadulterated hatred upon the muttering shinigami, "How *dare* you tarnish the Original Life Fiber! Do you think this will -"

"Bakudo Number Sixty One - Rikujokoro."

An exorbitant amount of blood spewed from between her clenched teeth when six thin shafts of golden light skewered her waist at alternating angles. Loose bangs of silver hair falling over her face as she hunched forward, large blotches of crimson staining her flaunting dress, Ragyo felt an eldritch rage building in the depths of her soul. Her plans... dealing with the Grand Couturier's artistic whims... none of that mattered. All she wanted to do... all the *Original Life Fiber* wanted to do... was tear this abhorrent man to pieces. And as multicolored light enveloped her constrained form, bathing Karakura Town in ominous colors, Ragyo's heel *clacked* as she took a single step toward the shinigami.



"How did you obtain *my* Life Fibers?!"

Ragyo Kiryuin's regal voice warbled, the distinctly inhuman tone causing her opponent to stiffen when it *shifted*, "I remember *you* ! You... who interfered with the sacred ritual! What did an insignificant *creature* like you do to my Life Fibers?! Something like *that* shouldn't exist by human hands! Tell me how you stole -"

"Bakudo Number Ninety Nine, Part One - Kin."

His hands clasped together, fingers intricately interlocked despite the modest desperation when the Kiryuin matriarch shattered through the first two Bakudo, Aizen grimaced from the strain on his soul as cords of spiritual fabric spun into existence. Weaving more spiritual energy into the technique when Ragyo's movement was arrested, her stolen blade halted only inches from his heart, he watched as her arms were painfully wrenched behind her back, muscles quivering against the unnatural constriction. An uncomfortable coldness racing down his spine at the expression in the Kiryuin matriarch's eyes, the inhuman hatred and loathing disturbing on several levels, he deliberately raised a finger skyward as an aura of darkness surrounded his body.

"The oozing crest of corruption! The arrogant vessel of madness! Deny the seething urge to let things stun and flicker! Disrupt the sleep! The crawling princess of iron!"

"YOU DARE!"

An aura of multicolored light flared brilliantly from Ragyo as she *tore* through the spiritual constraints, the scraps of fabric previously binding her limbs disintegrating underneath the sheer majesty of her spiritual pressure. Steam wafting from Isshin's sword as she crossed the vast distance to the shinigami within a single flash of lightning, her departure kicking off multiple consecutive supersonic explosions, Ragyo snarled at the serene expression in his eyes. Her fingers twitching as she vertically bisected the man before he could react, the force behind her fully-powered swing carved a massive trench

across the streets of Karakura Town hundreds of feet below, the Kiryuin matriarch *gasped* when the shinigami burst apart in a shower of colored plastic.

"The eternally self-destruction doll of mud! Unite! Repulse! Fill the earth and know your own powerlessness!"

Looking over her shoulder, eyes fixated upon the man standing unharmed in the rain, Ragyo stiffened when he dramatically declared, "Hado Number Ninety - Kurohitsugi!"

The already tumultuous skies darkened when gravity *flexed*, pulling simultaneously on her body in multiple directions. Staggering heavily under the immense pressure as thousands of shadowy boxes coalesced into existence, space and time warped by their very presence, Ragyo slammed a defiant heel against the air with a resounding *clack*. Her mouth twisted into an infuriated snarl as she swung Isshin's sword, intent on destroying the technique before it could form, she gasped in astonishment when her arm *disintegrated* upon touching one of the walls, dissipating in a spray of blood.

"Farewell, Ragyo Kiryuin."

Aizen smirked in mild amusement at the Kiryuin matriarch's furious expression as the obscenely difficult Kurohitsugi enclosed around her body, dozens of spiritual lances perforating the enclosed space. It had been concerning when Ragyo Kiryuin - or rather the Original Life Fiber - reacted poorly to the Hogyoku, granting her enough spiritual energy and strength to finish the battle, an ending that could not be allowed. However, the primal hatred displayed by the eldritch creature controlling the Kiryuin matriarch's body like a puppet gave him an advantage he used to devastating effect - clarity of mind.

Still, it wouldn't be acceptable to become complacent simply because he momentarily stalled Ragyo Kiryuin. Even a fully incanted Kurohitsugi lacked the necessary requirements for destroying someone twisted by the Original Life Fiber. It would take a more... direct approach.

But unfortunately he remained unable to properly wield hardened Life Fiber weapons.

Winding streaks of white and purple illuminated the overcast skies as he patiently awaited Ragyo Kiryuin's emergence from the Kurohitsugi, senses strained to their absolute limits to prevent any surprises. It took an exorbitant amount of spiritual energy for high-level Hado to overwhelm the natural absorption of the woman's powerful Life Fibers. But with her Life Fibers having adapted to Kyouka Suigetsu's illusions, more brutish tactics were necessary. And if *that* failed? If Ragyo Kiryuin's synchronization with the Original Life Fiber proved more than tactics and countermeasures could handle?

Well... he could always release his Bankai.

Strategically furthering himself from the constrained woman when minute cracks began spreading across the Kurohitsugi, thin clouds of water splashing beneath his boots with every step, he only had a moment to comprehend the Hado shattering like glass before a hand was *thrust* into his chest.

"W-What?"

Ragyo breathed heavily, her blood-filled mouth clenched tightly, as she plunged her sole remaining hand into the abhorrent man's sternum. She couldn't remember experiencing such humiliation! It almost put that *woman's* actions to shame! But as she stood before the shocked shinigami, more than half of her body simply *gone* and blood dripping from what limbs and faux organs remained intact, the Kiryuin matriarch allowed a brief but tense smirk to grace her bloody lips.

"La vie est drôle..."

Multicolored spiritual energy flared brightly in the rain, blinding anyone foolish enough to witness their battle, as Ragyo callously removed her arm from the shinigami's body.

The Hokyoku clasped possessively in her fingers.

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"MEN! DOU! KOTE!"

Uzu Sanageyama shouted passionately at the top of his lungs as he attacked Yukio Hans Vorarlberna's final remaining Life Fiber creation, his shinai smashing into the wyvern's head, claws and stomach. Steam blasting forth from the cracks covering his Blade Regalia Mark III as he continuously attacked the creature, its scales and bones shattering under the intense assault, he promptly jumped away when jets of crimson flames erupted from the wyvern's jaws, the heat transforming the pavement into molten tar. Armored fingers tightly clenching the shinai when the creature growled, the damage to its body regenerating, he clenched his teeth as emerald light shone from his regalia.

"Shingan... TENSENZUKI!"

The former Athletic Committee Chair's body shimmered brightly before *vanishing*, leaving the wyvern looking around in confusion before *thousands* of lightning-fast blows slammed against every visible inch of its body. Pushing his Blade Regalia even further beyond its limitations when the Life Fiber creature weathered the storm, its claws cutting through several afterimages while leaving a series of rending trenches in the ground, Sanageyama avoided another blast of superheated flames and cursed. Damn it! This wasn't working! But like hell he was going to let an overgrown lizard beat him!

"I'm not done with you yet!"

Leaping high into the rain as lightning flashed overhead, Sanageyama slammed his arms together and shouted, "TAKE THIS! Hissatsu: Isshin Zenzanken!"

The two-handed strike tore through the Life Fiber creature's incredibly tough defenses without slowing down, first shattering its skull into dust before severing it completely down the middle. Panting heavily from exhaustion as he landed back on the ground, the shinai in his hands shattered down to the hilt, Sanageyama grinned when the wyvern collapsed with one last defiant roar, its body dissolving into Life Fibers.

Whoever said regalia couldn't stand against raiment was talking out of their ass.

Sanageyama's mood soured as he tossed aside his shattered shinai, the wooden blade bouncing against the street. It was sheer *luck* that his Blade Regalia was still in one piece, minus several cracks and scratches. Nobody, especially *Jakuzure*, could know an overgrown fire-breathing lizard had almost eaten him... *twice* .

"You sure took your sweet time..."

An eyebrow twitched when Yoruichi Shihoin playfully bypassed his Shingantsu like it was nothing. He could sense spiritual pressure now, damn it! So how the hell did Yoruichi still manage to slip through his guard? His Blade Regalia creaking as he faced the woman, her confident posture and cocky attitude saying enough, Sanageyama grumbled when a group of nudist soldiers appeared carrying Yukio's unconscious naked body, "Come on! Don't tell me you already beat that snot-nosed punk!"

"Ha!"

Yoruichi leaned back and *laughed*, "After all the times I've beaten you into the ground you think an overconfident brat wearing fancy clothes could take me down?"

The former Athletic Committee Chair refused to fall for the woman's painfully obvious taunt. He couldn't let Yoruichi Shihoin get under his skin, especially after what happened last time. Flicking his wrist as Jakuzure flew overhead, dozens of musical explosions singing in his

ears, Sanageyama hefted the newly formed shinai onto his shoulder, "Tch... like there's anyone in Xcution that could kick your ass! You went toe-to-toe with the freaking Grand Couturier!"

"That's right," Yoruichi proudly folded her arms at the compliment, "But you've gotten better, Sanageyama. Your speed is far above the average lieutenant shinigami."

He smirked beneath his regalia's enclosed helmet at the hard-earned praise only for Yoruichi's next words to completely shatter the mood, "But Ichigo's at least six times faster."

"Like hell he is!"

Sanageyama pointed his shinai at the dark skinned shinigami, the subtle threat only causing her cheshire grin to broaden, "Ichigo Kurosaki is the final stepping stone! The last person I need to defeat before facing Lady Satsuki! There's no way I'm slower than him! Not after your training, Yoruichi Shihoin!"

"That's the spirit!"

Yoruichi chuckled at the teenager's easily manipulated frustration when it came to Ichigo's rate of progress, her smile only faltering when something flickered across the periphery of her senses. That was Junketsu's strange spiritual pressure, which could only mean Satsuki was fighting her mother. This was *bad* . She might have trained under Isshin, learned how to work alongside her Kamui, but Satsuki didn't have the slightest chance of defeating Ragyo Kiryuin.

She was going to die... or *worse* .

"Sanageyama..."

The teenager frowned at the unusual seriousness in her voice, "Don't let a single COVERS into Karakura Town. Understood?"

An excruciating long moment passed in absolute silence, broken only by the pattering of rain upon the drenched cityscape, before everything was illuminated beneath an intense burst of light. Time screeching to a halt as she looked over her shoulder, amber eyes narrowing to pinpoints, Yoruichi stared in astonishment at the serpentine spiritual dragon coiled through the skies to the west. Goryutenmetsu? But that was impossible! There wasn't anyone in Karakura Town remotely capable of casting that Hado!

Yoruichi quickly braced herself, arms crossed over her face, when the crackling technique roared loudly over the torrential downpour and slammed into the ground, its impact sending a shockwave rippling across the city. Did the Soul Society finally arrive to deal with Ragyo Kiryuin? Could Kisuke have discovered why they hadn't stopped her sooner? As the light from the Hado lessened, bathing the city in a temporary glow, the familiar spiritual pressure accompanying the technique caused her stomach to sink. No... it couldn't be! How did *he* escape from Muken? But more importantly...

*Why* was he fighting Ragyo Kiryuin?!

"What the hell was that?"

Sanageyama's mouth hung open beneath his Blade Regalia's helmet, a single bead of nervous sweat sticking to his cheek at the monstrous spiritual pressure washing across Karakura Town. He hadn't the slightest clue what the hell just happened but it was powerful enough to overwhelm his Shingantsu, leaving him effectively blind. His jaw clenched tightly in pain as his enhanced senses slowly returned, driving what felt like nails into his skull, he staggered backwards when Yoruichi Shihoin's cell phone rang, the piercing ringtone agony to his eardrums.

Searching through her pockets as the teenager cursed profusely, an eyebrow twitching as his opinion of her ringtone, Yoruichi raised the cell phone to her mouth before shouting at the top of her lungs, "What the hell were you thinking?!"

"I take it things are going well?"

Kisuke Urahara grimaced comically at the sharp ringing deep within his ear, courtesy of Yoruichi shouting directly into the phone. Now that was quite rude. Preemptively holding the phone at arms length when she furiously rebutted his question, her annoyance echoing across the underground chamber, he patiently waited until she finished before replying, "I have no idea what you're talking about, Yoruichi."

A conniving grin stretched across his face at Yoruichi's flustered response. Sitting with his back propped against an overturned Nudist Beach truck, columns of smoke rising from the burning vehicle, he ignored the blood oozing from his grievously wounded shoulder and chuckled cheerfully, "Goryutenmetsu, you say? I'm flattered, but you're looking at the wrong guy! Right now I'm playing a high-stakes game of hide and seek with Nui Harime and Ururu. And let's just say they don't play fairly..."

"You know that's not what I meant!"

Yoruichi resisted the desire to crush the phone in her hand at Kisuke's half-hearted excuse. Stiffening when *another* eruption of spiritual pressure caught her attention, she caught only a glimpse of flickering rainbow light beyond the rooftops before shouting into the phone, "Why is Sosuke Aizen fighting Ragyo Kiryuin?!"

"Oh... *that*..."

Kisuke scratched his chin at the question, one finger tapping against the phone as he looked around the back of the burning truck, "Well... it's actually very simple. It was obvious that Ragyo Kiryuin would use a Bleach Bomb against Isshin. But luckily I planned for this scenario the moment I learned of his relationship with the woman! So relax, Yoruichi! If there's anyone that hates Ragyo Kiryuin more than her own daughter... it's Aizen."



It took Yoruichi a moment to process the absurdity behind her friend's reasoning. She'd known Kisuke for hundreds of years, fought alongside him through thick and thin, but freeing Sosuke Aizen, one of the worst criminals in the history of the Soul Society, made no sense! Angrily turning around when she noticed Sanageyama eavesdropping on her conversation, she lowered her voice to a hushed whisper and seethed, "Why didn't you get the Gotei 13? The Captain Commander would have -"

"The Gotei 13 won't be coming to the rescue."

"It's quite difficult to explain over the phone," Kisuke momentarily paused, his attention shifting towards something in the background, before continuing, "But something's stopping the Soul Society from moving against Ragyo Kiryuin or Life Fibers. And it works both ways. If I hadn't installed a secret backdoor into Muken, freeing Aizen would have been all but impossible."

Yoruichi stiffened at the explanation, the reflexive tightening of her fingers further cracking the phone. Isshin had *known* about the Soul Society's problem from the very *beginning*. It made perfect sense. His warning when she attempted to investigate the Soul Society, why she hadn't sensed any shinigami for several months and why the Gotei 13 refused to respond against Ragyo Kiryuin had been suspicious at the time. But if Life Fibers somehow severed the World of the Living and Seireitei, preventing the Jigokucho from traveling through the Senkaimon, it was possible the Gotei 13 were fully aware of Revocs...

She disappeared in a flicker of Shunpo, Sanageyama dodging in the opposite direction, when a massive white fist smashed into the ground, the impact sending a large plume of smoke rising above the skyline.

Reappearing moments later on a building down the street, the eight nudists she rescued disoriented but otherwise fine, Yoruichi glowered at the colossal COVERS looming above the rooftops. Her mouth twisted into a disgusting sneer when the Life Fiber creature

turned around, displaying the thousands of innocent victims fueling its power, she raised the phone to her ear when another two COVERS landed nearby, their attention completely upon *her* .

"I'm going to kick your ass for this, Kisuke."

Kisuke's mood soured despite Yoruichi's playful, and expected, death threat. The inhuman roar in the background was far more important and concerning. He might have utmost faith in her fighting prowess but one shouldn't become complacent when dealing with Life Fibers. That was simply *asking* for trouble. Ragyo Kiryuin's monstrous spiritual pressure, which he could sense through the barriers built into the underground chamber, was proof that releasing Aizen from Muken, thereby earning the Captain Commander's legendary wrath, was the pragmatic and right decision.

It was necessary if humanity and the World of the Living were to survive.

Still, it wouldn't hurt to research whether normal Life Fibers could withstand Ryujin Jakka's flames.

He sighed in resignation when the proximity Bakudo centered on his current location detected two sets of synchronized moments. It appears his belligerent guests already learned how to partially suppress their spiritual pressure, which complicated things. They should have fallen for a few more of his tricks before reaching this point. Tucking his phone away before vanishing in a flash of Shunpo, his body flickering away moments before the purple Needle Blade cleaved through the burning vehicle, Kisuke grumbled at the subsequent eruption of spiritual energy tearing lengthwise across the ground.

At this rate his candy store would be destroyed!

Frowning slightly when a twisting crescent of purple spiritual energy exploded from the flames, a dull *thump* reverberating across the underground chamber when he redirected it back towards the Grand

Couturier using the Anti-Life Fiber material coating his geta, Kisuke grunted when another Needle Blade slashed deeply into his leg. As he retreated away from his daughter, Benihime lightly cracked from extensive contact with the hardened Life Fiber weapon, he pondered how Ururu slipped through his guard so easily. Contrary to expectations he wasn't playing with Nui Harime or Ururu. Yet strangely he hadn't sensed her spiritual pressure until *after* she attacked.

Grey eyes narrowing when Ururu spun the Needle Blade around her wrist, the purple weapon twisting around Benihime in a shower of sparks, he promptly ducked and placed his left hand against her stomach, "Hado Number One - Sho."

A concussive explosion of kinetic energy accompanied Ururu's involuntarily descent, her body first slamming into the ground before crashing through several vehicles. Staring grimly at his daughter when she leapt out of the smoke and dust, her appearance unblemished despite the intensity of the impact, Kisuke quickly switched Benihime to his left hand and spun around, parrying Nui Harime's weapon in a flash of light. His arm quivering from the superhuman strength coursing through the Grand Couturier's Life Fibers, the strained saccharine smirk twitching at the corners of her mouth somewhat unsettling, he attempted to strategically retreat only for the teenager to *immediately* close the distance.

"Gosh, you don't look so good!"

Nui Harime *laughed* at the shopkeeper's cowardly behavior, the sound hollow and mirthless, as she struck his zanpakuto again and again, sparks illuminating her manic eyes in shades of purple. Smiling psychotically at the visible cracks adorning the man's blade, she leaned forward and exclaimed, "And your sword seems awfully fragile, you know! It looks like it's about to shatter in your hand!"

"Oh... you think so?"

Kisuke braced his left hand against Benihime, the additional leverage halting the Grand Couturier's relentless advance, "It's hard to compare Benihime to your Needle Blade. But she still has a few tricks up her sleeves. *Nake*, Benihime."

"Golly, you don't need to tell me twice," Nui giggled as she twirled around the crimson wave of energy, manicured fingers curled through the Needle Blade's handle. Humming softly when the technique collided with the ground, creating a massive explosion that rustled her blonde pigtails, she tilted her head to the side and pouted, "But that sure was unexpected!"

"Why thank you," Kisuke smirked, traces of crimson clinging to Benihime, "Now if it's not too much trouble, could you apologize to Benihime? Your comment hurt her feelings."

"You've got quite a few screws loose, you know!"

Nui clapped her hands together at the shopkeeper's audacity, the Needle Blade awkwardly propped against her shoulder. Pursing her lips cutely, the façade of mirth barely concealing the utter contempt she felt, the Grand Couturier mulled over the comment before smiling darkly, "But *non* !"

Pain blossomed through Kisuke's body when the muscles and ligaments in his right shoulder were severed. Staring in disbelief when he noticed Ururu standing at the periphery of his vision, blood dripping from her Needle Blade, he grimaced as everything came together, seemingly uncorrelated pieces of evidence making perfect sense in his mind. At their level of synchronization Nui Harime and Ururu possessed *identical* spiritual pressures. There was no distinction between them, making it impossible to sense Ururu whenever he was fighting the Grand Couturier and vice versa.

But in his defense, most of what he knew about Twin Life Fiber Entanglement came from second-hand sources.

"Kamisori, Benihime."

An arc of wavering crimson energy exploded against the twin sisters as Kisuke took advantage of their childish delight at rendering his right arm useless. Immediately retreating from the Grand Couturier using Shunpo, his body flickering with every step across the underground chamber, Kisuke frowned when he touched down on the ground only to noticing Ururu and Nui already waiting for him.

"Gee, just how many attacks do you have up your sleeves?"

Nui Harime giggled at the shopkeeper's bloody condition, his ragged appearance causing her heart to flutter, "Because your sword is just full of surprises!"

"Don't sell yourself short, Nui Harime."

Kisuke sighed dramatically while switching Benihime to his other hand, "Twin Life Fiber Entanglement is a rather useful ability. It's virtually impossible for me to tell you and Ururu apart."

"Flattery will get you nowhere!"

Nui entwined her fingers with Amu's, their Life Fibers pulsing in synchronization as she cheerfully threatened, "But calling Amu by that ugly and atrocious name is just rude! It's like you didn't kidnap her! So if it's not too much trouble..."

"... could you just shut up and die?" Amu finished, her mouth twisting into a faint scowl, "It's really annoying listening to you talk..."

"... but we should be super careful," Nui interrupted with a dramatic flourish. Smiling widely while pointing the Needle Blade at Kisuke's heart, its purple coloration shimmering with a bright metallic luster, she enthusiastically added, "Giving this guy any time to think is just *asking* for trouble!"

Amu looked off into the distance, dulled eyes focusing on Lady Ragyo's moving presence, "This *has* been a lot of fun but we should

just kill him. I'm sure Lady Ragyo will be happy when we bring back his head."

"I'm starting to think you two don't like me very much..."

A breeze gusted through the underground chamber as Kiseki collapsed onto the ground, the apparently defeatist behavior causing the Grand Couturier to blink in confusion. Stabbing Benihime between his feet despite the threat poised by the sisters, he raised a finger in front of his face and smirked, "But you shouldn't celebrate just yet, Nui Harime. There's quite a lot you don't know about me... including the secret behind my zanpakuto."

"That's *really* interesting."

Sarcasm dripped from the Grand Couturier's voice as she marched towards the shopkeeper, "But nothing you say will -"

"Every zanpakuto possesses a Shikai - initial release - which gives their wielder access to several unique abilities. I'm sure you're more than familiar with Benihime by now," Kiseki motioned to his zanpakuto as a faint crimson aura caused his coat to gently flutter, "But shouldn't something with an initial release also have a *final release* ?"

Nui and Amu vanished before the enigmatic shopkeeper finished speaking, the ground cracking beneath their feet. They *refused* to let Kiseki Urahara pull another cowardly trick! Not when they were so close to making him pay for everything! Her mouth twisting into an ugly expression of utmost hatred, the Grand Couturier felt her sister's Life Fibers resonating in her soul when they attacked the man, Needle Blades shining brightly in the artificial daylight. Sapphire eyes, which previously gleamed with an unholy mirth, widening when spiritual pressure exploded from his body, Nui froze when Kiseki Urahara grabbed his zanpakuto.

"Sorry, but you had your chance," Kiseki somberly muttered, the crimson aura surrounding his body growing deeper, "Bankai:

Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame."

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Ragyo callously tore her sole remaining arm out of the shinigami's chest in a shower of blood, the multicolored sphere of Life Fibers glowing brightly in her charred fingers.

"La vie est drôle..."

The phrase contained not a trace of mirth, emerging from her bloody lips with a snarling lisp. Panting heavily as the battle arrived at the predestined conclusion, the burns and wounds adorning her flesh glowing with multicolored radiance, she smirked haughtily at the man's agonized expression. How *appropriate*. Already she could feel the righteous anger and fury at his blasphemous transgressions against the Original Life Fiber fading away, replaced with simple indignation. Standing tall as her body regeneration, flesh and clothing weaving out of nothingness, Ragyo narrowed her eyes when *something* emerged from the sphere clenched in her fingers.

"Quelle..."

Confusion etched itself upon her features at the white material flowing from the Life Fiber sphere, coating her fingers and hand in skin-tight clothing that accentuating every curve. As the substance moved towards her wrist, flowing like water across her skin, Ragyo's bewilderment was rapidly replaced by fury and loathing. How *dare* something so ugly and tainted adorn her! Her lips twisted into a snarl at the sphere's arrogance, that it *dared* cover one blessed by the Original Life Fiber with such atrocious and grotesque clothing, her eyes briefly flashed before the clothing *shattered* into dust.

"Nothing so unseemly has the right to adorn my body."

She sneered at the Life Fiber sphere, its multicolored luster dimming beneath her willpower, before returning her attention to the heavily injured man standing at death's door. That he was still *standing* despite the gaping wound in his chest was impressive. But his refusal to *die* was beginning to wear on her nerves. Heels clacking softly as she folded her arms under her bosom, Isshin's sword momentarily misplaced following the shinigami's previous technique, Ragyo smirked condescendingly, "As for you... it's remarkable you were able to use this *thing*'s power, however corrupted and vile it may be. So I suppose congratulations are in order..."

Smug arrogance crept into her voice at the shinigami's defiant expression, a stark contrast to his current condition. Momentarily glancing at the three massive COVERS attempting to deal with Yoruichi Shihoin, the woman's power and ability deserving no less, Ragyo chuckled with barely repressed pleasure before continuing, "Yet you never stood a chance. This *thing* was the only reason you managed to last so long. But much like someone passing off faux designs as Revocs' latest fall fashion apparel, the power you stole was a pale mockery of someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber!"

Her fist smashed against Aizen's face before the shinigami could muster a defense, the manic look in her eyes noticeable within the accompanying flash of lightning.

"SO HOW..."

She punched him in the nose, breaking cartilage in a spray of blood.

"... DARE YOU..."

Ragyo shouted at the top of her lungs as she *kept* punching the shinigami, droplets of blood intermingling with the falling rain.

"... USE SUCH A THING..."

The multicolored undertone shining from her hair brightened immensely when she grabbed the shinigami's face and *squeezed* .



"... AGAINST ME!"

Her mouth twisted into a snarl as the man was sent spiraling to the ground in an eruption of power, his undignified impact kicking up an enormous plume of smoke that rose above the rooftops of Karakura Town. Streams of water trailed down Ragyo's face as she stared at the destruction far below, her exasperation at the man's blasphemy slowly abating. Grimacing at the Life Fiber sphere resting in the palm of her hand, the dulled orb desperately trying to shimmer with its previous radiance, she sighed deeply and flicked her right hand outwards, multicolored Life Fibers weaving from her fingers.

A pleased sigh escaping her throat when Isshin's sword returned to her grasp, Ragyo glowered at the shinigami standing in the devastated park, "And with *that* being said..."

Ragyo crossed the distance separating them as she trailed off, her heels clacking next to the shinigami in the blink of an eye. Holding Isshin's blade directly above the annoying man's neck, the sword poised to skewer his throat from back to front, she grinned sadistically, "Give my regards to Kisuke Urahara when -"

She effortlessly dodged the concentrated bolt of lightning fired from the shinigami's finger, the corners of her mouth twitching at being *interrupted* by someone who didn't know their place. Glaring at the man when he leapt off the ground faster than someone with lethal wounds had any right to move, electricity crackling sharply around his zanpakuto while another annoying spell formed on his opposite hand, Ragyo patiently waited until the very last second before raising her forearm, the blade *shattering* against bare flesh.

"Pathetic..."

Sadistic amusement flashed through Ragyo's eyes as she smashed her heel into the shinigami's torn stomach, the accompanying pulse of spiritual energy sending him bouncing out of the crater. Would he ever learn? Running a finger down her dress, the living fabric responding perfectly to her touch, she slowly marched after the

shinigami, "But you brought this on yourself. Your blasphemy against Life Fibers... against the Original Life Fiber... for daring to create something so abhorrent and vile cannot be tolerated. And while I certainly *enjoyed* our time together I do have a schedule to keep..."

The surrounding storm *vaporized* as multicolored spiritual energy enveloped Isshin's sword. She was finished fooling around with the shinigami. Every time she gave the man an inch he took a mile and then some. Which is why she decided to simply destroy every trace of his miserable existence. It would be a poetic and ignominious death for someone who defiled the Original Life Fiber, "Of course, you could continue your futile resistance. But I'm afraid without your tiresome illusions you're nothing more than another pathetic human."

"What a fascinating statement..."

Aizen chuckled despite his broken nose as he slowly staggered back onto his feet, the limp from his fractured leg barely noticeable. As the laughter reached a crescendo, he smirked at the bemused matriarch, "... Ragyo Kiryuin."

Blood sprayed through the rain before Ragyo could comprehend the familiarity of the phrase, maroon eyes widening as Satsuki severed her left arm with the Scissor Blade. Staring at her daughter crouched at her side, Junketsu's advanced configuration once more adorning her undeserving flesh, Ragyo snarled when Satsuki reached for the Life Fiber sphere. Heels clacking as she quickly recovered from the dismemberment, Isshin's blade arcing towards her surprised daughter's neck, Ragyo stiffened when a light green hexagonal barrier formed in front of Satsuki.

"What!?"

Her arm quivered under the abrupt resistance when the barrier expanded, its surface pulsating as the immense energy coiled around Isshin's blade was dispersed away from her foolish daughter. Glowering at the shinigami's satisfied grin, the amusement in his pained expression annoyingly obvious as the surrounding landscape

was enveloped in a massive explosion of light, Ragyo's eyebrow twitched when he had the audacity to speak.

"You seem shocked, Ragyo Kiryuin," Aizen smirked pleasantly at the infuriated woman, "Did you believe my repertoire was limited to illusions and a few offensive techniques?"

Ragyo snarled at the condescending explanation, annoyance in her eyes when Satsuki retreated with the Life Fiber sphere moments before the hexagonal barrier shattered beneath her power. This was getting *ridiculous* . Staring at her daughter in frustration as her arm was drawn back into proper alignment with a wet squelch, blood and visceral blemishing her dress rapidly vanishing, Ragyo frowned at the shinigami's smug arrogance, a bloody grin that should be ground into the mud. *Of course* the man placed an illusion on Satsuki. Why on earth wouldn't he?

It certainly explained why she hadn't felt Junketsu until after Satsuki severed her arm.

"This is *quite* the surprise."

She quirked an eyebrow curiously when her daughter landed next to the insignificant speck of a man. Illusions or not... annoying abilities that could destroy her flesh aside... there was nothing to worry about Satsuki's sudden interference. Chuckling as she brushed aside a strand of loose silver hair, the amused laughter gaining her daughter's attention, Ragyo folded an arm across her chest, "A few weeks ago you would have severed my head without hesitation, allowing thoughts of petty revenge for Souichiro's death to cloud your judgment. But I'm curious... just *what* do you intend to do now?"

The brief hesitation in Satsuki's eyes, the subtle tensing of her taut muscles beneath Junketsu's fabric, warmed Ragyo's heart, "You *must* realize the Life Fiber sphere you risked your life stealing is completely worthless. It wouldn't *dare* allow a human to use its power against the Original Life Fiber's chosen servant. It *knows* its proper place in the grand scheme of things... unlike *you* ."

Ragyo shook her head, "If only you were more like Ryuko..."

Satsuki snarled in righteous fury, her mouth twisting into a sneer at her mother's tainted words, "What did you say?"

The Kiryuin matriarch smirked arrogantly at her eldest daughter's hate-filled expression, the loathing everything she hoped to accomplish with such an incendiary statement. Placing a hand against her cheek, eyes briefly focusing on the shinigami bleeding to death several feet from Satsuki, Ragyo sighed in mock disappointment, "It should be obvious, Satsuki. As a Life Fiber Hybrid, Ryuko is capable of making that sphere obey her fanciful teenage whims. You, on the other hand, are nothing more than a confused little girl who has forgotten her place."

"You only survived this long because of Junketsu, not the other way around," Ragyo basked in Satsuki's growing anger, the trembling of her daughter's muscles filling her heart with pleasure, "Which is *highly* disappointing. To think I raised such a rebellious and disrespectful daughter."

She turned her attention to Junketsu, the Kamui's multicolored eyes quivering slightly under her gaze, "It's honestly *embarrassing* that Isshin, despite his childish mannerisms, taught Ichigo proper discipline. Mais telle est la vie. Now... I think it's time I -"

"HOLD YOUR TONGUE!"

Satsuki shouted passionately over the torrential downpour, sapphire light blazing into existence as the force of her willpower and spiritual pressure overwhelmed her mother's derisive mockery, "Your words mean nothing to me, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

The intense aura enveloping Satsuki's body, tinting Junketsu a vivid shade of azure and causing the Kamui to tighten, pulsed when the Hōgyoku clasped in her fingers burst back into life, shining with a familiar shade of sapphire that immediately caught both Aizen and her mother's attention. Unconcerned when the Scissor Blade slowly

shifted colorations, auburn replaced by brilliant cerulean, Satsuki felt a mote of pride at Ragyo's shocked expression. She could *feel* Junketsu's child-like presence in her mind, the previously inaudible whispers now understandable in a way that defied comprehension.

"All of my mistakes..."

Satsuki's hair whipped frenziedly within the intense aura as she pointed the Scissor Blade at her mother, "Every decision that harmed others in the name of stopping *you*... of stopping the Original Life Fiber... will need to face the light of day! There's not a trace of doubt or indecision in my mind about such things! I will gladly face judgment for my actions! But at this moment that does not matter! Everyone in Karakura Town is fighting against *you*, Ragyo Kiryuin! They are risking everything to *destroy* Xcution and your COVERS! To destroy Life Fibers and shatter their hold upon humanity's fate!"

"AND THAT..."

Junketsu's eyes widened as the aura *exploded* into a beacon of light visible across Karakura Town, "... IS WHY I WILL DEFEAT YOU... RAGYO KIRYUIN!"

"No! This cannot be..."

Ragyo couldn't understand the event transpiring before her eyes. No... she adamantly *refused* to believe it! Such a thing was impossible! Yet a cold shiver raced down her spine when thousands of inaudible roars merged into a cacophony, the result of her COVERS simultaneously disintegrating into their constituent Life Fibers.

"Comment pourriez..."

She involuntarily stepped backwards, mouth slightly agape in growing shock and disbelief, when the countless Life Fibers floating above the city streamed towards her daughter. Lips quivering in

unadulterated loathing at Junketsu absorbing her COVERS, making their power and strength her own, Ragyo clenched her teeth in mounting frustration! This couldn't be happening!

"Impossible!"

Multicolored spiritual energy exploded from the Kiryuin matriarch's body, bathing the surrounding landscape with enough light to rival her foolish daughter, as she shot forward with all the speed she could muster, "You are unworthy of wearing such clothing!"

Satsuki watched her mother's inhuman breakdown with passive detachment as she calmly placed her left hand upon the cerulean Scissor Blade, the Hōgyoku clasped firmly within her fingers. She could feel Junketsu transforming, immersing her body with the strength of every COVERS in Karakura Town. Breathing deeply as Junketsu's synchronized power pulsed outward, dispelling the surrounding rain and causing Ragyo Kiryuin to momentarily falter, Satsuki scowled before shouting at the top of her lungs.

"JUNKETSU... SHINZUI!"

# Fly Like An Eagle

*Here's Chapter 56 of my story and let me state right off the bat - I'm proud of everything that happens. It's the culmination of years of work, constantly making sure to not screw anything up. It was difficult, I'll admit, but I believe it was worth it in the end. Some parts of this chapter took longer to write than others, but that was only to ensure the quality of everything - fight scenes or not - were up to my standards. So I hope you enjoy the chapter!*

*Oh! I also highly recommend AFTER finishing the chapter to visit **that-booky-chick15** on deviantart. She's done a lot of fanart for my story. I don't want to spoil anything but one of her newest artworks is a picture of Junketsu's fashion week apparel, colored using the scheme I chose for this story.*

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## Chapter 56 - Fly Like An Eagle

Kugo Ginjo grimaced, eyes narrowed as he raised a hand to block the blinding light filtering through the rain-soaked kitchen window, "Was that... a Hado?"

His skin nearly itched from the potent spiritual energy composing the technique, a testament to its sheer *magnitude*. It was mind-boggling. He knew the higher-level Bakudo and Hado would be incomparable to the basic Kido he learned during his time as a substitute shinigami but this... this was unbelievable. Was every captain capable of casting such devastatingly powerful techniques? The incantation must have been enormous. But that was the least of his concerns at the moment. Leaning forward when Isshin's house *shook*, the entire structure shaking under the Hado's shockwave, Ginjo frowned when he tried identifying the shinigami fighting Ragyo Kiryuin.

He didn't recognize their spiritual pressure.

Then again, that was somewhat expected. As the newest human to miraculously obtain shinigami powers he had been stationed in the World of the Living. The only times he met with the Gotei 13 were during his reports and when Jushiro Ukitake gave him the so-called combat pass, smiling while lying to his face about the badge's true purpose. And after countless years of loyalty and dedication they had the audacity to frame him for murder?

The Seireitei could rot in hell for all he cared.

Still, he wouldn't care if the Captain Commander personally confronted Ragyo Kiryuin. The woman was an inhuman monster attempting to sacrifice humanity to Life Fibers. It didn't make any sense why the old bastard hadn't already killed Ragyo.

"Boy, that's some serious firepower!"

Kon jumped onto the countertop with a soft *plop*, his plushie body squeaking as he walked closer to the window. Raising a stubby arm over his beady eyes, completely ignorant of the thoughts coursing through Ginjo's mind, the Mod Soul turned autonomous COVERS whistled at the already fading explosion of light and spiritual energy, "You have any idea who's fighting Ryuko's crazy mom?"

The former member of Xcution frowned, "No."

"Well, it's giving me the creeps," Kon huffed with an exaggerated flourish, one plushie arm pointing out the window, "And *those* things are still freaky!"

The massive weapon strapped across Ginjo's back shifted when he noticed the hundreds of COVERS floating overhead, flickering crimson light heralding their arrival as they poured from the east. Damn it! How did Ragyo's army of COVERS break through Nudist Beach's defenses? Fingers twitching as he resisted the urge to confront the Life Fiber beings, Ginjo stormed out of the kitchen,



leaving Kon alone to threaten the COVERS. This wasn't *right* . Coming back to Isshin's house at the last minute, disregarding any orders from Satsuki and Nudist Beach, was his decision but he couldn't ignore the guilt welling in his chest.

He wanted to personally take down his insane colleagues, if only to alleviate the immense guilt of standing on the sidelines for seventeen years. It was *his* fault Ragyo Kiryuin was not stopped years ago. If anyone died their deaths would fall on *his* shoulders. Yoruichi Shihoin was strong but the Elite Four's regalia, no matter how improved by Kisuke Urahara, could not match Xcution's raiment in terms of power. He wasn't even sure Ichigo's friends would stand a chance if Ragyo ordered Xcution to massacre everyone that moved.

*Especially* if she had the Grand Couturier reweave their raiment before invading Karakura Town.

"I hope dad's ok..."

His mouth tightened into a grimace at the fearful voice. The floorboard creaking loudly as he hesitantly continued walking into the living room, Ginjo nearly stopped when he noticed Yuzu and Karin staring through the window at the COVERS floating overhead, the former's hands nervously clenched over her chest. Giving a half-hearted greeting when they turned around, the friendly gesture briefly faltering at Karin's suspicious scowl, he tensed when Yuzu desperately asked, "Mr. Ginjo, do you think our dad's alright?"

"Don't worry about Isshin. I'm sure he's perfectly fine."

Ginjo chuckled even as he lied directly to Isshin's daughters, "Ragyo Kiryuin might be strong but even she fears your old -"

There was a deafening *thump* when several COVERS simultaneously landed outside the house, pavement and concrete shattering beneath the massive Life Fiber beings as they began smashing apart the neighborhood. Her heart beating rapidly at the sight of the monsters, the crimson light shining from within their

bodies causing her to feel nauseous, Yuzu flinched away from the window when one of the COVERS turned in her direction.

"Don't worry, Yuzu," Ginjo attempted to reassure the terrified girl, drawing a scowl from Karin, "Isshin installed an Anti-COVERS barrier around this place over the summer. We're practically invisible to those things. Ragyo Kiryuin might know this address but your old man's smarter. He made sure not a single COVERS could get through the front door."

"Is *that* why I couldn't go outside?! I literally burst into flames when I tried escaping through the back door, you bastard!"

Kon's angry shouting cut through the tension when the Mod Soul sprinted into the room, an annoyed expression on his face. Leaping onto the coffee table before throwing everything he had at the former substitute shinigami, fully intent on decking the guy in the jaw for his previous humiliation, his plan fell comically apart when Ginjo grabbed him without turning around. As he struggled within the man's grip, muffled curses causing Ginjo to tighten his fingers, Kon suddenly stopped. Of course! How could he not see it earlier? Finally realizing that the atrocious dress Yuzu stitched onto his beautiful body, he freed his mouth and huffed, "On second thought give my thanks to Isshin, will ya?"

"Huh?"

Quirking an eyebrow before releasing Kon, the possessed stuffed animal landing in a somewhat dignified manner before shuffling back toward the kitchen, Ginjo's mouth drew into a grimace when a derisive snort caught his attention. Arms trembling with barely restrained anger, fingers clenched into quivering fists, Karin's dark grey eyes narrowed as she glared at the former shinigami, "Why are you here? If the old goat turned this place into a fortress then why the hell are you standing around here doing nothing?"

"Karin!"

Weeks of frustration and fear caused Karin to lash out, furiously pulling away from Yuzu when her sister tried comforting her. She couldn't stand it! All of her friends left weeks ago, right before Ragyo Kiryuin's monsters swept across most of Japan. She didn't even *know* if any of them were still alive! Grabbing Ginjo's jacket, her knuckles turning white from the pressure, tears welled in Karin's eyes as she shouted, "Why aren't you out there fighting that woman's army of monsters!?"

"It's not that simple..."

A flash of lightning accompanied the half-hearted response, painting the living room in shades of purple and white. Ginjo knew there weren't any excuses for his actions. He selfishly retreated from the front lines to protect Isshin's daughters, allowing dozens of men and women to fall against Ragyo Kiryuin's army of COVERS. Their deaths, or worse, would be on his hands.

"Of course it's simple!"

He refused to meet Karin's eyes as she continued shouting, her accusations containing several words someone her age shouldn't know. Turning toward the window as Yuzu moved to calm her sister down, the rain-soaked landscape offering him very little solace, Ginjo stiffened when something moved across the street, darting rapidly from rooftop to rooftop before stopping several blocks away. Strange... there shouldn't be anyone this far away from the front lines. And most of the civilians fled to Osaka and other cities days ago. Wait... he knew this spiritual pressure.

Quickly grabbing Yuzu and Karin when light flashed from the figure's position, Ginjo leapt into the kitchen seconds before the living room exploded, showering everything in shards of splintered wood and glass.

Ginjo grunted when his head smashed through the table before slamming against the far wall of the kitchen, his back immediately flaring in pain from the impact. Ignoring the ringing in his ears, he

sighed in visible relief upon noticing Yuzu and Karin were mostly unharmed by the explosion. Bruised and disoriented but nothing serious. Blood trailing down his face as he slowly stood back on his feet, a light *squeak* barely grabbing his attention when he accidentally stepped on Kon, Ginjo tensed when the normally invisible barrier around Isshin's house shimmered brightly before shattering.

Of course the rocket had an Anti-Life Fiber warhead. Why wouldn't it?

"It appears I've overestimated the potency of Isshin's Anti-COVERS barrier."

His eyes widened as a figure calmly strutted through the smoking hole in the living room, their footsteps measured and precise. Angrily reaching over his shoulder for Ragnarok when the figure noticed his presence, their purple metallic armor glistening wetly from the storm, Ginjo clenched his teeth and sneered, "I should have known..."

Ominous multicolored light pierced through the acrid smoke and dust, dissipating the residual particulates as the petite figure removed the violet visor covering her amber eyes, "Your presence is unexpected, Kugo Ginjo. Lady Ragyo presumed someone with your history would be fighting on the front lines against Xcution and her COVERS."

"Is that right?"

Ginjo shifted his footing as he unsheathed Ragnarok, the massive weapon pointed threateningly at the dark skinned woman. This wasn't good. He could sense the spiritual pressure of her Excussion Raiment, restitched in the aftermath of the Great Culture and Sports Festival by the Grand Couturier. It seemed Ragyo Kiryuin truly wasn't holding anything back when it came to wiping out Karakura Town. Glancing over his shoulder, Yuzu and Karin's terrified expressions causing his hands to clench tightly around Ragnarok, he nevertheless smiled arrogantly at the woman, "You must be losing

your touch, Hououmaru. Nineteen years and you still don't know anything about me? I'm almost insulted."

The leader of Xcution frowned at his arrogance, "Lady Ragyo was suspicious of your true allegiance for many years."

He tensed when several COVERS landed outside, their monstrous forms glowing with a bright crimson light, "Why did you betray Isshin?"

"I don't understand the question," Hououmaru responded, her eyes momentarily drifting to Isshin's daughters.

"I thought it was odd when I sensed your spiritual pressure near Isshin... or at least someone *similar* to you," Ginjo scoffed, which elicited nothing more than a quirked eyebrow out of curiosity from the secretary, "Heh... I bet you're confused by what I'm talking about, Hououmaru. So let me break things down for you..."

Multicolored light shimmered around Ragnarok, drawing the woman's attention as he finished, "Isshin was talking to someone right before the Bleach Bomb exploded in his face. But that person wasn't *you*. Their spiritual pressure was different... almost unnatural. If I had to guess, I'd say someone created a Life Fiber clone with your memories."

"Your knowledge of Lady Ragyo's techniques remains frighteningly accurate, Kugo Ginjo."

Hououmaru permitted the slight trace of annoyance to mar her otherwise stoic façade. Kugo Ginjo's unexpected presence in Isshin's house made obtaining her objective exponentially more difficult. His knowledge concerning Life Fibers - learned over the course of nearly two decades of traitorous service to Lady Ragyo - meant she couldn't afford to simply attack without forethought. Clacking an armored heel against the floor upon deciding the most expedient course of action to eliminate the threat posed by Ginjo,

she ignored the loud impacts of the COVERS landing outside, "However, your loyalty to Isshin Kurosaki is quite suspect."

Ginjo was taken aback by the comment, "What?"

"You mentioned sensing something strange about my clone, which placed you in a position to counter Lady Ragyo. Yet you decided *not* to act," Hououmaru smirked in satisfaction as shocked realization slowly dawned upon the traitorous employee, "Your presence at the crucial moment in Operation Laissez Faire could have derailed Lady Ragyo's plans. All of her strategies depended upon incapacitating Isshin Kurosaki. Yet your inaction allowed the operation to proceed. Isshin Kurosaki is currently unable to muster the strength to oppose Lady Ragyo, leaving the naked apes and her rebellious daughter without protection."

She mockingly bowed at the waist, a faint smirk pulling at the corners of her mouth, "And for that you have my sincerest gratitude, Kugo Ginjo. Your continued service to Revocs has been -"

An intense burst of multicolored light caused Hououmaru to reflexively unsheathe her black trench knife, the obsidian weapon barely parrying the massive sword aiming to cleave off her head. Rapidly dodging the rest of Ginjo's subsequent attacks, flickers of purple electricity highlighting her movements, her eyes widened when he suddenly released his grip upon Ragnarok, the blade spinning twice through the air before embedding itself into the floor. Caught off guard by the absurdity of Ginjo's action, she was sent flying out of the house when he punched her squarely in the jaw.

"Kon!"

Ginjo retrieved Ragnarok from its impromptu perch before Hououmaru even cleared the sidewalk. The floor creaking underneath his combat boots as he swung his massive weapon at the COVERS attempting to enter the living room, the Life Fiber creatures freezing when he flashed through their bodies before scattering into strands of crimson fibers, he grimaced before looking

over his shoulder. Rain soaking his hair when he saw the Mod Soul standing in front of Karin, Ginjo shouted at the top of his lungs, "Take Yuzu and Karin as far away from here as possible! Don't stop for anything!"

"R-Right!"

The plushie nodded fervently before pressing the large button on his stomach. Sharpened tailor claws raking across the kitchen floor as he transformed into his awesome and powerful COVERS form in an outburst of multicolored stars, Kon chuckled with a metallic undertone before quickly stopping. This was no time for laughing. His glowing crimson eyes locked on Ginjo as Yuzu and Karin climbed onto his back, their hands grabbing bundles of his Life Fibers for support, the Mod Soul turned COVERS saluted the former substitute shinigami with his tail before bounding out the back door.

Smirking as the Mod Soul escaped, his spiritual pressure disappearing into the distance, Ginjo's momentarily relief vanished at the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps.

His raiment fluttering as the rest of the COVERS began pursuing Kon, he waited just a moment before slammed his sword into the street, the subsequent explosion of spiritual energy forcing Rei Hououmaru backwards. Rain mixing with the sweat dripping down his face as the secretary landed on her feet, random bursts of purple electricity arcing from her raiment, he hefted Ragnarok across his body and grimaced. This wasn't good. Hououmaru possessed the highest Life Fiber resistance in Xcution. He didn't know if his Cuirasse Raiment could take her down.

"What's wrong, Hououmaru?"

Ginjo smirked at the woman's confused expression, a stark departure from her earlier stoicism, "You seem surprised. Didn't Riruka mention anything about my new raiment?"

"Do not confuse surprise with frustration, Ginjo."

Rei Hououmaru flipped her trench knife into a reverse grip, the blade glistening in the pouring rain. Thunder roaring overhead as she started at her traitorous comrade, muscles tensed in preparation for anything and everything, she frowned when Ginjo scoffed under his breath, "You never leave Ragyo's side. The fact she sent you here means you're after something important. Why are you here? What do you want?"

"It's not what I want..."

Information pertaining to Kugo Ginjo's rewoven Cuirasse Raiment streamed down her visor's screen, "It was never what I wanted. All that matters is helping Lady Ragyo achieve her dreams. And one thing she deeply desires is your death, Kugo Ginjo."

Ginjo rolled his shoulders before sliding one foot outwards, gloved hands tightening around Ragnarok's handle. Smirking as multicolored light shone from his raiment, its brilliance a vivid contrast to his surroundings, he chuckled mirthlessly, "You're really a bitch, aren't you Hououmaru? But don't think I'm anything like Isshin! I know how you fight!"

The dark skinned secretary stepped forward in the middle of Ginjo's monologue, vanishing in a flash of electricity. It was incredibly foolish to speak with such a carefree and arrogant attitude in the middle of a fight, especially against someone of her caliber. He should have known better. Small puddles of water rippling when she reappeared behind Ginjo, crackling arcs of electricity gathered in her hands as she thrust the trench knife at his spine, "Électrocution Valse."

A metallic *clang* reverberated throughout the streets, shattering the nearby windows, when Ginjo spun around, Ragnarok blocking her attack in an intense burst of sparks and spiritual energy.

"I know all your tricks, Hououmaru!"

Ginjo grunted as he turned around, his massive sword aiming for the secretary's neck. Cursing when she disappeared at the last possible



moment, vanishing nearly too fast for his eyes to track, he tensed in preparation for her subsequent series of attacks only to scowl when nothing happened. His head snapping back and forth, drops of rain falling from his hair as he searched for the woman, Ginjo briefly stiffened when Hououmaru's spiritual pressure reappeared on the roof of a nearby house. Pivoting on one foot, Ragnarok raised in preparation for her next attack, his eyes narrowed when she simply stared passively from the rooftop, an unreadable expression on her face.

Something wasn't right.

A flash of lightning illuminated Hououmaru's raiment as he flexed his fingers around Ragnarok. What was she planning? He knew from experience that Hououmaru's preferred tactic was quick surgical strikes enhanced by her Excussion Raiment's incredible speed and reflexes. It was something the Grand Couturier actually *praised*. Yet she wasn't doing that! She allowed him to talk. Purposely wasting any chance of catching him off guard until the very last moment. It made no sense! What the hell was going on?

"Damn it!"

The answer came almost immediately. *He* wasn't the target! Turning around, thoughts of killing Ragyo's second-in-command forgotten, Ginjo rushed to leave only for Hououmaru to suddenly block his path, the black trench knife in her clawed fingers aimed at his throat.

"Your interference will not be tolerated, Kugo Ginjo. Electrocutation Étape."

Hououmaru's amber eyes narrowed, the purple visor shimmering with a multicolored light as electricity crackled around her Excussion Raiment. Breathing steadily when Ginjo hefted his massive weapon, wisps of spiritual energy wafting from the blade, she shifted one foot backwards. Traitor or not, Kugo Ginjo was still wearing raiment. And as one of the original members of Xcution brought into the organization by Isshin Kurosaki, he knew her raiment's abilities and

techniques. Victory could not be presumed until his heart stopped beating.

And she would sacrifice her life to ensure Lady Ragyo's dreams became reality.

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"JUNKETSU... SHINZUI!"

Shimmering fragments of sapphire twinkled around Satsuki Kiryuin as the outpouring of spiritual energy disintegrated the surrounding landscape. Standing several feet away, maroon eyes staring at the intense light enveloping her undeserving daughter's hidden form, Ragyo Kiryuin gnashed her teeth in building frustration. This was impossible! How could Satsuki, a failure incompatible with Life Fibers, synchronize with Junketsu to such an extent? Humans were incapable of donning a Kamui's ultimate configuration! A snarl pulling at her lips, twisting her features into an ugly mask unbefitting for a woman of her stature, Ragyo growled at the atrocious blue glimmer.

*Bien sûr...* that insignificant speck of a man's Life Fiber sphere.

Her eyes widened, muscles instinctively tensing beneath her flaunting dress, when the sapphire light surrounding Satsuki *shattered*. Sneering as the torrential downpour resumed over the park, droplets of cold rain running down her arms, Ragyo found herself enraptured by the marvelous Kamui adorning her daughter's undeserving flesh.

" *Incroyable...* "

Junketsu's beautiful white form, which she painstakingly stitched alongside Isshin so many years ago, was now dyed a deep and majestic sapphire. Streams of silver energy constantly wafted from the Kamui's grandiose pauldrons, surrounding Satsuki like a lustrous

quilted blanket. It was *beautiful*, a work of art unmatched by anything created by humanity. A fully ascended Kamui, even one adorning her miserable daughter, was simply *stupéfiant* .

"Oh?"

Ragyo quirked an eyebrow, her stunned silence replaced by faint amusement, "Oh dear... that's quite the attitude. You really believe that, don't you? It appears you've adopted quite a few of Satsuki's more annoying mannerisms."

She raised Isshin's hardened Life Fiber weapon, the blade glistening in the rain. Ignoring Satsuki's expression, her daughter's eyes narrowing at the seemingly one-sided conversation, Ragyo sighed wistfully. She wasn't in the mood to deal with an overconfident Kamui. But petulant outburst or not, Satsuki was wearing Junketsu's fashion week apparel. It was not a configuration she could take lightly. *La vie est drôle*. To think her eldest daughter, a failure from birth, would be the first to push their Kamui to such a transformation.

Somewhere Isshin was laughing at her.

Her heels clacked ominously as she vanished, disappearing into the rain when Satsuki rushed forward without pontificating. Did her daughter *honestly* believe she wasn't devoting her full attention? How naïve. Fighting Junketsu Shinzui with anything *less* than the majesty of her full strength would insult all Life Fibers. Maroon eyes narrowing slightly in frustration when her daughter closed the distance in a flash of silver light, Scissor Blade raised over her shoulders, she growled before blocking the attack, an annoyed scoff leaving her lips even as the ground shattered underneath her heels. Was this the full extent of Junketsu's power? Satsuki would need *far* more power to -

Ragyo froze when *something* nearby caught her attention.

The strength pressing down upon her sword increased returning Ragyo to reality as silver and sapphire burst from Satsuki's prone

form. Snarling as spiritual energy erupted from the hardened Life Fiber weapon, the matriarch could not believe this was happening. She was *actually* being pushed back? HER?! Heels digging into the ground for support when Satsuki pushed forward, silver spiritual energy mixing with the pure essence of her daughter's indomitable willpower, Ragyo cursed as her guard broke, blood spewing from multiple wounds as she was sent flying away, her body crashing unceremoniously through building after building.

"That's an interesting form, Satsuki Kiryuin."

Satsuki frowned, an annoyed scowl pulling at the corners of her mouth, when the heavily bleeding shinigami appeared at her side. Unconcerned by the gaping wound in the middle of his chest, only a thin layer of sweat in the rain hinting at his current level of discomfort, Sosuke Aizen stared at Junketsu's configuration with a discerning eye, "Junketsu Shinzui, was it? Remarkable. I was unaware Kamui were capable of achieving such transformations."

She carelessly tossed the Life Fiber sphere at the shinigami, discarding the invention without acknowledging the compliment. The artifact might be extraordinarily powerful, its power drawn directly from the Original Life Fiber, but it was unnecessary, an unwanted burden compared to Junketsu. Staring northward when a pulse of malignant spiritual pressure pushed against her mind, the once overwhelming sensation barely registering, Satsuki glowered as her hair shifted softly in the wind. She wasn't foolish enough to presume breaking through her mother's guard was enough to put down such a monstrous being. Yet her lips nevertheless curled into a faint smirk, the blanket of silver wrapped around her body brightening as a single thought crossed her mind.

Her mother had been overwhelmed by Junketsu's newfound strength.

Staring at the shinigami when he carefully placed the Life Fiber sphere against his chest, multicolored cracks instantaneously spreading across his injured body as the damage incurred fighting

her mother regenerated, Satsuki frowned thoughtfully. She could feel Junketsu's intense disgust for the invention. Yet her mind was focused upon a single question. How did the man acquire part of the Original Life Fiber? Given the disproportional longevity of shinigami could he have created the Hogyoku decades before her mother's existence? Scowling when Junketsu's multicolored eyes swiveled upward, the Kamui's intent understandable despite her inability to hear her voice, Satsuki waited until Aizen finished regenerating before bluntly asking, "Why did you not use your Bankai against my mother, Sosuke Aizen?"

"I'm afraid it's impossible to activate Seirei-no-Makoto in the middle of battle."

Aizen motioned with his shattered zanpakuto when Satsuki turned around, her Kamui's expressive eyes shimmering intensely within the silver aura of spiritual energy, "Unlike Ichigo Kurosaki's fake Bankai - Tensa Zangetsu - Seirei-no-Makoto requires several minutes of intense preparation to minimize unwanted consequences. While it's certainly possible to use my Bankai without proper planning against Ragyo Kiryuin, doing so will undoubtedly affect every person remaining within Karakura Town."

A massive *pulse* of her mother's monstrous spiritual pressure drew Satsuki's attention before she could respond to the inane explanation. He needed time to prepare his Bankai? Than for what reason did he refrain from activating Seirei-no-Makoto when her mother was ensorcelled by his illusions? She did not expect the man who singlehandedly defeated the entire Soul Society to express such *cowardice* .

Turning away from the shinigami, wisps of silver spiritual energy rising from the cerulean Scissor Blade, Satsuki scowled and looked over her shoulder, "You claim Seirei-no-Makoto requires several minutes of preparation to focus its effects upon my mother. Your hypocrisy is insulting, Souske Aizen! If that is indeed necessary why did you not use the time before confronting my mother to do so?"

"An interesting observation but unimportant at the moment," Aizen smirked at the teenager's deduction. Motioning to the Life Fiber sphere embedded in his sternum, its once brilliant glow faded to almost nothing, he allowed Satsuki several seconds to ponder his explanation before continuing, "Ragyo Kiryuin's brief theft of the Hokyoku temporarily disabled most of its abilities. As a shinigami I'm unable to wear Life Fibers or properly use hardened Life Fiber weapons like the Scissor Blade. The Hokyoku was the necessary bridge that afforded me the opportunity to fight your mother. Without its inhuman power any further involvement on my part will only hinder your efforts against Ragyo Kiryuin."

Lightning flashed across the heavens as Satsuki vanished, her body flickering out of existence before the vibrant purple faded back into dreary darkness.

Her heels *clacked* with every purposeful step, Junketsu's childish thoughts impressing themselves upon her mind, as she flew across the drenched city. Muscles growing taut when she instinctively twisted sideways, avoiding the hardened Life Fiber weapon passing inches from her stomach, Satsuki ignored the alien expression of inhuman anger on her mother's face as she shouted at the top of her lungs, "Tenrai Kagai!"

There was a brief moment of respite before a supersonic explosion rippled across Karakura Town, the tumultuous thunderstorm violently repulsed as mother and daughter unleashed a flurry of strikes against each other. Streaks of silver intermingling with rainbow as Satsuki frowned, irritation and frustration building within her chest at the ease in which her mother halted Tenrai Kagai. Refusing to allow such simplistic matters to determine the victor, Junketsu tightening around her body as she grabbed the sapphire Scissor Blade with both hands, Satsuki snarled defiantly and swung downwards, the force connecting against Isshin's weapon sending Ragyo Kiryuin plummeting uncontrollably through the rain.

" *Merde...* "

Sarcasm dripped from her lips as Ragyo retreated from Satsuki, her flaunting dress fluttering gently in the wind. *This was no longer amusing.* Furiously parrying her daughter's strikes as Satsuki caught up in a burst of silver light, eyes narrowed at the stolen power fueling Satsuki's current configuration, she stiffened when a long-forgotten presence impressed itself upon her mind. It couldn't be... she was so close! Her attention flickering to Karakura Town far below, maroon eyes desperately searching the ruined city, Ragyo gagged when Satsuki took advantage of her preoccupation, silver energy exploded out of her back as a heel slammed into her stomach.

"You've underestimated Junketsu!"

Satsuki flickered out of sight, silver light hiding her movements as she avoided her mother's retaliation, "You presumed Kamui could never stand against the power granted to you by the Original Life Fiber! But I intend to prove you wrong! For it will be Junketsu's power, tempered by my unyielding willpower, that shall end your insane tyranny over humanity!"

Ragyo snarled at her daughter's arrogance. How *dare* Satsuki speak to her with such insolence and disrespect! Her hair fluttering gently as she countered her daughter's technique, the spiritual energy contained within the Scissor Blade deflected toward the cityscape hundreds of feet beneath her heels, she ignored the anticipatory sensation pulsing against the corners of her mind. Such things could wait until *after* she finished addressing Satsuki's unbecoming behavior. Lips twisted sadistically as rainbow light coalesced across her fingertips, wisps rising from the extended digits, Ragyo's mocking laughter ended prematurely when Satsuki reached out and *caught* her hand.

"That will not work, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

Lightning illuminated the heavens as Satsuki's knee connected against the underside of her mother's chin. Blood mixed with spittle as the matriarch's head snapped backward with an audible *crack*, the faux bones in her neck briefly shattering from the force, Satsuki

wasted no time when Ragyo's heel *clacked* loudly against solidified air. Spiritual energy coalescing around the Scissor Blade, blue eyes locking with angry maroon, she snarled viciously and swung downward, severing Ragyo's right arm at the elbow.

This was it!

As blood spurted from the glowing wound, the limb immediately dissolving into its composite threads, Satsuki's attention was focused completely upon the hardened Life Fiber blade spinning away from her mother's possession. Grasping it tightly in her left hand, the multicolored hue almost instantaneously shifting to a vibrant sapphire, she crossed the weapons in front of her body and *vanished*. She only had *one* chance. Her mother would *never* allow a second opportunity. A brief flash of silver light heralding her movements as she reappeared behind Ragyo, Isshin's sword and the Scissor Blade poised above her neck, Satsuki's heart stopped when two pairs of perfectly manicured fingers gripped her wrists.

"Come now, Satsuki..."

Ragyo struggled, *actually struggled*, to hold back the hardened Life Fiber weapons. It appeared someone learned the single weakness of her regeneration. How *insulting*. Her daughter was a failure unable to merge with Life Fibers. It was blasphemous Satsuki thought she was worthy to wear Junketsu's fashion week apparel! Such glorious clothing was reserved for those blessed by Life Fibers, not some child who didn't know her place in the world. Her arms *shaking* as the blades slowly moving toward her neck stopped, Ragyo couldn't suppress an arrogant smirk at her daughter's frustrated expression, "Did you *really*... think it would be... that easy?"

"Enough!"

The blanket of silver light enveloping her body brightened as Satsuki matched her mother's monstrous strength, the hardened Life Fiber weapons once more moving forward, "Do not presume victory,



Ragyo Kiryuin! Your battle against Sosuke Aizen proved your strength is insufficient to overwhelm Junketsu Shinzui!"

"Oh? Was *that* his name?"

Satsuki's breathing stilled when the blades poised inches from her mother's neck slowly reversed course. Her arms quivering under the strain, steam blasting from Junketsu's vents as the Kamui granted her more power, she stiffened when the monster disguised as her mother laughed sadistically, "I take it back, Satsuki! For the first time in your pathetic excuse of a life I'm actually *proud* of you!"

"I presumed Ichigo or Ryuko would be the first to achieve their Kamui's ultimate configuration," Ragyo grinned despite Satsuki's equal and growing strength. Her silver hair glowing brightly in the dreary rain as she clenched her hands, eliciting a barely repressed grunt of pain from her daughter, she psychotically added, "But you proved me wrong! So allow me to grant you one piece of advice. You might have reached a level of power equal to my own. However..."

Blood *gushed* when Ragyo pulled Satsuki forward, her head smashing into her daughter's face, "You're still only HUMAN!"

Ragyo chuckled as she tore Isshin's blade from Satsuki's undeserving fingers. A change of plans was required. She no longer wished to reweave Junketsu's dress pattern, turning the Kamui into a loyal servant. It would be a grave insult. A Kamui able to achieve such a glorious transformation, ascending to their fashion week configuration, was to be cherished *not* disciplined. And best of all, it was *Junketsu*, not Souichiro or Kisuke Urahara's Kamui, which first reached such a marvelous state! Her wonderful mood only slightly worsened by her daughter's defiant expression, which clashed heavily with the blood oozing from her nose, she shook her head and sighed.

"Your determination is admirable..."

As much as she wished to *caress* every inch of Junketsu she was running behind schedule.

"But this highly entertaining fight has lost its luster."

An insane smirk twisted the corners of Ragyo's mouth, twisting the matriarch's expression into malevolent pleasure as she smashed Isshin's sword against the Scissor Blade. Grinning when Satsuki blocked the strike, heels digging against solidified air for purchase, she flexed her fingers and *pushed* a little harder, sending her disrespectful daughter flying backwards through the rain. Heels clacking softly as she pursued her daughter, eruptions of spiritual energy illuminating Karakura Town in vibrant hues with every clash, Ragyo chuckled despite the current standstill.

La vie est drôle.

Dancing around another Tenrai Kagai with barely any effort, Ragyo grinned at the sweat dripping down her daughter's face, "What's wrong, Satsuki? Don't tell me you're going easy on your mother..."

Satsuki panted heavily as she leapt away from her mother, arms trembling slightly, "Enough of your nonsense!"

"Nonsense? *Au contraire*..."

"You might have exceeded even the paltriest of my expectations but I'm afraid you've reached your limit. Junketsu Shinzui is simply putting too much strain upon your body," Ragyo fixed a strand of silver hair, pleased chuckling escaping her lips at Satsuki's unadulterated and childish anger, "Don't deny it, Satsuki. You've already grown slower, your movements ragged and *predictable* . I'll confess you've lasted longer than I anticipated but humans were not meant to wear such glorious clothing."

"How dare you!"

Her hands tightly gripped the Scissor Blade at the infuriating comment, spiritual pressure exploding from Junketsu despite her growing and noticeable exhaustion. It would be naïve to deny her mother's words when she spoke the truth. The strain of wearing Junketsu's ultimate configuration, of truly becoming one with the Kamui, was already taking its toll upon her body. Yet she would not allow shattered bones and torn muscles to stand in her way! Such injuries were irrelevant when the fate of humanity rested on her shoulders! Darting forward without provocation, the silver blanket of spiritual energy enveloping her body brightening with every step, Satsuki scowled when Ragyo disappeared at the last second, her psychotic laughter fading into the wind.

Turning around as she tracked her mother's spiritual pressure, she gasped when something cold pierced through her stomach.

"Do I have to repeat myself?"

Ragyo grinned as blood trickled down Isshin's blade, the pained gasp coming from Satsuki's clenched teeth causing her heart to flutter in ecstasy. Lightly caressing Junketsu's sleeve, the Kamui panicking beneath her pure touch, she leaned forward and sensually whispered into her daughter's ear, "You came far, Satsuki, but I'm afraid you've reached your limits as a human. So please give my regards to Souichiro... when you meet him in the deepest bowels of Hell."

"That's right... I'm only human..."

A hand lashed out, tightly grabbing the matriarch's wrist. The taste of copper filling her mouth as she caught her breath, the excruciating pain from the grievous injury tempered by its familiarity, Satsuki glared venomously at the monster in the guise of her mother, "But I will endure even the harshest of punishments to save humanity from Life Fibers!"

"Is that so?"

The Kiryuin matriarch chuckled at her daughter's defiance. It was a childish display of ignorance suited for one on the brink of death. Leering maliciously as she twisted the hardened Life Fiber weapon in Satsuki's stomach, earning a marvelous yet disappointingly muffled grunt of pain, Ragyo raised her other hand, multicolored spiritual energy already coalescing between manicured fingers, "Your determination is admirable but I'm running behind schedule. And it's about time Junketsu returned to her creator..."

Her voice trailed off when the world abruptly inverted. As the sound of wind whistled past her ears, an expression of confusion spread across Ragyo Kiryuin's features.

Had she fallen prey to another one of that *insignificant speck's* illusions?

As lightning reflected off a bloodstained blade held by a hooded figure, the pealing of thunder accompanied by the fluttering of fabric, her bewilderment was quickly replaced by fury and indignation.

Standing behind the beheaded CEO of Revocs, blood dripping from his reforged zanpakuto, Sosuke Aizen smirked beneath the hood of the spiritual concealing cloak. He could never understand the level of paranoia necessary for Kishime Urahara to conceal multiples cloaks throughout Karakura Town. But who was he to complain?

Strategically retreating when the woman's headless body *moved*, tearing the stolen blade from her daughter's stomach in the process, he quirked an eyebrow at the expression of unadulterated hatred in her eyes as she finished regenerating.

"How..."

"Since when were you under the impression, Ragyo Kiryuin," Aizen interrupted, his pleasant tone never wavering, "That you could afford to forget about me?"

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"Bankai: Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame."

The Grand Couturier stiffened, her widening eyes drifting upwards, when an enormous construct materialized behind the heavily wounded shopkeeper, mannequin-like fingers resting softly upon the ground. With its expression permanently etched into feminine delicacy and braids of long black hair falling across its shoulders, concealing any indecency exposed by the revealing crimson robe, the Bankai appeared perfectly it felt horribly *wrong*. And the crimson energy surrounding the puppet, wafting from its thin frame like wisps of smoke, was causing her fingers to clench around the Needle Blade.

How could the stupid shopkeeper have something like *this* hidden up his sleeves?

And *why* did she feel so nervous?

"She *does* look rather frightening..."

Nui's attention snapped towards Kisuke Urahara at the vague comment, the shinigami's mouth stretched into an annoying smirk despite the blood covering his clothes. How was he so calm? Amu destroyed every ligament in his shoulder! He should be screaming in pain, not grinning like nothing was wrong! Tensing when the shopkeeper raised a finger, his massive spiritual construct moving slightly in response, her confusion turned into frustration at the insufferable expression on his face, "But that's a perfectly normal reaction. Most people are rendered speechless the first time they see a shinigami's Bankai."

"Humph! You really think your ugly Bankai will change anything?"

Her eyes darkened in vitriolic hatred as she pointed the Needle Blade at the shopkeeper, its purple surface gleaming menacingly in the artificial sunlight. Golly, he must think she was born yesterday to fall for such an obvious trap! Only an idiot wouldn't realize there was

something special about his Bankai! Smiling broadly, the expression strained by her complete *hatred* of the man, she waited until Amu landed at her side before finishing, "Bigger isn't always better, you know! Especially if you're fighting someone faster than you! It may look strong *but...*"

"... there's no way your Bankai can touch us," Amu raised her Needle Blade, effortlessly continuing the Grand Couturier's train of thought, "After all, we've already injured you quite a bit..."

"... which means all that extra power is completely useless!"

The Grand Couturier's smile widened despite the ominous sensation radiating from the mannequin, "You can hide it all you want... but we can tell you're in a lot of pain! How do you expect to stop us if you can't even hold your stupid zanpakuto?"

"You're absolutely correct."

Kisuke rested his forehead against Benihime's hilt as he conceded the Grand Couturier's point, his bloodstained fingers leaving imprints on the temperamental zanpakuto. Turning his attention to Ururu when her spiritual pressure changed, synchronizing perfectly with Nui Harime's after their brief separation, he pedantically explained, "Despite their overwhelming power Bankai are inherently dangerous. The immense spiritual pressure heavily strains the shinigami - both physically and mentally - which is why Bankai are usually seen as a final resort. While training can minimize the negative effects, activating Bankai while injured usually leads to a proportional decrease in its power."

"However... Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratama is different from most Bankai."

Nui Harime stiffened at the additional piece of information, her expression faltering when the spiritual construct slowly imperceptibly opened its eyes, disturbing crimson light shining from within the empty sockets. His forced smile straining at the Grand Couturier's

reaction, the equal yet subdued response from Ururu causing him to briefly reconsider what he was about to do, Kisuke narrowed his eyes and muttered, "She might be strong but my zanpakuto is more of a... supporting hand."

Before she could think about the annoying shopkeeper's answer Nui gasped when portions of her body *unraveled*, purple Life Fibers spilling out of the open seams covering her arms and legs.

"W-What?"

An uncomfortable fear plucked at her inhuman heart when she noticed the same thing happening to Amu. Trembling eyes staring at the open sutures on her arms, familiar purple light shining brightly in the sunlight as Life Fibers spewed from the wounds, Nui Harime froze in growing terror at the *slow* rate of her regeneration. Her blonde pigtails fluttering when she leapt away despite her unraveled state, the lack of muscles and bones making the retreat easier, she couldn't suppress a shuddering sigh when the unnatural wounds began healing, the seams closing in a matter of seconds.

Shaking fingers nervously gripped the Needle Blade as she examined the unbroken skin on her arm. She couldn't understand what happened. There was no warning from the man. No *hint* apart from his stupid comment. And that sensation when her body started falling apart at the seams... that strange feeling quivering in her Life Fibers felt familiar. Almost like his Bankai could...

She nearly dropped the Needle Blade.

No... it couldn't be...

"I see you've figured it out."

Concealed within the protective embrace of his Bankai, the mannequin-like woman delicately clasping her jointed fingers around his body, Kisuke Urahara noted the massive spiritual energy engulfing Karakura Town before continuing, "But that's not

surprising. After all, someone with your experience should easily understand the extent of my Bankai's abilities."

She stopped paying attention to the shinigami when a second pair of arms emerged from his Bankai's bare back, the puppet-like arms hanging limply for a fraction of a second before stabbing into the ground. No... this was impossible! Her eyes swiveling momentarily towards Amu, her sister's nervousness and apprehension synchronized with her own, Nui Harime was rendered speechless when the limbs pulled two bundles of Life Fibers from the ground. As the spiritual construct slowly wove the crimson threads between its jointed fingers, the

eerily familiar motion disturbing every Life Fiber in her body, Nui's shock twisted into hatred.

"This shouldn't be possible!"

Nui Harime didn't *care* about the unladylike outburst as she shouted at the shopkeeper, "There's no way your stupid Bankai can manipulate Life Fibers!"

"It's strange how some things in this world just seem to come together..."

Kisuke sighed as his Bankai's original pair of arms receded, allowing his honored guests to see the freshly sewn stitches covering his shoulder and leg. Casually patting down his coat as he stood up, streams of blood trickling from the closed wounds, he frowned at the Grand Couturier's conflicted expression, "But to be perfectly honest I'm not someone who enjoys using Bankai. It's simply too much of a hassle. I'd much rather rely on Benihime's Shikai and my own wits given the opportunity. In fact, over the last few decades I couldn't fathom any situation where using Bankai would be advantageous."

"But I suppose you're rather curious about my Bankai."



His faint expression of amusement faded as he changed the subject, "Well... in any other situation I wouldn't even consider explaining my Bankai's ability. Telling your secrets to the enemy is rather stupid. However, I suppose you've earned a small reward for your hard work."

Taking a single step forward, the spiritual construct rising to full kneeling height behind him, Kisuke stoically raised his zanpakuto, "It's actually very simple. Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame has the ability to restructure anything within an arbitrary radius. In other words, my Bankai allows me to weave and unravel whatever I choose, which includes Life Fibers to a small extent."

He allowed himself to smile despite the hatred radiating from Nui Harime and Ururu, "You know, I suppose that makes us quite alike, miss Grand Couturier."

"No it doesn't!"

Nui Harime didn't care that she shouted at the top of her lungs, causing her synchronized connection with Amu to falter. She didn't *care* that her hand was clenched tightly enough to nearly draw blood. There was no way this stupid man was at her level! It was impossible! She was trained by Lady Ragyo since the day she could walk to become the Grand Couturier of Revocs! She *bled* learning the intricacies of weaving Life Fibers into clothing! Her creations and cute outfits were worn by ninety percent of humanity! Her name was mentioned in every corner of the fashion industry! That this man... this *monster*... who kidnapped Amu and raised her as a pathetic human could even say such a thing was unbelievable!

There was no way his stupid Bankai made them equals!

She barely reined in her anger as she sprinted towards Kisuke Urahara alongside Amu, purple spiritual energy writhing around their Needle Blades. There was no way she would give him the satisfaction of pissing her off! Covering the appreciable distance in the blink of an eye, her body blurring as she swung the hardened

Life Fiber weapon at the man's neck, Nui gasped when a shimmering barrier of Life Fibers stopped her attack. What!? How was this possible? Eyes widening as she traced the threads to the Bankai's puppet-like arms, jointed fingers dancing nimbly through the air, she had only a moment to comprehend the *impossibility* of the situation before her body once more began unraveling.

Pink boots stepped lightly upon the ground when the Grand Couturier retreated from the shopkeeper, her teeth clenched in growing frustration and hatred. This wasn't supposed to be happening! Not to her! Ignoring the sensation of her body stitching closed, a feeling that reminded her of that night nine months ago, she angrily lashed out when the Bankai pointed a jointed hand in her direction. As the purple energy surrounding the Needle Blade collided with the invisible stitching, destroying the attack in an explosion of light, she froze when the shopkeeper's voice echoed across the underground chamber.

"Have you ever wondered *how* I, a lowly and humble candy-store owner, created Mugetsu?"

Kisuke granted Nui Harime a moment to ponder the question as he tracked Ururu's changing position. Carefully observing the honest bewilderment in the Grand Couturier's eyes, her tempestuous anger replaced by outright jealousy, he subtly shook his head and tapped Benihime against the ground, "Due to the unique nature of my Bankai I've obtained what could best be described as perfect knowledge in the field of stitching. Give me a piece of clothing and I'll tell you the stitching and dress patterns. But unlike a normal couturier my skills are not limited to simply *clothing* . With a single observation I can determine the suturing necessary to maximum one's potential... or limit their power and mobility."

"Of course, your physiology renders you highly resistant to that particular aspect of my Bankai."

He frowned when Ururu landed next to the Grand Couturier, her emotionless expression twitching from unadulterated hatred. As their

nearly identical spiritual pressures synchronized once more, disturbing the delicate imbalance he'd carefully cultivated, Kisuke closed his eyes, "I suppose you find this information troubling, Nui Harime. But I'm sure someone with your knowledge understands what I'm saying. My Bankai allowed me to compress what it took Souichiro Kiryuin and his friends in Nudist Beach nearly a decade to create into only a few months. I'll confess it was frustratingly difficult to create Mugetsu. My abilities with Life Fibers pale in comparison to Isshin's and Ragyo Kiryuin's. Even with my humble skills it took three attempts to get it right..."

Benihime's bloodstained blade gleamed darkly in the artificial sunlight as he coldly added, "But I'm sure as the Grand Couturier of Revocs you're more than aware of the difficulty in creating Kamui."

Nui Harime stiffened at the comment, her eyes widening at the *implications* behind the man's words, before rage overwhelmed any semblance of sanity. No! It wasn't *fair* that Kisuke Urahara, an insignificant human, created a Kamui when she couldn't! Nothing about that made sense! She tried for *years*, using every skill Lady Ragyo taught her about weaving Life Fibers, only to fail over and over again! Every Kamui she wove never opened their eyes! They never spoke to her! None of her beautiful creations possessed the same spark of life she saw in Junketsu or Mugetsu or any of the other Kamui! Why couldn't she do it? She could weave raiment with both arms tied behind her back. Her eyes were good enough to spot the Banshi in Satsuki's cheap and mass-produced Goku Uniforms!

So why couldn't *she* weave a Kamui?

She instinctively raised the Needle Blade when the shinigami vanished, sparks illuminating her face as the hardened Life Fiber weapon clashed against his zanpakuto. Pushing angrily against the shopkeeper's increased strength, pulses of spiritual energy whipping across the underground chamber while her pink boots dug into the ground for support, Nui growled at Kisuke Urahara's expression. Why was he smiling? Did he honestly believe he could win just because he got stronger? She wasn't *stupid* ! So what if his Bankai

could briefly unravel her Life Fibers. It didn't *matter* ! None of what he did mattered! He was going to die, bleeding out on the ground like a naked ape for daring to stand in Lady Ragyo's way!

He would *never* harm another hair on Amu's head!

"What's wrong?"

Nui *laughed*, the melodious sound concealing her growing instability as she repulsed the shopkeeper's zanpakuto. Leaning forward when Amu appeared on the edge of her vision, her sister poised to skewer the shopkeeper through the spine, she grinned broadly, exposing her sharpened teeth, "Did you honestly think your ugly Bankai would change anything?"

"Of course I did..."

Kisuke returned the Grand Couturier's smirk right before his arms unraveled, flesh and bone exposed for a brief instant before stitching back together. Noting the fear in Nui Harime's eyes when his strength matched... then *exceeded*... her own, he reached out and *grabbed* the Needle Blade, "After all, I've already restructured my arms!"

"W-What?"

Nui *gasped* when her arms buckled under the shopkeeper's monstrous strength. How was he so strong!? Teeth clenched as her pink boots dug into the ground, rock and dirt shattering beneath her heels, her hate-filled expression twisted in fear when Kisuke Urahara reached out and *grabbed* the Needle Blade. This was impossible! No! She refused to let a stupid man defeat her! Not this time! Not again! Hands shaking from exertion as she desperately tried slicing apart the shinigami's fingers, sapphire eyes widening when that failed, Nui *screamed* when the shopkeeper thrust his arm forward, sending her flying uncontrollably halfway across the underground chamber.

"That's one down..."

Blood dripped from the former captain's restructured fingers, the expected consequence of grabbing a hardened Life Fiber weapon with his bare hands. Briefly pondering the limits of the Grand Couturier's strength before ducking sideways, strands of light-blond hair passing across his vision as the other half of the Needle Blades came precariously close to severing his head, Kisuke grimaced at his estranged daughter's uncharacteristic vitriol. That was close. Another second and he might have actually died. Vanishing in an exceedingly rapid step of Shunpo, sparks dancing across his vision as he blocked Ururu's furious assault with more effort than anticipated, he frowned when he sliced into her shoulder only for the wound to regenerate in a flash of purple light.

This wasn't good. Despite Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame's ability to restructure his body to maximum effectiveness, boosting his power beyond a Life Fiber Hybrid like the Grand Couturier, the effects were only temporary. Soon he would no longer be able to match Nui Harime or Ururu's strength. And their subconscious regeneration was turning the fight into a battle of attrition, one he couldn't win through conventional methods.

Twisting clockwise when Ururu broke through his guard, the purple Needle Blade slicing harmlessly through his favorite coat, he swiftly reached into his pocket and removed a small device. It was unfortunate things progressed to this point but Ragyo Kiryuin's actions left him no alternative. As he held the slightly glowing weapon, an interesting thing he borrowed from Isshin's car, Kisuke purposely ignored the fear in Ururu's eyes before depressing the Bleach Grenade's trigger. Now wasn't the time for sentimentality. Adhering the device onto his daughter's dress, he forcibly kicked her away as the Anti-Life Fiber weapon timed down, exploding in an intense burst of white light.

"I'm sorry, Ururu."

Guilt twisting through his heart like a knife as the explosion faded, allowing him to see Ururu's heavily damaged and burnt body. Visibly *flinching* when his daughter desperately tried pushing herself off the ground, shaking arms barely functioning before she collapsed with a pained cry, he looked over his shoulder and vanished as a thoroughly enraged Nui Harime crashed through the air.

"How DARE you hurt, Amu!"

The ground shattered under the unrelenting spiritual energy exploding from the Needle Blade, metal plating and reinforcements disintegrating as she desperately tried wiping the man from existence. He would *pay* for hurting Amu! Breathing heavily as she searched for the cowardly shopkeeper, Twin Life Fiber Entanglement making sure she felt her sister's agony and pain, Nui Harime screamed incoherently at a familiar wooden clomp. Fingers furiously clenched around the Needle Blade, her once immaculate and perfect pink dress covered in tears and rips, she spun around and slammed the purple weapon against the shinigami's zanpakuto.

"You seem a tad upset, miss Grand Couturier," Kisuke offhandedly commented, pushing away the teenager's weapon before quickly retreating.

"Y-You... *bâtard!*"

Nui Harime spat out the curse, a stark departure from her normal rejection of such crass language. She was going to kill him! Her body flickering as she chased after the shinigami, his insufferable expression twisting her mind until nothing remained but anger and hatred, the underground chamber exploded every time she smashed the Needle Blade against his cheap and ugly zanpakuto. How *dare* Kisuke Urahara lay a finger on her sister! Amu was the only person in the world who understood her feelings! Ichigo and Lady Ragyo might be family but Amu was her other half! She filled in the emptiness and constant loneliness in her heart!

She wouldn't let Kisuke Urahara take that away!

Snarling when the shopkeeper avoided her attack, vanishing before the Needle Blade bisected his body from shoulder to waist, Nui's anger lessened at a familiar whimpering. Turning around, sapphire eyes locked onto the unconscious form of her sister lying nearby, Nui Harime felt a chill course down her spine. Impossible! How did she not realize Kisuke Urahara was leading her in a complete circle? Stiffening when something familiar prickled against her senses, feeling her mind with dread, she tried retreating only to *gasp* as hundreds of Life Fibers wrapped around her body. The Needle Blade clattering to the ground as her arms and legs were tightly bound, the glowing threads preventing her from moving a muscle, only a single thought pierced the overwhelming veil of confusion and shock.

How was this happening? There was no way the shopkeeper could have planned everything out! He couldn't have foreseen she would stand in this *exact* spot!

"There's no point trying to break those Life Fibers."

Kisuke casually walked around the ensnared Grand Couturier as she collapsed onto the ground, her face impacting the dirt with a sickening thud, "Thanks to Houka Inumuta's almost perfect surveillance of Honnouji Academy I've learned the limitations of your strength. From the video evidence of your battles against Ichigo, Satsuki and Ryuko I've determined the maximum output your Life Fibers could exert... and then increased that estimation by twenty percent. It was a precaution, one that took into account Orihime regenerating the damage to your eye. I'm also aware of the hooks underneath your fingernails, designed to remove Banshi from Life Fiber clothing."

The Grand Couturier's heart stopped when a familiar purple sword was placed underneath her chin, the cold material lightly caressing her skin. Her eyes shaking at the *second* Needle Blade in the shopkeeper's left hand, she couldn't think... couldn't *breathe*... as he raised the weapon above her neck, the emotionless expression on his face never wavering. S-She was going to die...

"It would be rather simple to kill you with these blades."

Stunned when Kisuke Urahara turned around, removing the Needle Blades from her neck in the process, Nui Harime only managed to emit a choked gasp, "W-What?"

The former captain walked away from the terrified teenager, his wooden geta clomping softly against the ground. Switching the awkward Needle Blades for Benihime, the familiarity of his zanpakuto rather comforting, he paused before looking over his shoulder, "You have quite the body count, Nui Harime. I'm sure there are thousands of people more than willing to kill you. After all, your death would end Ragyo Kiryuin's plans to feed humanity to the Original Life Fiber. Not to mention stopping construction of Shinra Koketsu. However, that would greatly upset Ururu..."

"Her name is Amu!"

Nui Harime struggled against the Life Fibers binding her movements, sapphire eyes never straying from the shinigami's emotionless expression, "I won't let you kill her!"

"Why would I kill my own daughter?"

The Grand Couturier's eyes turned upward when the enormous form of Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame loomed over the shinigami, standing to its full unrestricted height. Watching in horror when the construct's hands danced through the air, dozens of Life Fibers coaxing themselves from its jointed fingers, she stiffened at Kisuke Urahara's next words, "Perhaps you misheard me, Nui Harime. I have no intention of killing you or Ururu. However, I would recommend you remain absolutely silent. Unless, of course, you wish for Ururu to die."

An ominous echo radiated throughout the underground chamber as he tapped Benihime against the ground, Nui Harime's desperate cries falling upon deaf ears. His expression etched into solemn resignation when the Life Fibers woven around his Bankai's fingers



shot forth, snaking through the air before piercing Ururu's skull, it took every ounce of self-control to not turn away when his daughter began *screaming* .

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Things *weren't* going as she anticipated.

Ragyo Kiryuin snarled when the shinigami's sword carved into her stomach, blood spraying through the rain before the wound rapidly sewed itself closed. How was this possible? She destroyed his precious zanpakuto only a few minutes ago! The blasphemous sound of torn clothing fueling her loathing of the man as she furiously countered his successive strikes, the deafening clash of their blades driving away the surrounding storm, she feigned bafflement when Sosuke Aizen's sword stabbed through her heart. Did he *honestly* think she would be inconvenienced by such pathetic injuries?

Reaching out, fingers tightly clasping the shinigami's vestments when he attempted to retreat, she prepared to return the favor only to quickly turn around, Isshin's sword deflecting the cerulean Scissor Blade swinging towards her neck.

This was getting *agaçant* .

"I was wondering where you were hiding, Satsuki."

She smirked at her daughter's expression, childish hatred and misplaced feelings of guilt twisting her features into something ugly and atrocious. How *appropriate* for one unworthy of being a child of COVERS. Gracefully moving away from the shinigami, each successive clack of her heel covering hundreds of feet, Ragyo chuckled when Satsuki rushed forward, her movements precise despite the blood oozing from her stomach. Oh... now *that* was interesting. It seemed Junketsu was actively staunching the bleeding. Flexing her wrist when Satsuki finally caught up, bursts of

energy illuminating the heavens with each clashing of their weapons, Ragyo chuckled upon noticing Junketsu's growing nervousness.

Even the Kamui instinctively understood the insurmountable gulf between their powers, a lesson her foolish daughter appeared intent on ignoring.

Her actions were flawless, each footstep properly measured, as she gracefully avoided the Scissor Blade before reaching out and grabbing her daughter's wrist. Fingers gently caressing the remarkable fabric composing Junketsu's fashion week apparel, her motherly touch earning a disrespectful shiver from the ungrateful Kamui, Ragyo didn't hesitate to smash her knee into Satsuki's stomach. Taking extra care to hit *exactly* where Isshin's blade already pierced taut muscles, she sighed wistfully at her daughter's anguish.

Fashion week apparel or not, it was impossible for a human to stand against one blessed by the Original Life Fiber.

"I will not... yield to you... Ragyo Kiryuin!"

Her mouth twitched in annoyance when Satsuki endured the attack, grunting painfully but *not* flinching. An imperceptible hint of pride tainting her thoughts as she grasped her daughter by the throat, squeezing just hard enough to make her struggle for every breath, she glared into Satsuki's defiant eyes, "Yield? This isn't some childish schoolyard skirmish. Your valued Elite Four won't be saving you at the last second. This is reality, Satsuki. So I'm afraid you -"

She instinctively released her coughing daughter when a familiar presence imposed itself upon her subconscious. Damn that man! Strands of silver hair floating across her vision as she narrowly avoided Sosuke Aizen's zanpakuto, the blade coming embarrassingly close to severing her head a second time. Growling in frustration at the constant interruptions, spiritual pressure exploding from her body, she rushed forward, slamming her

hardened Life Fiber weapon against the shinigami's zanpakuto with enough force to send him skidding backwards across the sky.

Spiritual energy illuminated the heavens as she clashed furiously with the shinigami, her offensive only faltering when Satsuki had the *audacity* to attack at the same time. But the brief moment required to correct her daughter's foolish behavior, sending her crashing through several buildings before slamming into the ground, gave Sosuke Aizen enough time to vanish in a burst of speed. Covering his movements with several low-level Hado, the worthless techniques granting him valuable time, his expression shifted in surprise when she parried his sword.

How insulting! Did he think she wasn't paying *attention* ?

Snarling as she countered the man's subsequent attacks, the randomness in which he switched tactics highly infuriating, Ragyo gagged when his sword abruptly twisted around Isshin's blade, impaling her throat in a small spurt of blood.

"I've grown *tired* of your foolishness..."

Ragyo's voice was clear despite the blade lodged through her throat. Blood lips twisting into a psychotic smile as she grasped the zanpakuto, fingers tightly clenched around the metal when he attempted to retreat like a coward, she barely cracked the spiritual weapon before a massive explosion of sapphire crossed her vision. Jumping backwards as her daughter flew upwards, the hole in her throat closing upon the removal of the man's blade, she sneered at the... camaraderie... between Satsuki and the abhorrent shinigami.

That could *not* be allowed to continue.

"Lumière Divine."

The shinigami's eyes widened at the lack of forewarning behind her divine attack before vanishing... just as she expected. Only a suicidal *imbécile* would dare attempt to withstand the power of

someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber. Smirking when her daughter rushed forward without thinking, streaks of sapphire light trailing from Junketsu's glowing form, she waited until the Scissor Blade was inches from her neck before stepping away, avoiding the straightforward attack. Her serene expression tightening as she parried Satsuki's subsequent strikes, sparks illuminating her face with every redirection of the cerulean weapon, the satisfying *crack* of her foot against her daughter's chest caused her to smile.

It didn't matter if Junketsu granted Satsuki superhuman endurance. Her daughter was still *human* . And that meant...

"Bakudo Number Sixty One - Rikujokoro."

Ragyo barely shuddered when six thin shafts of golden light pierced her body for the second time. Damn that pathetic man! Her heels clacking against platforms of spiritual energy as the technique abruptly shattered, dissolving into nothingness before the arrogant shinigami lowered his hand, her eyebrow twitched when Satsuki vanished, allowing Isshin's sword to carve harmlessly through the rain. His arrogance was wearing on her nerves! Yet she couldn't deny the effectiveness of his cowardly actions. The brief moment of immobilization was all her daughter needed to retreat, forcing this ridiculous battle to continue for another few seconds.

"To think you would become such an annoyance..."

Her dress rustled as the spiritual energy writhing around Isshin's sword cleaved through the abandoned streets hundreds of feet below, destroying everything in a massive explosion of light. This was getting annoying. She could not afford wasting any more of her precious time fighting her petulant daughter and the atrocious shinigami. The corners of her lips curling upwards at Satsuki's labored breathing, the pained grimace offering some modicum of satisfaction, Ragyo shook her head and sighed, "Perhaps holding back at Honnouji Academy was a mistake. Making sure you were dead would have save me so much grief."

"Your words fall upon deaf ears!"

Lightning flashed behind Satsuki as the glowing blanket of sapphire energy enveloping Junketsu overwhelmed her mother's unholy radiance, "I may be human and perhaps I will never truly wear Junketsu Shinzui. But it is *your* strength that has faltered, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

Her amusement faltered at the childish outburst. Did her daughter honestly believe she could hide something so obvious from her own mother? *How pathetic* . It was apparent from the slight quivering of the Scissor Blade that Satsuki was suppressing the intense pain radiating from her perforated stomach and broken ribs. Junketsu might have stopped the bleeding but her daughter was still human, a problem no amount of Life Fibers could fix. Shaking her head in mock pity before vanishing, closing the distance between them in a single step, Ragyo had only a moment to savor Satsuki's astonishment before she was forced to *once again* lean backwards, narrowly avoiding the zanpakuto carving through the rain.

"Impressive reflexes, Ragyo Kiryuin..."

Sosuke Aizen adjusted Kyouka Suigetsu's direction mid-swing, severing the matriarch's arm at the shoulder, "But you left your guard wide open."

Maroon eyes narrowed at the shinigami's unwarranted smugness as blood gushed from her shoulder. She refused to acknowledge that such an inferior being could stand against someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber. It was impossible! That abomination fused with his chest was the only reason Sosuke Aizen remained among the living! Yet her rage was tempered by reality. She never imagined Satsuki transforming Junketsu into her fashion week apparel. Such a miraculous possibility never crossed her mind! But Junketsu Shinzui alone wouldn't change anything. No... it was dealing with both her daughter *and* the loathsome shinigami that was causing her to experience something she hadn't felt since *that night* seventeen years ago.

### *Exhaustion.*

The satisfying crunch of bones echoed hollowly over the rain as she snapped her leg upwards, redirecting the shinigami's grasping fingers away from the hardened Life Fiber weapon still clasped by her severed arm. Did they *really* think she wouldn't notice their goal? Darting forward as blood streamed into her shoulder, Life Fibers pulling taut during the second it took her body to regenerate the damage, Ragyo scowled when Satsuki appeared at her side, spiritual energy writhing around the Scissor Blade swinging towards her wrist.

Her chest rose and fell rhythmically as she pirouetted counterclockwise, driving the back of her heel directly into Satsuki's exposed stomach. Yet neither the pained grunt escaping her daughter's mouth or the subsequent impact of her body against the ground brought her any comfort. She did not have *time* for this! Unadulterated *hatred* pulsing in the darkest depths of her heart as she turned around, eyes widening when the shinigami unleashed a torrent of electricity and spiritual energy from his hand, Ragyo quickly raised Isshin's sword to block the attack only to realize it *wasn't enough* .

What!?

Teeth clenched as she struggled against the technique's power, heels skidding backwards through the rain, Ragyo stiffened at the thought of this man blemishing her appearance. Fury driving her actions when electricity arced around Isshin's blade, burning her hand nearly to ash, she was forced to wait until the technique finally faltered. Breathing deeply as several flickers of spiritual energy crackled around the hardened Life Fiber weapon, her jaw clenched tightly at the *unbothered* expression etched upon the shinigami's face.

"You... arrogant... man!"

She snarled viciously as smoke rose from her body, intermingling with the fading traces of spiritual energy from her opponent's attack. How *dare* he! The hardened Life Fiber weapon shaking vigorously in her hand, electricity briefly arcing between her fingers as multicolored light flowed down the shimmering blade, Ragyo seethed at Sosuke Aizen's expression. It was inconceivable that Satsuki and this... this... *man* pushed her this far! She refused to allow such a lower creature to insult her - and the Original Life Fiber - any longer!

Growling as strands of silver hair fell across her vision, water dripping from the disheveled and frayed locks, Ragyo forced herself to ignore the minuscule tears adorning her flaunting attire. She had *enough* of his arrogant behavior!

Her shoulders loosened, the previously burning hatred coursing through her Life Fibers lessening into mere irritation, before she crossed the seemingly insurmountable distance to the shinigami with a single *clack* of her heel. Fingers curled into claws as she reached for the abhorrent device embedded in the man's sternum, blood mixing with rain when he countered by stabbing his blade through her palm, Ragyo grinned at Aizen's amateurish mistake. Fingers gently squeezing the weapon, shattering the reforged sword into shards of metal, her brief elation disappeared at his reaction.

Something wasn't right.

The man's bewildered surprise towards the destruction of his zanpakuto was too emotional, a reaction at odds with his behavior thus far. That only meant one thing. Leaping away upon catching a glimpse of flickering sapphire upon the shattered remnants of his blade, Ragyo found herself unceremoniously thrown backwards by the shockwave heralding her rebellious daughter's return, spiritual energy caressing her skin as the Scissor Blade came precariously close to severing her arm.

*Merde !*

Breathing heavily upon regaining her balance, silver hair laying matted against her forehead from the pouring rain, Ragyo's eyebrow twitched when the shinigami mockingly clapped his hands, "Exhaustion must be a peculiar sensation, Ragyo Kiryuin."

His insufferable smirk broadened as he walked forward, fingers loosely holding his shattered sword, "But that's understandable. For most people, the concept of feeling exhausted is an evolutionary advantage designed to prevent meaningless injuries. But as someone tainted by the Original Life Fiber, flesh and bone transformed into something alien yet still familiar, you cannot be described as 'human.' A rather interesting sacrifice, would you not agree? By casting aside your humanity, discarding whatever drew Isshin Kurosaki's naïve attention in the first place, you've become one of the most powerful beings in existence. However, this power possesses limitations. Your regeneration, for example, is linked to -"

The pleasing crunch of cartilage shattering beneath her fist was acceptable compensation as she broke the shinigami's nose, ending his insulting explanation before her daughter could blink. He *dared* utter Isshin's name with such flagrant disrespect!? Enough was enough! She was past the point of humoring Sosuke Aizen! All that mattered was ending his abhorrent existence and -

Ragyo's train of thought was interrupted when the Scissor Blade cleaved through the shinigami, cutting him in half before severing her head in a spray of blood.

"What!?"

She was *baffled* by Satsuki's surprisingly vicious action as her body tilted backwards, the Life Fibers connecting her head and neck glowing brightly in the rain. She *never* expected her daughter to wantonly sacrifice the shinigami's life, especially considering Ichigo and Ryuko's somewhat positive influence on her childish demeanor. Maroon eyes widening when the man's corpse exploded, disintegrating into pieces of rubber and clothing, her disbelief devolved into unbridled *hatred* . Puppeteering her headless body



when Satsuki rushed forward to take advantage of her supposed handicap, Isshin's sword smashing into the Scissor Blade hard enough to send her overconfident daughter careening off balance, Ragyo snarled as her head rejoined her body with a sickening *squelch* .

Damn it! She was running out of time!

"Come now, Satsuki," Ragyo scoffed as her daughter continued her foolish assault, "Cutting off my head won't get you anywhere, even if you *are* wielding a Scissor Blade."

"Do not lecture me!"

Satsuki panted heavily, the autumn cold burning her lungs with every breath, when her mother effortlessly parried the Scissor Blade. Staggering backwards, hands shaking around the hardened Life Fiber weapon's curved handle, she granted each word equal *weight* and *passion* as the pain emanating from her stomach worsened, "I, more than anyone else, am aware of your monstrous power. But even so... I will push forward! Breaking through any limitations and barriers to ensure YOUR demise, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

"Oh? And what does *Junketsu* have to say about your suicidal behavior?"

She chuckled softly at her daughter's shock, an honest reaction only surpassed by her Kamui's, "Don't look so surprised, Satsuki. Surely you didn't think Junketsu would allow you to callously throw your life away? The moment remaining in her fashion week apparel endangers your life she'll automatically revert to her basic configuration, leaving you on the verge of death."

"What are you talking about!?"

Her daughter's growing nervousness, hidden beneath a cracking veneer of stoicism, was truly a sight to behold, "I'm afraid your body simply can't withstand the majesty of Junketsu's fashion week

apparel. And that's the *only* thing keeping the wound in your stomach closed. So the moment Junketsu transforms back to normal - voluntarily or otherwise - you're going to bleed to death."

"An astute observation."

Sosuke Aizen smiled as he stood an appreciable distance from the matriarch, narrowed eyes observing her muscles for the slightest hint of movement, "However, that line of reasoning raises an interesting question. Your confidence surrounding Satsuki's mental fortitude and spiritual energy, both of which are necessary for her Kamui to stay in its current configuration, suggests the existence of an ulterior motive."

The Hōgyoku shone with a dull light, flickers of blue appearing within the sphere as he swept a hand through the rain, "One might assume through simple observation that your current actions might be motivated by growing desperation. Despite evidence to the contrary your vaunted regeneration isn't limitless. Every lethal or debilitating injury, no matter how minor, causes your spiritual energy to decrease, suggesting your growing frustration with this battle comes from your weakening power. Yet that conclusion would be wrong. For despite your labored breathing and disheveled appearance the odds of victory remain in your favor. Therefore, a simpler conclusion must exist."

His smirk broadened at the matriarch's rising spiritual pressure, "But I don't think I should waste another three minutes of your precious time explaining something you already know."

"How dare you!"

Ragyo snarled at the shinigami's blasphemous mockery, her eyes never drifting away from his arrogant expression as she effortlessly dodged Satsuki's sneak attack. Leaning sideways when the traitorous captain vanished, Isshin's hardened Life Fiber weapon parrying his zanpakuto before proceeding to carve a deep gash in his arm, blood trailed down her fingers as she reached out and

grabbed the Scissor Blade. This was unacceptable! Momentarily struggling against her daughter's undeserved strength, teeth bared in growing hatred when she lost track of Sosuke Aizen, Ragyo panted heavily before retreating, the damage to her body already regenerating.

How *dare* they stand in her... no... the Original Life Fiber's path! Merde... she was running out of *time* ! She refused to allow the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet to fail, not at this crucial stage! And certainly *not* at the hands of her pathetic daughter and the blasphemous shinigami!

Maroon eyes widening when something caught her attention, a presence in the distance which filled her heart with unholy anticipation, Ragyo's lips curled into a smirk.

"Your camaraderie is impressive... but I'm afraid my patience has reached its limit."

She didn't give her daughter the chance to argue before ascending vertically into the sky, an explosion of spiritual pressure and multicolored light accentuating her movements. It was time to end this farce of a battle. Locks of disheveled silver hair whipping in the rushing wind upon breaking through the clouds, melodious laughter escaping her throat when she sensed Satsuki and Junketsu's presences rapidly growing closer, Ragyo sighed deeply at their commitment. It appeared her troublesome daughter was determined to end her life. And judging from *his* atrocious power the shinigami wasn't far behind.

*Perfect .*

"I won't allow you to escape, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

The Scissor Blade carved harmlessly through the rain when she dodged her daughter's straightforward attack, vanishing with a soft *clack* of her heel. Moving once again as the shinigami attempted the same feat, Isshin's hardened Life Fiber weapon parrying Sosuke

Aizen's zanpakuto in a shower of sparks, Ragyo smirked despite her labored breathing, Satsuki's foolish announcement overriding the exhaustion plaguing her body. Allowing her daughter to briefly believe victory was within reach, a fleeting sensation she would quickly tear apart at the seams, she raised her left hand above her head and *grinned* .

"My dearest daughter... you have so *much* to learn."

Spiritual energy rapidly gathered between her fingers as she laughed, basking in the nervousness stretching across her daughter's face. How absolutely *wonderful* ! Her smile widening when the contemptible shinigami swung his blade horizontally through the rain, several techniques erupting from its surface, she refused to acknowledge the futile and pointless effort as they slammed into her body, doing little more than rustling her dress.

"For in what universe..."

Ragyo's eyes locked firmly upon her daughter as the spiritual energy floating within her hand *pulsed*, bathing the surrounding storm with its majestic radiance, "... were you under the assumption that I was running away?"

Her laughter turned increasingly unhinged when the shinigami leapt backwards, spheres of pink spiritual energy forming out of nothingness around his body. *Pathétique* ! It didn't matter that he was casting one of his annoying techniques. Nothing he... or her daughter... did at this point would change *anything* ! Sighing sensually, shimmering hues of light dancing across her face from the sphere of spiritual energy, Ragyo stared directly into Junketsu's quivering eyes, "You have my deepest gratitude, Satsuki! It would have been impossible doing *this* in the middle of Karakura Town. But thanks to your foolish bravado that's no longer a problem!"

"Éclat Divine!"

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"Soten Kisshun, I reject."

Twin streaks of orange light spun into existence from Orihime Inoue's hairpins, dancing gracefully around the teenager as she raised her arms. Swallowing the lump in her throat at the blood dripping from Chad's body, the liquid mixing with the puddles of water pooled underneath his chair, she ignored the astonished whispers from the two nudists across the hospital's lobby and took a deep breath. As a familiar golden barrier enveloped her friend, immediately healing some of his less severe injuries, Orihime felt the faint shaking of her hands abate, the tension leaving her shoulders with every passing second.

"Wow!"

A comical amount of water fell from her Goku Uniform as Mako Mankanshoku appeared next to Orihime. Ignorant of her friend's startled reaction, nor how the nudist soldiers looked around in confusion, she poked the humming shield with a finger, "How does your awesome power heal grotesque or otherwise horrifying wounds, Orihime? It is why there's no longer a weird chain on my chest no matter how hard I look?"

"Um... well..."

The awkward silence was nearly stifling as Orihime trailed off, unsure how to properly explain her Shun Shun Rikka to Mako. While her friend was smart... in a way... there were some things that went over Mako's head. And it was getting difficult thinking of new excuses. Luckily she was saved the effort when Uryu, who had been staring through the lobby's windows deep in thought, turned around, his sneakers squeaking against the floor. Silhouetted against the scintillating spiritual barrier surrounding Karakura General Hospital, tinting everything a pale shade of green, he adjusted his glasses, "I'm impressed you made it here so quickly, Mako. It couldn't have

been easy hiding from Ragyo Kiryuin's army of COVERS or Xcution."

"It sure wasn't!"

Mako tilted her head sideways while turning away from Orihime, one finger pressed innocently against her chin, "Karakura Town is much bigger than Honnou City! I kept getting lost and turned around! But thanks to Chad's awesome sense of direction I found this place without any problems! Even if it took longer than expected!"

"She ran halfway across Karakura Town before I caught up," Chad corrected with a small amount of embarrassment when everyone, including the nudists on the other side of the lobby, looked collectively in his direction, "Then she tried heading back to Kisuke's store. The third time I gave her directions she ran right past this place."

Uryu didn't bother putting any effort into understanding Chad's explanation other than a small sigh of annoyance. *Of course* Mako would run past his father's hospital without slowing down. But her terrible sense of direction, which was easily on par with Kenpachi's, was currently the least of his concerns. Staring through the double-plated windows into the storm, a faint nausea building in his stomach when he concentrated upon the spiritual pressures in the distance, he focused on the rain streaking down the spiritual barrier, "It's lucky the COVERS disappeared a few minutes before you arrived, Chad. I don't think Tessai would have opened the barrier with those things still floating outside."

"But it was strange," Chad grunted, the uncomfortable pain from his broken ribs fading, "One moment they were chasing us and the next they just... fell apart."

The bespectacled Quincy frowned, his mind struggling to make sense of the confusing situation. Why did the COVERS vanish? It couldn't be a coincidence they disappeared at roughly the same time Satsuki Kiryuin's already impressive spiritual pressure abruptly

increased. There had to be a connection. Concealing his building disgust when several concussive bursts of spiritual energy assaulted his senses, timed nearly perfectly with the explosions of multicolored light hundreds of feet in the sky, Uryu stared at his reflection in the window, "It's a long shot but their disappearance might be related to Satsuki's fight against Ragyo Kiryuin."

"WHAT!? Lady Satsuki's fighting her mom?!"

Uryu ignored Mako's exaggerated outburst as he turned around, "You probably didn't notice, Chad, but when the COVERS fell apart their Life Fibers began streaming towards a single point in Karakura Town - Ragyo Kiryuin. But I find it difficult to imagine she would destroy her army, which means Satsuki must have discovered a method to absorb the COVERS, using their Life Fibers to boost Junketsu's power."

A blinding flash of lightning illuminated the hospital's lobby, answering the unasked question with silence, as Orihime slowly lowered her arms, the golden-orange barrier surrounding Chad dissipating with her next breath. Yet despite healing his injuries, including the damage to his clothes, the strange unease bubbling within her chest hadn't lessened. Something was wrong. Forcing herself to smile when Chad nodded in appreciation, the gesture strained despite her best efforts, she clenched her hands together, "Ragyo's power is incredible, isn't it?"

"Yes... but I'm concerned about that *other* spiritual pressure."

The unspoken name garnered identical looks of acknowledgement from Chad and Orihime, leaving Mako the only one innocently left in the dark. Sitting down as the menacing ticking of the clock above the receptionist's desk filled the lobby, permeating the tense silence and magnifying even the smallest noises, Uryu furrowed his brow in thought, "Still, it's difficult to fathom Satsuki's newfound strength. How could absorbing the COVERS increased Junketsu's spiritual pressure to such an extent? But more importantly... I don't know why

Sosuke Aizen is here... or why he's decided to help fight Ragyo Kiryuin."

"Hold on just a second! Isn't Aizen that genius super villain Ichigo fought when he was a soul reaper, romping around the afterlife without a single care in the world?"

Uryu rubbed the bridge of his nose as the question cut through the tension like a knife, "Mako, for the last time it's shinigami not 'soul reaper.' But yes, Aizen was the one..."

His exasperated explanation faded into the background as Orihime stood up, arms folded across her chest. It wasn't *right*. She had to do *something*. But no matter how hard she attempted justifying her actions, Ryuken Ishida's barking orders from only a few minutes ago echoing through the recesses of her mind, nothing placated her immense guilt. It didn't matter if he was their enemy. She didn't *care* if he'd murdered dozens, if not hundreds, of people working for Ragyo Kiryuin. She refused to let Moe Shishigawara die simply because he was part of Xcution. Walking slowly across the lobby, careful not to draw attention as Chad took over explaining things to Mako, she flinched in surprise when the two nudists appeared in her path.

*"Apologies, Orihime Inoue, but Ryuken Ishida ordered you not to leave the lobby until the prisoner has been secured."*

Information streamed down his Probe Regalia's visor as Houka Inumuta momentarily disconnected himself from Ishida Pharmaceutical's servers and satellites, tapping into Karakura General Hospital's intercom system with a simple press of a button, *"The member of Xcution captured by Mako Mankanshoku poses a substantial risk. cursory inspection of his wounds revealed dozens of Life Fibers, each woven around vital organs and tissue. If for some reason you're worried about his health, he's currently suffering from multiple broken bones and internal bleeding. Nothing life threatening."*



Orihime wrung her hands together, "But..."

*" Your concern for his health is noted, Orihime, but allow me to put things in perspective. Ragyo Kiryuin is fully aware of the effects your Shun Shun Rikka has on Life Fibers," Inumuta interrupted, ignoring Orihime's distraught expression when something across Karakura Town caught his attention, "And while observing your healing capabilities frame by frame would be fascinating, the risk outweighs the benefits. The information Nudist Beach gathered from Jackie Tristan's battle against Kinue Kinagase proves Ragyo Kiryuin can track the implanted Life Fibers. And while Tessai Tsukabishi's spiritual barrier conceals anyone inside the building, the limitations of her powers remains unknown. But given what we DO know, it's safe to assume Ragyo Kiryuin can sense anyone in proximity to Moe Shishigawara."*

Uryu's eyes widened at the implications, "Which means she might be able to sense Orihime."

*" Given the requirements necessary for hardened Life Fibers weapons to achieve their full effect, her Shun Shun Rikka is the most dangerous threat to Ragyo Kiryuin," Inumuta paused when Gamagori's battle against Riruka Dokugamine took an unexpected turn, "Which makes your safety our top priority. But if it makes you feel better, once Ryuka Ishida removes the Life Fibers from Moe Shishigawara you'll be allowed to heal his injuries, which shouldn't take more than thirty minutes. So please try and relax."*

The intercom died with a soft *click* as Inumuta returned his full attention towards coordinating the forces scattered throughout Karakura Town. Left standing alone in the middle of the lobby, the nudist soldiers relaxing when she made no effort to disobey their orders, Orihime gasped indignantly when Mako's arms wrapped tightly around her waist. Nearly pulled to the ground by the hyperactive teenager, arms twirling through the air in a desperate attempt to keep her balance, she blinked in surprise as Mako reached out and grabbed her hands.

"You should stop worrying, Orihime!"

Mako posed dramatically, one hand waving back and forth in front of her face, "Uryu's dad is a world-famous doctor, which automatically makes him super awesome! There's no way he would let anything happen to that guy! Not when he promised to make him all better! And your magical powers can bring him back to life if Uryu's dad screws up... which means there's absolutely nothing to worry about!"

She puffed her cheeks alongside the last exclamation, innocently ignorant of the surprised cough coming from Uryu, "So cheer up, Orihime! Because right now Lady Satsuki is fighting her mom alongside a total stranger! They probably didn't even exchange names or anything! Being sad will only make Ichigo and Ryuko feel super bad when they come back with lots of souvenirs and food! And I know better than anyone that cheering for someone guarantees they'll win! It's a proven fact! So let's cheer for Lady Satsuki! That way Ichigo and Ryuko won't have to fight a climactic battle at Honnouji Academy!"

"Thanks, Mako," Orihime forced herself to smile, the strained gesture lost on her friend, "That makes me feel better."

Orihime wanted to feel better, truly she did, but the strange feeling of guilt had only grow worse over the last few minutes. Why did she feel this way? Uryu's dad was one of the best doctors in the world. She trusted him to help someone like Moe Shishigawara despite the atrocious actions he committed working for Ragyo Kiryuin. It only made sense. So why were her hands shaking? Staring at the floor as she turned around, hands clasped tightly against her chest, Orihime's spiraling thoughts ground to a halt when a *massive* explosion shook the building.

"What the hell!?"

Uryu's glasses slipped down the bridge of his nose when the fluorescent lights in the lobby flickered, the eruption of multicolored spiritual energy overwhelming everything else in the process. Time

slowed to a crawl, his senses working quickly as the source of the explosion dawned upon him. Only one being possessed such nauseating and terrible spiritual pressure and it was taking a considerable amount of effort simply resisting the urge to throw up. Holding a hand against his mouth, the vile taste of bile nearly causing him to gag, Uryu tensed when the shockwave from Ragyo Kiryuin's attack smashed into the barrier surrounding the hospital. Eyes widening at the cracks rapidly spreading across the green surface, streams of multicolored light piercing through the buckling barricade, he reached for Orihime's arm only to freeze when orange flashed across his vision.

"Santen Kesshun, I reject!"

The triangular shield flashed into existence moments before the barrier shattered, protecting everyone in the lobby from the ensuing explosion of glass. A ragged breath tearing its way out of his throat as he looked around, attention shifting between Chad's imposing form in front of Mako to the nudist soldiers crouched behind a vending machine, Uryu's mouth dried at the sunlight shining through the expanding hole in the clouds. *Incredible*. That was the only word he could think to describe Ragyo Kiryuin's power. Nothing he'd encountered could compare to what he just witnessed. The only attack that came close was Ulquiorra's technique back in Hueco Mundo... but *this* attack originated from a greater distance. And it still had enough power to shatter a barrier created by a shinigami captain?

It was absolutely terrifying.

Just how much was Ragyo Kiryuin holding back at Honnouji Academy?

He walked forward as the Santen Kesshun dissipated, sneakers crunching lightly against shattered glasses. Squinting through narrowed eyes at the darkened clouds on the horizon, the bitter autumn wind causing his skin to break out in goosebumps, Uryu staggered under the full weight of the situation. Ragyo Kiryuin's

attack shattered the spiritual barrier. There was nothing stopping the woman from sensing their spiritual pressures. They were no longer *safe*. Twisting around, the abrupt movement catching everyone by surprise, he opened his mouth to speak, to warn Orihime that she needed to leave, only for something to crash into the parking lot at nearly terminal velocity.

"Lady Satsuki!"

Uryu didn't know who shouted as he leapt through the broken window, scattered droplets of rain falling upon his face. The cold November air burning his lungs with every breath as he ran across the parking lot, Heilig Bogen materializing in his right hand as puddles of water splashed against his pants, he threw caution to the wind when he saw how *badly* Satsuki was injured. Junketsu's tattered uniform did little to conceal the extensive burns covering her body. Blood oozed freely from her mouth and stomach, pooling on the ground and mixing with the rain. Yet Satsuki was still *conscious*, harsh coughs wracking her throat as she noticed his presence.

"ORIHIME!"

His panicked voice disturbed the eerily quiet afternoon as Orihime rushed outside, the two nudists only a few steps behind. Glancing down the abandoned streets when she pressed two fingers against her hairpins, the fairy-like creatures enveloping Satsuki within their golden-orange barrier, he ignored Mako's aggressively loud outburst in order to focus on the greater threat - they weren't safe. Only an idiot wouldn't think Ragyo Kiryuin would notice the sudden presence of several spiritual pressures, which meant it was only a matter of time before she found them. They needed to get back inside the hospital. If they could reach his father's underground training room than perhaps they had a chance to -

"So *that's* what healed dearest Nui's eye..."

Ragyo Kiryuin's heel clacked against the pavement as she decapitated the two nudist soldiers with a casual sweep of her arm.

*Finalement* ! She was *finally* finished with that farce of a battle! Leaning sideways to avoid the filthy blood spurting through the air, mouth curling upwards at Orihime's horrified scream, her marron eyes narrowed when Uryu appeared in her path, a Heilig Pfeil aimed at her throat. How disappointing. Did the young Quincy think his pitiful arrows could leave even a scratch upon her glorious body? Exhausted or not, such a being could *never* hope to stand against someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber.

"Come now, Quincy."

She grinned at Uryu's sneer, fingers *grabbing* the Heilig Pfeil inches from her face. Just what did the Quincy expect to accomplish with such a pathetic act of resistance? Snapping the spiritual arrow without breaking her stride, the measured *clacking* of her heels causing the youth's fingers to twitch nervously, she purposely raised her other hand as slowly as possible, the newly acquired Scissor Blade shimmering with a multicolored hue "Such arrogance from a lowly being. You Quincy seem utterly incapable of understanding your place in the grand scheme of the world. It's *disappointing* that I have no intention of..."

"GET AWAY FROM HER, URYU!"

Tessai Tsukabishi's booming voice interrupted the matriarch, earning an irritated glower as she looked over her shoulder at the former captain standing on the roof of Karakura General Hospital. Meeting her gaze without blinking, the freshly drawn black tattoos covering his arms shining with a bright crimson light, he waited until Uryu was safely out of range before shouting at the top of his lungs, "SŌDAI KŌGŌ KAKOI!"

"That's quite enough of *that* ."

Spittle flew from the former captain's mouth when a concussive wave of spiritual energy slammed into his stomach, tearing a hole through his shirt and apron. Smirking when the man's feet left the rooftop, his body momentarily hovering in the air before crashing

headfirst into a building several hundred feet away, Ragyo lowered her hand and chuckled, smoke rising from her curled fingers. Honestly, did every shinigami have to announce their techniques *before* attacking? It was simply poor etiquette. Such foolish behavior in the middle of a battle was liable to get someone killed.

But back to the business at hand.

She snapped her fingers as Yasutora Sado leapt into the air, spiritual energy writhing around his transformed arm. Calmly tucking a lock of disheveled silver hair behind her ear as Life Fibers emerged from her body, the threads immediately drawing everyone's collective attention, she chuckled at the subsequent choking gasps. It didn't matter if Isshin informed Nudist Beach of their abilities. No human or Quincy could hope to stand in her shadow. The rhythmic *clacking* of her heels echoing beautifully as the magnificent Life Fibers wrapped around the three teenagers, binding their limbs yet allowing them to continue breathing, her smile tightened imperceptibly at a very specific motion.

Now that simply would not do...

It required only a single, immeasurably slow step to clasp her fingers around Orihime's wrist, preventing the horrified teenager from activating the single technique capable of damaging her body other than hardened Life Fiber weapons. Gently lowering her arm, maroon eyes softening at the girl's terrified expression, Ragyo stared at the barrier surrounding her eldest daughter with something akin to pride, "A most magnificent ability. But the method of activation could use some work. Your name was Orihime, correct?"

She relaxed her fingers, allowing Orihime to escape without resistance. There wasn't any need for violence. Not when she was so *close*. Chuckling lightly when the terrified girl raised shaking hands to her temple, the orange light radiating from the hairpins causing her heart to flutter, Ragyo ignored the unwarranted shouting from the humans and sighed, "La vie est drôle! Despite going through all the trouble of escaping to Karakura Town... of hiding

under Isshin's protective embrace... Sora didn't have the audacity to change your name!"

"W-What?"

The question escaped Orihime's mouth as little more than a whisper before she collapsed to her knees, the mental strain of Ragyo Kiryuin's words too much for her mind to bear. How did the woman know her brother's name? And why... why did she speak about Sora with such familiarity and *contempt*? Flinching away in fear when Ragyo reached forward, perfectly manicured fingers tracing paths down her cheek, Orihime's breath caught in her throat when the woman gently hummed, "When dearest Nui reported about what happened at Honnouji Academy I was ecstatic! Beyond words! It was simply inconceivable that after all these years you were *still* in Karakura Town..."

Ragyo's expression turned *motherly* as she cupped Orihime's chin, "... my precious weaving princess."

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## Orihime [織姫] - Weaving Princess

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## Kamui Tales [Alternate Weave #4 - Déjà Vu]

Isshin Kurosaki groaned as he slowly pulled himself out of the ground. Getting hit pointblank by a Bleach Bomb hurt like hell. And Ragyo's punch hadn't helped. Brushing dust and pieces of crushed rocks from his shoulders, the powdered material falling easily from his white lab coat, he grumbled under his breath before freezing. Wait a second... something about this wasn't right. Grabbing the

front of his coat, which he *hadn't* been wearing several minutes ago, the shinigami turned doctor turned Life Fiber hybrid found himself completely and utterly baffled.

When did he change clothes?

Deciding to solve the mystery after returning to Karakura Town and putting an end to Ragyo's insane plans to feed humanity to Life Fibers, Isshin took a single step before pausing for a second time. Nothing about this made sense! Somehow, against all odds, he ended up landing in Honnou Town... and it was *sunny* . Utterly confounded, one hand scratching the back of his neck, Isshin stiffened when a familiar and highly annoying sensation plucked at the far corners of his mind. Glancing upwards at the thousands of COVERS floating listlessly in the sky, he realized there was only one logical explanation.

"I've somehow travelled to another dimension."

It wasn't an impossible scenario. The captain of the Twelfth Division bragged about creating a machine capable of opening portals to different universes. For weeks he claimed to have *finally* surpassed Kisuke Urahara. Well... he *had* until the accident that caused half of his division to vanish from the Soul Society, destroyed his laboratory and left him glowing for two weeks.

"Well, there's no point getting upset."

He frowned at the spiritual pressures inside Honnouji Academy before snapping his attention back to the COVERS. This was something he hoped to never experience again. He could feel their alien emotions and incessant desire to devour humanity. They were simply waiting for the order to consume the people inside the stadium. But even in an alternate dimension the connection to the Original Life Fiber remained, transcending the boundaries of space and time. It took nothing more than a minor application of willpower, forged and tempered by seventeen years of parenthood, to freeze the COVERS in place.



"That was too easy..."

Isshin scratched his chin in confusion. The last time he visited Honnouji Academy it had taken a considerable amount of effort to keep the COVERS at bay. He had constantly fought Ragyo for dominance. There was something off about this universe. If he knew Ragyo... and he *did*... she would never hold herself back like this, not when he was nearby. This version of Ragyo, if it *was* Ragyo, probably hadn't expected someone to take control of her COVERS, which meant he, or another version of himself, didn't exist in this universe.

He shook his head, ignoring the building migraine, and turned back to Honnouji Academy, "It won't be easy dealing with Ragyo. She probably already knows I'm here."

Ragyo Kiryuin found herself experiencing a peculiar series of emotions as she held her long-lost daughter's glowing heart, the organ pulsating gently in her hand. The ecstatic pleasure she previous felt, the sensation of overwhelming joy unfathomable to mere humans, had disappeared, replaced by confused uncertainty. Someone had taken control over the COVERS with contemptible ease, preventing her from regaining superiority. But such a feat was impossible. Only *she* was blessed with the power to command such Life Fiber creatures. Her intimate connection with the Original Life Fiber meant only *she* could control the COVERS with naught but a cursory thought.

Yet someone, against impossible odds, had superseded her control in the blink of an eye.

"How very strange..."

She turned away from her hyperventilating daughter, maroon eyes narrowed at the familiar presence. Traitors to Life Fibers could not be tolerated. They needed to be purged, destroyed down to the dress patterns. That someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber... by that marvelous primordial being... would side with humanity, using their

magnificent power to control her COVERS was blasphemous! Once she finished dealing with dearest Ryuko and Satsuki's rebellion was crushed beneath her heel she would hunt down this being. Yet one question remained in her thoughts, twisting her mouth into a scowl.

*How* did this being encounter the Original Life Fiber?

"NO!"

Blood dripped onto the walkway when Ragyo lashed out, screaming as she sliced off her hand with the Scissor Blade, "I'm Isshin Matoi's daughter, got it? You're not my mom! You can't be!"

The matriarch couldn't help but sigh at the unnecessary shouting. Must her daughter express herself with such vulgarity and rudeness? It was simply unbecoming for someone blessed by Life Fibers, especially if they were her daughter, to behave in such a childish manner. Ignoring the remainder of Ryuko's outburst as she leaned over, fingers reaching for her severed hand, Ragyo stiffened when someone appeared on the walkway, their clothing ruffling briefly before stilling.

"Heh... looks like I haven't lost my touch."

Isshin greeted the astonished woman like an old friend, ignorant of the way her eyes focused on his silver hair. At this range he could sense the extent of Ragyo's, *this Ragyo's*, spiritual pressure. Even wearing Junketsu she paled in comparison to the intelligent woman from his dimension. And to think he'd been legitimately worried for a moment about having to fight her. That was a massive load off his shoulders! Perhaps this strange alternate dimension wasn't as horrible as he initially thought.

But he still needed to figure out a way back to *his* universe.

He turned his attention away from the baffled matriarch when Ryuko's heart was drawn in her chest with a sickening *squelch*, the glowing organ returning to its proper position in her body. A frown,

barely visible underneath his childish veneer of flamboyant amusement, developed at the barely contained outrage and disbelief in the teenager's eyes, how her muscles quivered with every breath. This wasn't good. It didn't take someone with Kisuke Urahara's level of intelligence and situational awareness to understand how this would likely end.

"Judging from your expression I'm guessing you've just received some rather startling and world-shattering news," Isshin muttered while brushing some dust off his lab coat.

"Shut the hell up!"

Senketsu's voice fell upon deaf ears as Ryuko pointed the Scissor Blade at the strange man, "Who the hell are you!? And why do you look like *her* !?"

"That's a long and boring story," Isshin looked at his watch, the action disguising the thoughts rapidly coursing through his mind. The situation was worse than he expected. This version of Ryuko was still an emotional wreck, barely holding herself together. And thanks to Ragyo tearing out her heart, something that never happened in his dimension, she was beginning to question her humanity. With the Original Life Fiber's hold on his mind as strong as ever, perhaps even *stronger*, deescalating this situation would require finesse, "But right now you need to take a deep breath and relax. It's not every day you discover your body is made of Life Fibers."

"That's obvious, you silver haired bastard!" Ryuko growled, fury etched across her face, "Now tell me something useful before I beat the living shit out of you!"

"You remind me of my son," Isshin folded his arms, maroon eyes tracking the Grand Couturier in the background. "Ichigo's always scowling, which makes it difficult for him to find a girlfriend. It's quite an embarrassment, really. To think my own son didn't inherit any of my charm and personality. But I'm sure you two would get along perfectly!"

Ryuko couldn't take the bastard's apparent stupidity for another second, "What the hell are you talking about!?"

"Yes... what *are* you talking about?"

Ragyo refused to listen to the traitorous being's constant drivel for another second, his annoying answers causing her eye to twitch. Blessed by the Original Life Fiber or not, his wasn't a match for Junketsu's power. She would have plenty of time to correct his life choices after finishing her surprising reunion with Ryuko. There was simply *so much* she needed to find out from her long-thought-dead daughter. Smiling as she stepped inside the man's guard, one arm cocked over her shoulder, Ragyo *laughed* as she punched his squarely in the face, the resulting explosion of multicolored energy sending Ryuko soaring across the stadium. Now that the traitor to Life Fibers was taken out of the picture she had time to -

"Ouch."

Her eyes widened at the man's halfhearted and dull response. She was at a loss for words, her mind unable to comprehend the utter impossibility of the situation. How could this man... this traitor to Life Fibers... take her attack without flinching? How could Junketsu's full power, which she barely used against her own daughter, only force him back a few inches? It didn't make any sense! Yet a smirk nevertheless slowly stretched across her face. This was unexpected. Something she never fathomed in the darkest recesses of her soul. This had the potential to change *everything* .

With an exaggerated sigh she lowered her arm and stepped away from the man, "Nui, be a dear and keep Ryuko occupied for the next few minutes. It seems dealing with this man will require more effort than expected."

Ragyo waited until the Grand Couturier left, the sound of Scissor Blade against Scissor Blade music to her ears, before frowning, her eye twitching in annoyance at the man's constant rubbing of his nose. Why was this infuriating man - a Life Fiber Hybrid - pretending

her punch broke his nose? It was both rude *and* insulting! Forcing the thought from her mind, she folded her arms across Junketsu and sighed, "It's obvious from your marvelous appearance you've made contact with the Original Life Fiber. There's no point denying it. Yet I cannot remember anyone other than myself giving themselves to that primordial being. So perhaps you can enlighten me... just *who* are you?"

"The name's Isshin Kurosaki."

He sagely rubbed his chin as an explosion tore through the stadium, "And perhaps I'm just out of touch with today's trends and fashions but should a middle-aged woman be wearing a school uniform?"

Ragyo felt her eyebrow *twitch* again, the embarrassing gesture unbelievably *lost* on the ignorant man. It was... infuriating... that Isshin Kurosaki viewed her with such contempt, that his actions contained the appearance of superiority. She wanted nothing more than to wipe the annoying smirk from his face. Yet she quickly discarded the notion, instead sighing wistfully at her misfortune. Why, just *why*, couldn't she have met this man instead of her pathetic husband? Souichiro might have possessed some intellect but marrying him had been simply for convenience, a method of gaining an heir worthy of Life Fibers. This man on the other hand, beneath his childish yet somehow strangely endearing personality, had been deemed *worthy* by the Original Life Fiber!

She refused to allow such a valuable opportunity go to waste!

"It appears we've reached an impasse... my dear Isshin."

The sudden but brief tensing of the man's shoulders didn't escape her notice. Nor did the single bead of nervous sweat trickling down the side of his face. Strutting forward, Junketsu's heels clacking with every step, her grin widened at his faltering bluster, "The **COVERS** won't descend as long as you're here. In any other situation I would be quite... *displeased*... by such traitorous behavior. However, I'm not someone to look a gift horse in the mouth."

She looked Isshin squarely in the eyes, basking in her brief dominance over the man, "Your foolish behavior aside, you are someone the Original Life Fiber found worthy of its glorious power. *You* ! Not my pathetic excuse of a husband! I wish to know what makes you so special, Isshin Kurosaki!"

Overwhelming despair and panic flooded Isshin's mind at the *familiar* look in Ragyo's eyes. He recognized that terrifying look! What god did he piss off for Ragyo to *always* fall head over heels for him? Swallowing the lump in his throat when she leaned forward, her chest pressed against his own, Isshin mentally begged Masaki to grant him the strength and mental clarity to survive what was about to unfold.

# Can't Stand Losing You

*Here's the next chapter of my story, right in time for Christmas. A lot happens in this chapter. There's several battles being fought across Karakura Town, characters undergoing personal development, etc. So I hope you enjoy reading the chapter. And when you're done, the poll between Satsuki and Ryuko is still on my author page. I haven't forgotten about that.*

*So enjoy the chapter and check out the tvtropes page if you have the time. Things are reaching a climax in To My Death I Fight.*

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## Chapter 57 - Can't Stand Losing You

**[November, 1988]**

*" Commencing Experiment O-LF5."*

*The tension in the darkened room, illuminated by the faint glow from dozens of monitors, was palpable as Sora Inoue stared intently at the scrolling data. Frowning introspectively as his colleagues initiated the boot-up sequence, klaxons barely audible through the subbasement's reinforced walls, he nodded when several lights above his desk turned green. This was the moment, the point where weeks of work paid off. Breathing deeply as patented machinery whirred to life, the constant electric hum causing his fingers to twitch, Sora momentarily hesitated before typing the final required commands.*

*" All systems are stable, Ma'am," he announced, aware of the woman standing silently behind his chair, "The subject's vitals are stable. No sign of Life Fiber desynchronization. Heart rate and blood*

*pressure are elevated but within acceptable boundaries. Increasing level of anesthesia. No indications of abnormal reactions."*

*" Very good, Mr. Inoue," Ragyo Kiryuin's eyes narrowed, concealing her growing anticipation, "Proceed to Phase Two."*

*He nodded as the other researchers worked to bring the remaining systems online, "All subsystems operational. Commencing with Life Fiber infusion in twenty seconds. Engaging all containment seals. Disabling anti-tailoring protocols alpha and delta. Secondary safety restraints engaged. Priming Life fiber suppression systems. Switching from passive Life Fiber infusion... now."*

*A flash of golden-orange light slammed into the bulletproof glass across the room. The already dimmed lighting flickered under the deluge of energy, monitors shaking as the protective material visibly shuddered. Sweat dripped down Sora's face, a combination of the sweltering heat within the room and his own nervousness, as he stared at the real-time image of the young girl sitting in the other room, her body convulsing as Life Fibers threaded themselves into her bound arms and legs. Leaning forward, his throat dried as he waited for any signs of success. But as the seconds dragged into minutes, the silence growing increasingly uncomfortable, the young researcher became aware of the fingers crushing the back of his chair.*

*" Yet another failure."*

*Ragyo sighed, the multicolored light shining from her silver hair dimming. She didn't have the patience to waste twenty minutes watching Sora Inoue and his team search for meaningful results. It was obvious the experiment was a failure, the fifth over the last year. Their constant lack of success... and endless excuses... were beginning to wear upon her nerves, something she didn't think possible.*

*With well-practiced grace Ragyo marched towards the window separating the two rooms, removing her sunglasses in a flourish that*



*concealed the frustration and annoyance building inside her Life Fibers. Staring at her daughter's tear-stricken face, blood oozing from Orihime's half-conscious form as densely-woven Life Fibers callously removed themselves from her punctured limbs, the matriarch's fingers twitched at the pathetic display.*

*" Bon sang..."*

*It was inconceivable that Orihime, incubated within an artificial womb inside the Original Life Fiber alongside her sisters, was an absolute failure like Satsuki and her nameless second-born daughter. Such a blasphemous notion was absurd! Orihime should have been perfect! A true daughter of Life Fibers! Her body wasn't tarnished by Souichiro's inferior genetics like Satsuki. So why were her precious weaving princess's Life Fibers refusing to function, rendering her little more than a pathetic human? It didn't make any sense! From the moment of their birth both Nui and...*

*She shattered that thought in a heartbeat. Merely thinking about Nui and her other, lost daughter, was... absolutely infuriating.*

*" Mr. Inoue, please inform Orihime's physician that my daughter requires her assistance."*

*Ragyo's callous tone betrayed nothing of her inner annoyance as the research made the appropriate call, his voice slightly flustered. There was no point working herself into a frenzy over the horrifying fate of Amu. To think Isshin, of all people, would commit such a horrible crime, all to spite the Original Life Fiber. It was inconceivable! The foolish man wouldn't harm anyone! But with any luck she could still salvage the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet using her two remaining daughters.*

*All she required... needed... was finding the source of Orihime's lamentable condition. And fixing it.*

*Her heels clacked softly as she turned around, the fading golden-orange light absorbed by her multicolored backdrop. There was*

*another, more important, matter she needed to address at the moment. Souichiro was growing increasingly suspicious of her actions, investigating the millions of dollars spent on equipment necessary for the experiment. And if Hououmaru's reports on his inquiries were accurate, her husband was beginning to piece together Nui and Orihime's existences. And that simply couldn't be allowed. Especially not for a traitor like her husband.*

*After all, he was the 'secret' leader of that laughable anti-Life Fiber resistance growing in the Kansai region.*

*" I'm disappointed by your team's continued failure, Mr. Inoue."*

*The abruptness took the researcher, one of her more promising employees, by surprise, "When I hired you last year, it was under the presumption that you would live up to your rather commendable résumé. However, your inability to successfully remedy Orihime's condition has raised doubts concerning that my initial decision. I DON'T appreciate losing any sort of investment, Mr. Inoue. Several of the best minds in the world, concentrated within this room, yet you consistently fail to achieve any sort of progress?"*

*" I expect a full report on my desk by the end of the week," Ragyo walked away from the man, annoyance tainting her features, before looking over her shoulder, "And unless you can convince me otherwise... your letter of resignation."*

*" Perhaps..."*

*Spinning around, sweating at Ragyo Kiryuin's unnervingly cold glare, Sora cleared his throat, "Kazashi, can you bring up the data from Experiments O-LF3 and O-LF4?"*

*He tapped a finger during the several seconds it took Kazashi, an older woman in her mid-thirties, to find the required information, "Our initial calibrations used Nui's Life Fibers to limit possible fluctuations in the experiment. As the only other naturally born hybrid, her Life Fibers proved valuable as a working baseline. It allowed the*

*procedure to move forward without starting from scratch. However, we determined that Orihime and Nui's Life Fibers possess noticeable differences despite their identical genetics."*

*Sora leaned forward, typing rapidly as the images on the monitor changed, "These variations might be causing unexpected feedback, preventing the system from properly synchronizing with Orihime. It will take some time but rerouting the Life Fibers through a tailoring convertor should eliminate the issue. But..."*

*The sudden hesitation drew the woman's curiosity, "But what, Mr. Inoue?"*

*" During our analysis of Experiment O-LF4, I discovered that Orihime's Life Fibers actively radiate an unknown form of energy," Sora coughed as the graphs changed, shifting into a picture of Orihime, "Spectrographic testing of her Life Fibers, comparing them against Nui's, proved inconclusive. This phenomenon is unique to Orihime. Further experimentation of her Life Fibers, with appropriate changes to the equipment, should narrow down the likely -"*

*" That's quite enough."*

*Ragyo was mildly impressed by the young man's analysis. Brushing off his remaining concerns with a discerning glare, she sighed under her breath, "You've made your point. I shall grant your team another three months to reverse Orihime's intolerable condition."*

*She took another few steps before stopping, eyes narrowed over her shoulder, "However, there's still the matter of your obtrusive empathy for my daughter."*

*" Empathy?"*

*" Don't think I didn't notice your hesitation before starting the procedure," Ragyo smiled, a mirthless expression that doubled the tension in the room, "How I treat Orihime is none of your concern. I recommend discarding such notions if you wish to keep your current*

*position. My daughter cannot achieve her full potential with sacrifice. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Inoue?"*

*" Yes, Ma'am."*

*A sharp hiss of pressurized air interrupted any further discussion when Rei Hououmaru marched into the room, fresh rips and tears blemishing her once immaculate uniform. Bowing to the matriarch, her manners unaffected by the bloodstains covering her clothing, the secretary smoothed a crease on her skirt, "Please excuse my interruption, Lady Ragyo, but there's an urgent matter that requires your immediate attention."*

*Ragyo closed her eyes, mentally sighing, "Nui, I take it?"*

*Hououmaru adjusted her aviator sunglasses with a quick flick of her finger, "Yes. I'm afraid she accidentally injured another caretaker during her scheduled play time. I attempted to intervene but her strength proved too much."*

*" Oh dear..."*

*Ragyo sighed as she followed Hououmaru out of the room, any lingering thoughts concerning Sora Inoue's employment already forgotten. It was getting increasingly difficult keeping Nui from accidentally harming those assigned to keep her entertained. As a precocious three-year-old-girl, her developing mind constantly craving new information, Nui was prone to erratic outbursts. This was merely the second incident this month, "Nui must be lonely without a playmate her own age. Perhaps I should reconsider introducing her to Satsuki. Heaven knows my daughter could use the company..."*

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Kisuke Urahara's fingers twitched as Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame extracted the Marionette Threads around his daughter's mind.

He observed Ururu violently convulse against the ground, her heart-wrenching screams long since replaced by faint whimpering. Frowning as numerous crimson threads spun from his Bankai's puppet-like hands, weaving around his daughter before pulling taut, the former captain turned shopkeeper steeled himself against the guilt welling in his chest. It appeared the Bleach Bomb worked perfectly. Ururu's regeneration had slowed to a crawl, giving him more than enough time to finish. But despite knowing his actions were the primary cause of his daughter's suffering, he didn't deserve *all* the credit.

None of this would have been possible without Ragyo Kiryuin's loathing of his accomplishments and general misanthropy.

His grey eyes narrowed imperceptibly, shoulders slumping from weariness. Something about the woman's handiwork didn't feel right. There were too many questions. The information Houka Inumuta obtained from Revocs suggested Life Fiber Hybrids were naturally immune to Mental Refitting. No matter the source, the Life Fibers within Ichigo, Ururu, Ryuko and even Isshin should assimilate the Marionette Threads, breaking any mental control in *seconds* .

It explained Kinue Kinagase's immunity to Shukuro Tsukishima's Mémoire Raiment.

Yet Ragyo Kiryuin somehow bypassed that unsurmountable barrier.

He grimaced when Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame removed the final Marionette Thread. Unlike the crude version of the technique used by her former employee, the matriarch didn't require physical contact to stitch Life Fibers into her target's mind. It was frightening to say the least. Her tailoring skills were impossibly complicated, possessing inhuman nuances he couldn't comprehend. Simply *attempting* to analyze the weaves and cross-stitching composing

Mental Refitting strained his prodigious talents. However, his constrained understanding granted him *some* clarity.

From a purely scientific point of view Ragyo Kiryuin was brilliant... if one ignored the ethical and moral ramifications of her actions.

But sending Nui and Ururu to his humble candy-store? That was suspiciously short-sighted, even accounting for the former's single-minded determination to ending his life. They were both crucial for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. Losing *either* daughter would prove disastrous to Ragyo Kiryuin's plans. Without Nui and Ururu's synchronized cooperation Shinra Koketsu could never be finished, which begged the question why she risked everything bringing them to Karakura Town. And the only answer that came to mind was rather disturbing.

It was frightening but Ragyo Kiryuin believed nothing - Nudist Beach, Satsuki or even his own appreciable efforts - posed any risks to her plans. The thought of losing either daughter was inconceivable. But Kisuke couldn't fault the woman's overwhelming arrogance. With Isshin out of commission, she was the most powerful being in Karakura Town. Thanks to her monstrous spiritual pressure, high-speed regeneration and repertoire of dangerous techniques, defeating Ragyo in straightforward combat was nearly impossible. It would take someone with equivalent strength, possessing minimal moral compunctions about collateral damage, simply to keep the woman's attention.

Fortunately for humanity's long-term survival, his plans took *all* these variables into consideration.

By focusing her attention on something dangerous, such as a former captain with an artifact made from the Original Life Fiber, Ragyo would *never* think about the handsome shinigami who stitched Mugetsu and broke into her manor unraveling Ururu's Mental Refitting.

"Amu!"

Nui Harime's voice cracked as she struggled against the unyielding Life Fibers wrapped around her body. Sapphire eyes burning with murderous intent towards the shinigami standing in front of Amu, the pink bow keeping her blonde hair prim and perfectly curled *unraveling*, she snapped angrily, "What did you do to her!?"

"Oh, nothing much..."

Kisuke patted down his dusty sleeves as Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame dissolved into motes of spiritual energy, "I simply used my Bankai to unravel your Ragyo Kiryuin's work."

He ignored the Grand Couturier's understandable reaction when pain lanced through his arms and legs, causing him to nearly stumble before recovering his balance. He underestimated the extent of his wounds. Without his Bankai sustained the stitching, the temporarily restructured sections of his body were reverting to their original states. Eyes narrowed at the feeling of warm liquid trickling down his fingers, staining Benihime crimson. There wasn't much time before the rest of his injuries, self-inflicted or otherwise, reopened, resulting in a relatively minor case of exsanguination.

"It was actually very difficult. But thanks to your cooperation I successfully extracted the Marionette Threads she implanted into Ururu."

The torn ligaments and muscles in his shoulder screamed as he cautiously approached the ensnared teenager, the *clomping* of his geta catching her attention, "From your expression you probably believed Mental Refitting was permanent. And normally you'd be correct. But allow me to apologize, Nui Harime. Because I'm sorry to say that Ururu's original personality and memories will return once she regains consciousness."

"I'm going to kill you..."

Nui *seethed* at the sociopathic shopkeeper, her voice little more than a whisper. With a repressed sneer her fingers convulsed, the hooks

coating the underside of her fingernails unable to grasp the shimmering Life Fibers only inches away. Words couldn't describe her *contempt* for the atrocious shinigami. Everything he said simply pissed her off! Bristling at Kisque Urahara's uncaring expression, every fiber of her being *quivering* at his lack of empathy, she snarled, "Amu was the only person who understood me! And you killed her!"

"That's a rather serious accusation."

He stared thoughtfully at the Grand Couturier, the contours of his face etched into a frown, "I seem the remember promising *not* to kill you or Ururu."

"She's not Ururu!"

The Grand Couturier's fervent denial was overshadowed when she attempted to physically tear through the Life Fibers only to slip, smashing her face against the ground with a sickening *thud* . Breathing heavily as blood trickled down her forehead, Nui clenched her teeth in frustration, "Stop calling her that stupid name!"

"I see..."

Kisque trailed off, leaving Nui Harime shaking furiously as he withdrew another bucket hat from the folds of his coat. Carefully examining the green and white stripped fashion statement for damage, he sighed at the tears making it almost unwearable. Fate was indeed a cruel mistress. It seemed every time he fought a Life Fiber Hybrid, whether they were Ichigo, Ryuko or the Grand Couturier, his favorite hat was destined for an unusual and torturous death, "Well then, it appears I've overestimated your connection with Ururu. After all, only someone who cared about their sister would have prevented Ragyo Kiryuin from weaving Marionette Threads into \_."

"That was *your* fault!"



Nui spat at the shinigami, the effort required to *shut him up* causing her voice to rise several octaves, "You did something to her! Amu should have been happy when Lady Ragyo saved her! Everything should have been perfect! But she wouldn't listen to Lady Ragyo! S-She..."

Her voice devolved into a harsh whisper, "Amu only wanted to see *you* ! She wouldn't even talk to me! *You* convinced her she was nothing! That she was only a stupid human! Bu Lady Ragyo fixed everything! I finally had my sister back... and you *killed* her!"

An eerie wind coursed through the underground chamber, dust devils mixing with pillars of acrid smoke, as Kisuke allowed the Grand Couturier to finish speaking before calmly placing the damaged bucket hat on his head, "This might sound rather insulting... but I really *don't* think you know anything about Ururu."

"Shut up!"

Kisuke wasn't bothered by Nui Harime's resentment nor the subtle shifting of her spiritual pressure. The Grand Couturier was someone who wore their emotions on her sleeves, which balanced Ururu's quiet and shy disposition. But her denial of reality despite evidence to the contrary was interesting, "You first encountered Ururu during No-Late Day when you broke into Ichigo's dormitory at Honnouji Academy. It was your first meeting in almost seventeen years. Yet for some reason you failed to initially realize she was your sister. This is all just speculation, but you only started treating Ururu as a member of your family *after* speaking to Ragyo Kiryuin. Am I wrong, Nui Harime?"

He stabbed Benihime into the ground, the zanpakuto piercing several inches of rock and steel, "I would be lying if I claimed to fully understand Twin Life Fiber Entanglement. Perhaps on some level you *did* recognize Ururu. An inherent and unshakable mental connection would certainly explain your growing fascination with my daughter over the subsequent months."

"However, the being you call 'Amu' never exist."

Blood dripped from his fingers as he observed Nui Harime's fluctuating emotions, his shadowed eyes narrowing at something shimmering beneath her hatred, "As the Grand Couturier of Revocs you should have recognized 'Amu' was nothing more than a puppet. It's not something a person of your prodigious talent would have missed. Your Life Fibers are identical to Ururu's, meaning it's *impossible* you didn't notice anything wrong."

The subtle twitching of the Grand Couturier's eyes underneath her disheveled hair didn't escape his notice, "The notion that Ragyo Kiryuin would weave Marionette Threads into your sister must have been horrifying. You probably couldn't believe she would do something so heinous. So tell me..."

"... when did you convince yourself nothing was wrong with Ururu?"

Nui refused to believe anything Kiskeya Urahara said about Amu, her jaw clenched at the shopkeeper's lies. He didn't know anything about her relationship with Amu! Even Lady Ragyo admitted their synchronization was a miracle from the Original Life Fiber! So why couldn't she tell the stupid man he was wrong!? There was no way the shinigami knew what he was talking about! The Amu she met at Honnouji Academy, her stoic and adorable sister who hung out with Ichigo and Ryuko, was the same! She hasn't changed at all!

"There's nothing wrong with Amu!"

She struggled against the Life Fibers, the pain from her shoulders nearly dislocating only fueling her determination to *kill* Kiskeya Urahara. All Lady Ragyo did was undo the damage to Amu's mind, fixing everything this human did to her sister! Panting heavily as bangs of curled blonde hair obscured her vision, hiding the blood oozing down her face and stinging her eyes, Nui tensed when the shinigami stepped forward, his expression unreadable.

"Now *this* is a surprise..."

The number of times he could remember being genuinely *surprised* was notoriously small. He prided himself on taking into account hundreds of possible variables, preparing multiple strategies. Yet he hadn't anticipated something like *this* . It was subtle, undetectable to anyone familiar with the technique. Even with the knowledge from his Bankai, he almost missed the fluctuations in Nui Harime's spiritual pressure. Superficially it resembled desynchronization, the consequences of her connection with Ururu breaking, but closer inspection revealed something *worse* .

Somebody had used Mental Refitting on the Grand Couturier.

Kisuke pressed a finger against Nui Harime's temple despite her objections. Only someone on the same level as Ragyo Kiryuin, possessing an unbreakable connection with the Original Life Fiber, could have successfully pulled this off. But despite his reservations, he didn't believe she used Mental Refitting on her daughter, not when Nui was already completely loyal and dedicated. And there was something else. He could sense the lingering presence of Marionette Threads yet the Life Fibers themselves were missing. Her personality and memories were also unaltered, which implied adjusting the Grand Couturiers behavior wasn't *his* goal.

The only question was why -

An explosion of spiritual energy *shattered* the specialized barrier surrounding the converted training ground, tearing the former captain from his worsening thoughts. What was happening in Karakura Town? He had anticipated an event of this caliber occurring if, or rather when, Sosuke Aizen sufficiently infuriated Ragyo Kiryuin. But nothing of *this* magnitude. Looking over his shoulder as the lights flickered, failing under the deluge of energy, it took him seven seconds to mentally calculate the woman's location relative to his store.

The next fraction of a second he shifted his weight when Nui Harime finished *chewing* through the Life Fibers.

"Nake, Benihime!"

Crimson energy rippled down his zanpakuto, arcing towards the Grand Couturier still recovering her balance. How could he have been so shortsighted? Adjusting his hold on Benihime when Nui Harime danced around the destructive column of spiritual energy, her body flickering from precise and chilling bursts of speed, Kisuke pushed aside the pain coursing through his leg, jumping away moments before her fist smashed *through* the ground.

This was his own fault. Given the Grand Couturier's physiology he should have expected her teeth were capable of manipulating Life Fibers.

An obnoxious *rip* reached his ears as he twisted sideways, Nui Harime's fingernails tearing through the high-quality fabric of his coat. With instincts honed from years of fighting and stealth he countered the Grand Couturier's attack, blood spraying through the air as Benihime carved into her shoulder. Something was *off* about her tactics. This wasn't the same person who chased him halfway across Karakura Town. Frowning introspectively as he evaded another wildly thrown punch, the power coursing through the deceitfully petite fist buckling the metal plating covering the floor, Kisuke stiffened upon realizing *where* they were standing.

His nose burned with the acrid smell of cleaning products when the Anti-Life Fiber armament throughout the area detonated. One hand cupped over his mouth as explosions shook the foundations of his store, destroying multiple Nudist Beach vehicles and needle stockpiles, he grimaced when Nui Harime emerged from the smoke, both Needle Blades clasped tightly in her trembling hands.

"That was quite clever, miss Grand Couturier."

He matched Nui Harime's contemptuous glare with mirthless amusement, Benihime shimmering as he took stock of the situation. This was the worst-case scenario. Despite the tattered dress clinging to her body, blood streaming down her face and arms, the Grand

Couturier's strength and spiritual pressure *still* exceeded his own. Even with her regeneration suppressed by Twin Life Fiber Entanglement, in his condition he couldn't afford taking any unnecessary risks.

It appears luck simply wasn't on his side today.

He tensed when the Grand Couturier raised the Needle Blades. Prepared for absolutely everything, strategies for countering her repertoire of techniques without Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame forming in his mind, Kisuke was caught off guard when she turned around, seething impotently before *running away*.

"Huh?"

The overbearing tension dissipated as the teenager fled towards the exit, his bucket hat blowing away a moment later from an exceptionally strong gust of wind.

"Well, I didn't see *this* coming..."

Relief coursed through the beleaguered shopkeeper once Nui Harime's spiritual pressure vanished. He was fortunate she suspiciously decided to escape his humble shop. The remaining Anti-Life Fiber explosives strewn throughout the converted training ground wouldn't be effective against an infuriated and vindictive Life Fiber Hybrid. Reaching down to pick up his hat, exacerbating the wounds sustained fighting Nui and Ururu, he dusted off the damaged article of clothing while pondering the Grand Couturier's surprising retreat. But as exhaustion reared its ugly head, Kisuke looked at his blood-covered hands.

"Oh well, I'm sure Yoruichi can handle her."

Spiritual energy curled around his fingers, coalescing into a translucent orange barrier as he limped towards Ururu's prone form. Nui Harime might have escaped with the Needle Blades, but it was a pyrrhic victory. Without his daughter's assistance - Mental Refitting or

otherwise - she couldn't finish weaving Shinra Koketsu. And that meant Ragyo Kiryuin's overarching plans for humanity, the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet, would never come to pass. Still, he hoped Tessai and the others could stall her long enough for Isshin to recover or the Life Fiber Barrier to come back online.

Because he had the suspicion Ragyo Kiryuin was going to be *furious* when Nui Harime told her what happened.

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Ragyo Kiryuin's mouth curled into a warm smile as she cupped her daughter's chin, "... my precious weaving princess."

There was an ear-wrenching screech of metal when she flicked her wrist, the Scissor Blade spinning twice through the air before stabbing into the ground near her feet. She could hardly contain the excitement thrumming throughout her body. Stroking a finger down her daughter's cheek, the ignorant muttering from the humans and Quincy eliciting not a single mote of her valuable attention, Ragyo frowned at Orihime's confusion, "It appears you don't know the significance of your own name. Didn't *he* tell you anything?"

She lowered her hand, smiling as she stepped away from her shivering daughter, "Oh? Sora Inoue didn't tell you *anything* ? How quaint. That contemptible man truly thought one small action would undo years of mistakes, even if the guilt existed only in his mind. But we *both* know the world doesn't work that way. One cannot simply develop a sense of guilt. Nor can they discover their conscience. It's something Sora Inoue knew quite well during -"

"Koten Zanshun, I reject!"

Ragyo didn't visibly react when something emerged from her daughter's flower-shaped hairpins. Watching as the phantasmal construct fluttered around Orihime, golden spiritual energy

enveloping its metaphysical form, she closed her eyes and sighed. *This ? This* was how Orihime activated her abilities? It was a complete mockery of the Original Life Fiber, demeaning the magnificent being's powers underneath human sentimentality. Anyone else attempting such blasphemous actions would have perished. But she could only feel disappointment and pity for her daughter. Opening her eyes when the projectile shot forth, ripples of spiritual energy following in its wake, Ragyo resisted the reasonable temptation to blame Isshin.

The man might play the fool but he did *not* lack an imagination.

With minimal effort she reached across her waist and tore the Scissor Blade from the ground. Casually swinging the appropriated hardened Life Fiber weapon at the projectile rocketing towards her neck, its lethal power filling her heart with unadulterated excitement, she smirked as golden-orange sparks danced across her vision. As the muscles in her arm shook slightly from the effort of countering Koten Zanshun, its divine strength threatening to sever her Life Fibers, she chuckled at her daughter's horrified reaction.

It was charming Orihime believed the Scissor Blade couldn't withstand the offensive manifestation of her powers.

"Dearest Nui informed me you're convinced that man was your brother."

The projectile ricocheted harmlessly off the Scissor Blade with an exaggerated twisting of her wrist. Unsatisfactory appearances aside, it was something that could hurt her. But to think her daughter's abilities developed so magnificently despite her absence. *Evolving* without her guidance. Thrusting the hardened Life Fiber weapon back into the ground while Orihime collapsed onto her knees, the last dredges of resistance shattered, Ragyo strutted forward, a smirk twisting the corners of her mouth, "Do you believe Sora Inoue cared about you? That his *affection* wasn't merely an act? Some self-serving fantasy he deluded himself into believing existed?"

Her fingers twitched at the coarse cotton threads composing Orihime's sweater, "After all, he lied to you about your parents... about your *mother* ."

Orihime couldn't look away, Ragyo Kiryuin's monstrous spiritual pressure stifling her thoughts, "N-No..."

Ragyo smiled at her daughter's horrified reaction to the truth of her existence. Leaning forward while gently stroking Orihime's hair, the orange bangs falling silkily between her fingers, she stared disinterestedly at the flower-shaped hairpins, the plastic accessories serving as a conduit for her *true* powers, "To think my daughter would grow into such a beautiful young woman."

"I-I'm not your..."

"You look just like your sisters," the Kiryuin matriarch added, ending her daughter's whisper of defiance without even trying, "Surely you've noticed the resemblance? But while dearest Nui and Amu were born perfect, true daughters of the Original Life Fiber, somehow your Life Fibers were weak and defective."

"What did she say?"

Uryu Ishida couldn't believe what he just heard. Orihime was a Life Fiber Hybrid like Ichigo and Ryuko... and Ragyo Kiryuin was her *mother* ? How was that possible? Flinching when the Life Fiber wrapped around his body tightened, eliciting a grunt of pain while Mako Mankanshoku gnawed at the alien threads, he grimaced, "Orihime's her daughter? But that's..."

"Impossible? I'm sure you find *nothing* in this world is impossible, Quincy."

She snapped her fingers, the threads wrapped around the young man tightening until he could hardly breath, "But awakening her Life Fibers proved more difficult than expected. Despite my best efforts they simply refused to properly function."



A shifting of the wind briefly caught her attention, "Unfortunately, I couldn't dedicate time to such a valuable task. Revocs had recently entered the international market. Not to mention Nui was quite the precocious young girl. So I entrusted the task to a particular man, someone lacking my former husband's sense of morality."

"S-Sora... wouldn't..." Orihime stammered, memories of her older brother flashing through her mind, "He... wouldn't... do..."

Ragyo grinned at the tears running down her daughter's cheeks, "I did not care what he did to achieve success... and Sora Inoue did not allow human morality or sentimentality to cloud his judgment."

She reached out, stroking her nearly comatose daughter's hairpins, "I assumed his experiments to awaken your Life Fibers failed, a product of his wavering dedication. But from your magnificent abilities it seems his research was successful after all!"

"Don't listen to her, Orihime!"

Uryu swallowed the bile in his throat, a byproduct of Ragyo Kiryuin's monstrous spiritual pressure, and shouted, "Even if she's telling the truth, your brother risked everything rescuing you from Revocs!"

"I did not ask for your opinion, *Quincy* ."

Glaring over her shoulder she flicked a finger at the discourteous teenager, the shockwave of pressurized air sending Uryu crashing through the façade of his father's hospital. Callously turning back to Orihime without a second thought, her daughter's frantic cries for the Quincy barely registering in her mind, Ragyo tucked a strand of disheveled silver hair behind her ear, "Sora Inoue's selfish actions removed all meaning from dearest Nui's existence. Without your presence she was left purposeless, unable to understand the emptiness growing within her heart. Yet even if you were lost to me, I was *not* about to let him escape without punishment..."

Orihime's breath hitched in her throat, "You didn't..."

Ragyo cupped her daughter's tear-stricken chin, "It took nine years but Sora Inoue paid the price for betraying me! For betraying Life Fibers and Revocs!"

She didn't bother waiting for her daughter's response, instead gently pulling Orihime off the ground. It was time for them to leave. The sounds of battle once common throughout the city had nearly disappeared, replaced by an eerie and satisfying calmness. Of course, she could still hear the occasional explosion from the south - Isshin's household if she remembered correctly - which meant Hououmaru encountered something unexpected. But that did not matter. The fate of her secretary - of *all* Xcution - was unimportant in the long run, sacrifices to ensure the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet became reality. And with her daughter recovered, Kisuke Urahara slaughtered by Nui and Amu, she couldn't care less if Hououmaru survived whoever she was fighting.

Reaching for the Scissor Blade, the weapon shimmering in the afternoon sunlight, Ragyo's eyebrow twitched when an annoyingly familiar arrow shot over her shoulder.

"Leaving already, Ragyo Kiryuin?"

Smoke drifted from his Heilig Bogen as Ryuken Ishida stood upon his hospital's roof. Narrowing his eyes when the woman looked over her shoulder, the monstrous and vile spiritual pressure radiating from her body causing his stomach to churn, he allowed himself a succinct moment of satisfaction. As the technique implanted into the Heilig Pfeil activated, trapping both Ragyo Kiryuin and Orihime Inoue within a pentagram-shaped barrier, the self-proclaimed 'Last Quincy' glared disdainfully at the matriarch.

"Kirchenlied: Sinne Zwinger."

Her indifference shifted into outright annoyance at the Quincy's cavalier behavior. She would not grant the man the *honor* of an answer. He didn't *deserve* one. No Quincy were worthy of her attention. Closing her eyes with a tired sigh as she tore the Scissor

Blade from the ground, the force behind the seemingly lazy action shattering the surrounding pavement, Ragyo listened impatiently to Ryuken Ishida's ongoing explanation. An impenetrable barrier? An archaic technique designed to imprison Quincy for insubordination? How laughable! In any other situation she would react cautiously. *Especially* after fighting Satsuki and that contemptible shinigami.

But she was running out of time. And Ryuken Ishida was a *Quincy* .

"Is that right?"

The barrier *shattered*, dissolving into shards of spiritual energy with naught but a flick of her wrist. Smirking as the Quincy tensed, his muscles and raised bow signifying the nervousness coursing through his soul, Ragyo chuckled before turning around, her heels clacking against the ground. Did he honestly think she would take the bait? That she would lose her temper so easily? *La vie est drôle*. What could he, a mere Quincy, possibly hope to accomplish other than an early death? He might possess some interesting abilities and a modicum of strength but he was nothing compared to that *woman* .

And she was *dead* .

Ignoring the Quincy's predictable response to her silence she stepped over the bruised and battered form of her eldest daughter, the wounds covering both human and Kamui a warning to anyone daring to stand against the Original Life Fiber. Yet she felt a twinge of pride when Satsuki somehow returned from the brink of unconsciousness, bloodied fingers clenching the pavement while convulsions wracked her body. Failure or not, she had to give her daughter credit. Satsuki managed to accomplish a truly miraculous feat - ascending Junketsu into her fashion week apparel. It was an unexpected and dangerous development which could have changed everything... if Ryuko or Ichigo had been in her place.

The irony of that fact was not lost upon her.

With a resigned sigh she grabbed Orihime's arm, her daughter too emotionally devastated by the truth of her existence to resist. She was *done*. Karakura Town had worn out its welcome and she *did not* want to deal with Sosuke Aizen, whenever he decided to return. But as she walked away, her heels clacking with every step, Ragyo's eyebrow twitched when the Quincy continued, "You're not paying attention, Ragyo Kiryuin. Therefore, I will repeat my previous statement. Those trapped within the double-layered barrier of Sinne Zwinger are rendered spiritually blind."

She scoffed at Ryuken Ishida's arrogance, a trait seeming possessed by every Quincy, before her eyes narrowed.

*Wait... double-layered?*

Her fingers twitched when the previously invisible second layer of Sinne Zwinger shimmered faintly, glowing translucently in the late autumn afternoon. Snarling at the sudden deluge of spiritual pressure assaulting her senses when the barrier shattered, raining shards of spiritual energy upon the ground, time slowed to a crawl as she twisted around, eyes locked upon Yoruichi Shihoin floating only a few feet away. She was fast... but not fast enough! Sunlight refracting off the Scissor Blade when the shinigami avoided her initial strike, leaving behind an afterimage as she dodged to the left, Ragyo's façade of smug arrogance shattered upon the lightning-coated fist smashing into the *right* side of her face.

There was a sickening *crunch* as every bone in her neck shattered, blood spewing from her mouth in response to the crackling lightning coating the former captain's hand. As her eyes quivered at the shinigami's audacity, her cheek rippling around the clenched fist, Ragyo *snarled* when she inadvertently allowed Orihime to slip free from her grasp. No! Reaching for her daughter as her broken neck repaired itself, bones and muscles regenerating with a nauseating squelch, her vision briefly swam when she was launched away from Karakura General Hospital, courtesy of Yoruichi Shihoin's subsequent *eleven* punches.

*Merde !*

Ragyo recovered her balance after only a few seconds of flight, smoke drifting from her heels as they skated angrily against streams of solidified spiritual energy. A single breath leaving her throat as she came to a halt, the abandoned landscape of Karakura Town hundreds of feet below stretching to the horizon, she growled in frustration. This was insulting! She refused to allow this shinigami to ruin everything! Not when she was so close! How could this *shinigami* possibly understand the effort required to incapacitate Isshin? Glowering when Yoruichi Shihoin reappeared in a flash of speed, her eyes betraying an expression unsuited for someone of her lowly status, she took note of the lightning surrounding the woman's body.

"How *rude*..."

With eyes half-lidded, displaying her true *lack* of interest in the fight, she caught the former captain's hand, the electricity crackling harmlessly against her palm. Lightly squeezing the impertinent woman's fingers, the sound of cracking bones granting her *some* pleasure from this unwanted distraction, Ragyo smirked at the bewildered woman's reaction, "Your strength is impressive, Yoruichi Shihoin. However, compared to someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber you're nothing more than an insignificant insect!"

"HAH!"

Lightning crackled around Yoruichi's body as she ignored the Kiryuin matriarch, choosing instead to concentrate her efforts on more proactive solutions. The muscles in her arm shaking as she punched the Scissor Blade, seeking to destroy the sinister weapon instead of allowing Ragyo Kiryuin to continue using it, her eyes widened when dozens of small wounds opened across her hand. Retreating the instant her opponent's attention wavered, she stared at her quivering hand, blood dripping from between her numbed fingers. What the hell just happened? Kisuke never mentioned the Scissor Blade could dissipate spiritual energy!

How was she supposed to counter a weapon capable of tearing through Shunko?

"You know," Yoruichi grumbled, lightning arcing between her fingers, "I never had this much trouble fighting Satsuki. And it's nearly impossible to read a Kamui."

A single bead of sweat trickled down her cheek at Ragyo Kiryuin's blasé reaction, the malevolence shimmering beneath the woman's stoic exterior unnerving. She had a feeling things were about to get *worse* . Grunting as she switched into a familiar stance, strands of purple hair hovering in the aura of lightning enveloping her body, Yoruichi's face scrunched before she flexed her knees and *moved* .

"RAIOKEN!"

The former captain didn't hold anything back as she furiously assaulted the Kiryuin matriarch, each punch containing enough spiritual energy to vaporize an Adjuchas. Shouting loudly, her hair whipping frenziedly back and forth under the barrage of supersonic blows, Yoruichi's breath hitched when Ragyo Kiryuin vanished, disappearing in the gap between successive punches. *What* !? She hadn't even seen the woman *move* ! Tensing at the faint clack of a heel, blood spraying from her shoulder despite dodging the Scissor Blade at the last second, she glared angrily at the blood-stained weapon poised inches from her neck.

A gash opened across her cheek as she instinctively pirouetted around the hardened Life Fiber weapon, accentuating her retreat with judicious bursts of Shunpo. Gripping her bleeding shoulder, crimson oozing between her fingers, she grimaced at her opponent's spiritual pressure. Even after fighting Satsuki and Sosuke Aizen she still had *this* much power? Spitting angrily as the white lightning circulating around her body coalesced into a pair of wings jutting from her shoulders, destroying what remained of her jacket in the process, she stiffened when Ragyo Kiryuin calmly asked, "You wouldn't happen to still be holding back, would you Yoruichi Shihoin?"

Yoruichi caught the subtle *twitch* of Ragyo's fingers before a heel planted itself in her stomach. Doubling over, several ribs breaking under the spiritual energy exploding from the small of her back, she watched helplessly as the matriarch swung the Scissor Blade, bifurcating her body from shoulder to waist.

"Damn it..."

Ragyo twitched when the shinigami's corpse vanished, leaving behind only the tattered pieces of her shirt. She had nearly forgotten about the Grand Couturier's confrontations with the woman, two embarrassing encounters that earned dearest Nui's enmity. But she didn't have time to waste fighting someone without the slightest chance of winning. It was clear Yoruichi Shihoin was aware of this fact, which is why she was stalling for time. Only a naïve fool wouldn't realize the shinigami was hoping to keep her busy long enough for Orihime to escape into the shadows.

She would *not* let that happen!

It took less than a second to track down Yoruichi Shihoin, her eyes narrowing at the shinigami's suspicious behavior. Slowly looking over her shoulder, determined to understand *why* she only retreated a few hundred meters, Ragyo caught the tail end of the nearly topless former captain rotating her hands before lightning *exploded* from her body, forming a pillar that stretched into the cloudless skies.

" *Qu'est-ce que c'est ?* "

An eruption of wind rustled the matriarch's hair as she watched the white lightning enveloping Yoruichi Shihoin collapse, twisting into a concentric ring emanating from the center of her back. As several drum-like spheres formed upon the structure, their phantasmal nature verified when the shinigami slowly passed her rotating arms through them, Ragyo scoffed at the dark skinned woman's arrogance. Why did Yoruichi Shihoin believe she would stay her hand, *allowing* her to finish charging what was obviously a powerful

attack? Even if it didn't possess the slightest chance of succeeding, her opponent's *gall* was insulting.

Ragyo disappeared with an annoyed snarl, the characteristic *clack* of her heels absent as she reached Yoruichi Shihoin in only a few steps. She was *done* fooling around! Thrusting her arm forward, intent on tearing out the shinigami's heart, her eyes widened when the former captain's fingers curled into claws, bangs of purple hair transforming into glowing horns as she shouted at the top of her lungs.

"SHUNKO: RAIJIN SENKEI!"

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Electricity sparked around Rei Hououmaru, the force emitted by her Écusson Raiment Mark II cracking the glass façade as she vertically ascended the building. With a sharp intake of air, punctuated by the vivid taste of copper in the back of her mouth, she sheathed her trench knife and grabbed the edge of the roof, vaulting over the multicolored-tinted blade awaiting her arrival. Landing behind the insufferable traitor in a tightly controlled spin, she lashed out as Kugo Ginjo turned around, her leg snapped towards his chin.

"Électrocution Marche!"

The former substitute shinigami leaned backwards, nearly losing his footing when electricity burst from Hououmaru's heel. Jumping away from the woman, briefly skidding against the rain-soaked rooftop before regaining his balance, Ginjo tensed when the lightning coiled around her leg didn't dissipate. Wait... she wasn't going to try something that stupid a *second* time? As Hououmaru scowled, shifting her center of gravity with a soft *clack*, his eyes widened when the electricity crackling around her raiment transformed from a light purple-white to dark violet.



Damn it, she was!

The commander of Xcution drove her heel into the rooftop with a dull *thump*, sending shockwaves of lightning rippling through the structure. As the building immediately *shook*, cracks spreading beneath his feet, Ginjo moved, twisting Ragnarok around his wrist while backpedaling across the roof. Accompanied by the ear-splitting screech of shattering glass and metal as the building collapsed floor by floor from the power of Hououmaru's rewoven raiment, he briefly stumbled when *something* sliced through his forearm. Pushing aside the pain, Ginjo ignored the slickness between his fingers and *jumped*, cursing when he looked over his shoulder.

Why the hell did Hououmaru look so smug?

Blood trickled down Ragnarok, staining the broadsword as he landed upon a gravel-covered roof down the street. Fighting Hououmaru was proving to be a pain in the ass. Not only was her restitched Écusson Raiment faster, it was also stronger than he remembered. And that ignored whatever other features Ragyo and the Grand Couturier wove into her new uniform's Life Fibers. He grunted when an explosion of dust and smoke washed through the streets, gravel crunching beneath his boots. While this made stopping Hououmaru significantly more difficult, dealing with her improved raiment wasn't impossible.

Twenty years of working with the woman meant he *knew* how she fought. He knew her weaknesses and strengths. And if the Grand Couturier hadn't changed *too* much, every attack at her -

His train of thought ground to a halt as he swung Ragnarok, intercepting the black trench knife with a resounding *clang* .

"You're getting predictable, Hououmaru!"

Ginjo grinned, the muscles in his arms trembling while slowly pushing the woman's trench knife away from his neck, "But third time's the charm, right?"

"Your arrogance is unfounded, Kugo Ginjo," Hououmaru retorted, gravel crunching underneath her heels when the pressure doubled, driving the traitor's blade several inches closer to her face, "Someone like *you* should know the follies of preemptively presuming victory."

Her arms buckled with a flourish of electricity, unable to continue resisting the greater physical strength of Kugo Ginjo's Sauvegarde Raiment. Shifting her center of gravity as Ragnarok slammed against the roof with a deafening *thud*, the subsequent shockwave rustling her hair, Hououmaru glowered at the multicolored light emanating from the newest fissure blemishing her raiment. Electricity surged alongside her righteous indignation, crackling as she backflipped, clearing the twenty-foot gap to the adjacent building in a single bound. Seething when the traitor followed suit, his raiment granting him agility *he should not possess*, she snapped her fingers, vanishing in a shimmer of purple light.

"Damn it!"

Ginjo cursed when Hououmaru faded from existence. He should have seen this coming. *Of course* her restitched Écusson Raiment possessed the same version of optical camouflage as Houka Inumuta's regalia. Why wouldn't it? There was not a chance in hell Ragyo wouldn't weave something that useful into her secretary's uniform. Cautiously stepping forward onto the roof, he tensed when something besides the oppressive silence became obvious. He couldn't sense Hououmaru's spiritual pressure. But that was impossible. Ragyo might be brilliant but she shouldn't know *anything* about spiritual pressure.

This was just *perfect* .

"I didn't think Ragyo found regalia worthy of her attention," he called out, glancing around the seemingly abandoned roof, "So why the sudden change of heart? Did she finally run out of ideas? Or maybe she's not nearly as good a couturier as she -"

There was hardly any warning, a puddle rippling across the roof, before Hououmaru reappeared in a shimmer of light, electricity crackling around her raiment.

He backpedaled to avoid the enraged woman's initial strike, wincing when blood sprayed from a jagged gash across his forearm. Swinging Ragnarok in a tight circle when Hououmaru reversed her grip upon the trench knife mid-slash, pirouetting on her back foot before thrusting the weapon at his heart, he snarled as their blades clashed in a shower of sparks. Something was *off* about her expression. The hatred on her face didn't look *right*. It was too... perfect. Instinctively leaning sideways, pushing off the roof as Hououmaru flicked her wrist with an almost lazy effort, his eyes widened when lightning *exploded* from the edge of her trench knife.

Since when could her Écusson Raiment do *that* ?

A strange warmth trickled down his face, stinging his right eye as he backed away from Hououmaru. What the hell just happened!? Holding Ragnarok stiffly against his back when she tried severing his spine, their weapon colliding with an ear-splitting *clang*, Ginjo grunted at the awkward position. Maybe pissing off Hououmaru by insulting Ragyo wasn't the smartest decision. Especially since the Grand Couturier added some nasty surprises to her new raiment. Still, it managed to accomplish *one* very important goal.

Pivoting sharply, his knuckles bleeding white as Ragnarok scraped against the roof, he smirked when Hououmaru dodged, backflipping out of range, "What's wrong, Hououmaru? You seem to be having trouble blocking my attacks."

The mockery earned an angry twitch from the dark skinned woman, "Maybe I should start holding back. Pulling my punches might help even the odds."

"Do not confuse frustration with weakness!"

Hououmaru crossed the roof before he could blink, slamming the pommel of her trench knife against Ragnarok. Forced off balance by the unexpectedly powerful blow, Ginjo's attention shifted as he staggered backwards, moving from the insane woman towards the Life Fiber weapon conveniently poised overhead. *Grinning* when Hououmaru realized the depths of her folly, blinding pulses of multicolored spiritual energy enveloped Ragnarok as he *slammed* the broadsword against the roof.

"Cross Slash!"

The *air* trembled as spiritual energy surged forth from Ragnarok, the ever-growing wave of multicolored destruction enveloping Rei Hououmaru. For a brief moment Ginjo contemplated stopping the technique, sweat already dripping down his face from the exertion, before changing his mind. With a defiant shout spiritual energy *exploded* from Ragnarok, doubling the width of the beam already demolishing everything in its path. This wasn't some friendly spar. He wasn't going to take *any* chances against someone like Hououmaru.

His arms trembling when the energy cutting a swath of destruction dissipating, Ginjo cursed as a purple-clad figure leapt from the tinted smoke, "Damn... I missed."

"Riruka's report downplayed the strength of your raiment."

Blood slowly dripped onto the ground from the fingers on Hououmaru's left hand, leaking out of the glowing cracks covering her Écusson Raiment. She could not blame anyone other than herself for the agony encompassing every part of her body. Arrogance and falling prey to his taunts allowed Kugo Ginjo to land such a devastating blow, damaging the raiment the Grand Couturier spent hours weaving. It was a mistake she *would not* repeat. Yet her hatred was tempered by the source of the traitor's replacement raiment. For no human could have stitched such a well-crafted and marvelous uniform.

That was the *only* reason Kugo Ginjo's new raiment hadn't already fallen apart at the seams.

"However, the outcome of Operation Laissez Faire... of this battle... has already been determined," she added, unconcerned by the small puddles of blood around her heels, "You might have damaged my raiment, but I still hold the advantage."

"... the advantage, huh?"

Ginjo mulled over the words before smirking, "It must be one hell of an advantage to offset that fractured arm."

"Your audacity is *noted*," Hououmaru retorted, electricity coiling around her damaged raiment at his flagrant mockery, "Électrocution Glissando."

A wispy smile threatened her stoic façade, electricity sparking beneath her heels as she appeared behind Kugo Ginjo in the blink of an eye. Spinning tightly at the waist, fingers dragging against the rooftop, Hououmaru nearly cursed at the lack of blood staining her trench knife. That technique was woven into her Écusson Raiment by the Grand Couturier after the Great Culture and Sports Festival. It *should* have severed the Life Fibers composing his raiment, leaving him choking on blood while dying of asphyxiation. Amber eyes flickering behind her raiment's visor at the rapidly approaching footsteps, the commander of Xcution scoffed derisively.

It appeared she needed to strike a little *harder* to penetrate something woven by Isshin Kurosaki.

She countered Kugo Ginjo's laughably telegraphed attack with discernable effort, trench knife deflecting both the initial strike and subsequent swings from his broadsword. The corners of her mouth twitching as she stabbed her blade into his stomach, earning little more than a pained grunt when it failed to penetrate the densely-woven Life Fibers, Hououmaru did not hesitate to throw herself backwards, leaping off the rooftop before the traitor could retaliate.

Breathing deeply as she landed in the middle of the street accompanied by the metallic *clack* of her heels, Hououmaru glanced upwards, glaring at the rapidly descending figure.

This was getting ridiculous. She couldn't afford wasting any more time fighting someone who simply would not learn their place!

The street *buckled*, rippling beneath the tidal wave of multicolored energy as Kugo Ginjo smashed his blade against the ground. Electricity coiling around her body, temporarily boosting her Écusson Raiment's already impressive speed, Hououmaru nimbly danced between the pieces of flying asphalt, purple afterimages following every measured step, "Predictable and pathetic. Those two words describe *you*, Kugo Ginjo. Raiment are designed to cover the body, leaving only the barest traces of flesh visible. That your rewoven Cuirasse Raiment leaves your arms exposed..."

Her expression shifted into faux disappointment as the smoke settled, heels clacking softly in the middle of the destroyed street, "... suggests Isshin Kurosaki doesn't trust you to properly wear such extravagant clothing. Any normal raiment would -"

"It's just *clothing* ."

Ginjo callously yanked Ragnarok from the ground, dust clinging to the blade's surface, and scoffed, "Sorry for interrupting your clichéd speech explaining how I'm not 'worthy to wear raiment,' but insane discussions about Life Fibers just aren't my thing. It might look strange... and its speed and durability are lower than your raiment... but my Sauvegarde Raiment is certainly *stronger* ."

He grinned at the renewed twitching of Hououmaru's cheek, "I guess that makes Isshin a damn good tailor. Well... either *that* or Ragyo's nowhere near as good as she -"

"Do not finish that thought, Kugo Ginjo."

"Fine," Ginjo clenched his fingers, spiritual energy enveloping Ragnarok. Defeating Hououmaru was taking too long. Given the sudden change in Karakura Town's weather, if the fight dragged out any longer he might find himself facing Ragyo or worse... the Grand Couturier, "You sound rather confident about your Écusson Raiment's power. So let's see what it can *really* take!"

Using reflexes honed by decades of experience wearing raiment, allowing its Life Fibers to encompass her body, Rei Hououmaru pushed off the ground, scarcely avoiding the tsunami of spiritual energy disintegrating everything in its path. With another kick, her heel cracking the concrete façade of a building, she leapt into the air, electricity coiling around her Écusson Raiment. Isshin Kurosaki was truly worthy of Lady Ragyo's affection if Kugo Ginjo's raiment was this powerful despite its scandalous appearance. Her lips pursing as she cleared the skyline, landing on the nearest building with a light wince, Hououmaru flinched at the pervasive *emptiness* she earlier tried ignoring.

What happened to the COVERS!?

"Électrocution Valse!"

Anger twisted her features when Kugo Ginjo's broadsword blocked her punch, sending the subsequent eruption of electricity dissipating harmless into the air. Damn it all! *Where* were the COVERS!? She was neither blind nor dumb. She had *witnessed* the majestic Life Fiber beings fraying apart at the seams, streaming into the distance... towards Lady Ragyo. Yet it was *Junketsu's* power which grew exponentially stronger in the aftermath! How could Lady Ragyo's failure of a daughter have controlled the COVERS? She was human, unworthy of wielding such a marvelous ability! That was...

She quickly ended that traitorous line of thought, snarling as she leapt beyond the reach of Kugo Ginjo's weapon.

It didn't matter whether Junketsu evolved, miraculously gaining control over the COVERS. Without Isshin Kurosaki's interference - betraying the very being that bestowed upon him immeasurable power - Lady Ragyo's glorious strength was unsurmountable. All that remained was her mission... her part of Operation Laissez Faire.

And she *refused* to allow Kugo Ginjo's frustrating inability to *die* stand in her way!

"Électrocution Marche!"

Her leg snapped backwards in a wide arc, electricity curling between the armored plating of her Écusson Raiment. Planting both hands onto the roof for support, the clawed digits tearing into the concrete, Hououmaru smashed her heel against Kugo Ginjo's weapon, instantly arresting its momentum mid-swing. Content with her minor accomplishment, she allowed him a moment's reprieve before nimbly flipping away, smirking as the lightning generated by her raiment exploded at point-blank range.

"Shit!"

Ginjo felt something in his knees *pop* as he stabbed Ragnarok into the roof, the soles of his boots skidding harshly against the surface. With traces of electricity still coiling throughout his body, muscles twitching from Hououmaru's attack, he dashed forward with snarl, *glaring* at the woman desperately fleeing across Karakura Town. Like *hell* he was going to let her escape!

It took shorter than expected to catch the normally quicker woman, the damage sustained by her raiment reducing her mobility. Swinging Ragnarok over his shoulder in a single-handed grip, releasing a wave of spiritual energy that forced Hououmaru to stop running, Ginjo half-smirked as he landed in front of the enraged woman, "The commander of Xcution running away from a 'traitor' to Life Fibers? If I didn't know better, I'd say you're *afraid*, Hououmaru."



"You think raiment woven by Isshin Kurosaki concerns me, Kugo Ginjo?"

Hououmaru's tone was measured, lacking any irritation or anger, as her visor deconstructed in a flash of multicolored light, "Riruka might have underestimated your raiment's strength but her report, on the other hand, was quite detailed. Électrocution Épée."

The emotional vacancy of her voice momentarily took Ginjo by surprise before he *moved*, leaning sideways when she viciously slashed her trench knife through the air. As the spaulder of his Sauvegarde Raiment disintegrated, fraying under the surging column of lightning, he flexed his fingers around Ragnarok and *swung*, intercepting Hououmaru when she sprinted around her own attack. Immediately forced on the defensive by the sheer *randomness* of her strikes, sparks dancing across his vision with every clashing of their blades, Ginjo couldn't help but *smirk* at Hououmaru's desperation.

Fighting *him* instead of pursuing her original objective was driving her insane.

"What the hell!?"

Ginjo wasn't sure who asked the question - Hououmaru or himself - when an immense pillar of white electricity flashed into existence, causing the entire city to *tremble*. He recognized this spiritual pressure. How could he forget? But to think Yoruichi Shihoin had something like *this* hidden up her sleeves. Relief spreading throughout his body, he turned around, rolling his shoulders at Hououmaru's expression of utter bafflement, "It looks like Ragyo finally met someone besides Isshin who can kick her ass."

"Your words hold no meaning!"

"You seem rather pissed off over a 'meaningless' comment," Ginjo swung Ragnarok, blocking Hououmaru's increasingly erratic attacks, before countering with a downward slash that sent her stumbling, "Don't tell me you're starting to *doubt* Ragyo?"

"My faith in Lady Ragyo has never wavered!"

Hououmaru pressed a hand against her bleeding chest, the result of Kugo Ginjo's recent stroke of good fortune. Glaring at the blood staining her raiment with quivering eyes, the liquid seeping thickly onto the ground, electricity crackled dangerously around her body as she *sarled*, rushing forward without the slightest hesitation. As her trench knife slashed downward through the air, embedding itself deeply into Kugo Ginjo's forearm when he covered his face, she backed away, avoiding his retaliatory punch, "Even Junketsu's new strength couldn't measure against Lady Ragyo's divine power!"

"... it's funny."

Ginjo watched Hououmaru retreat, his right hand trembling, "If Isshin were here, he'd probably say something like 'don't kill Hououmaru.' But that doesn't work for me."

He briefly hesitated, fingers hovering over the trench knife stabbed through his forearm, before grabbing the blade and *pulling* . Throwing the blood-covered weapon off the side of the building, his vision clouding from the pain, spiritual energy *exploded* from his Sauvegarde Raiment, "Because you're *insane* ! Helping Ragyo sacrifice humanity to Life Fibers? I don't what's worse. That you're willing to die... or that you don't *care* . But it doesn't matter! You won't survive to see Ragyo's plans fall apart! Xcution dies with you, Hououmaru!"

"Gosh, now that's just *rude* !"

Everything came to a sputtering halt at the saccharine tone. Blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth, the spiritual energy coiled around Ragnarok dissipating as the weapon clattered onto the roof, Ginjo stared at the purple blade protruding from his chest, "W-What?"

"You can still talk, huh? I must be out of practice..."

The Needle Blade was callously yanked backwards, pulled at an angle that skewered his lungs. Gasping wetly, blood spurted from his mouth as he took a single step before collapsing onto his knees, cold numbness already spreading throughout his body. His Sauvegarde Raiment deactivating in a flash of stars when something *plucked* at his back, Ginjo fell face-first onto the roof with a boneless *thud* as a pair of pink boots strolled around the blood pooling underneath his body.

"I was not expecting your assistance, Grand Couturier."

Rei Hououmaru straightened her posture, the injuries accumulated confronting Kugo Ginjo ignored for the moment. Brushing a hand against her raiment as the Grand Couturier walked silently around the dying traitor, she couldn't help but notice the teenager's disheveled appearance. The tears blemishing her pink dress, the way her blonde hair bounced in curled bangs instead of drill-like pigtails, indicated something transpired during her mission to eliminate Kisuke Urahara. Noting a peculiar absence, tensing at the Grand Couturier's distinct lack of a smile, she gently inquired, "Forgive me for asking, but where is -"

"Shut up."

A thin cut appeared across Hououmaru's cheek, her eyes widening at the Needle Blade poised inches from her face. Staring into the Grand Couturier's vacant eyes, subtly aware of the other hardened Life Fiber weapon's location, she momentarily paused before repeating the question, her tone brooking no arguments, " *Where* is Amu?"

"You're sure asking a lot of annoying questions..."

She did not falter under the veiled threat, meeting the enraged Grand Couturier with calm detachment befitting the commander of Xcution. Nevertheless, the implications were enough to send a shiver down her spine. Something had gone wrong during their mission. The combined power of Amu and Nui should have

overwhelmed Kisuke Urahara, their knowledge of Life Fibers countering whatever traps he prepared. That the teenager returned alone from her mission, apathetic about her disheveled and unprofessional appearance, would undoubtedly displease Lady Ragyo, "Very well, I'll let you explain Amu's absence once Lady Ragyo concludes her business and returns to Honnouji Academy. Now if you'll excuse me, I must -"

"... kill that silly old goat's stupid children?"

Nui looked over her shoulder as she turned around, the blood-stained Needle Blades glistening ominously, "You're kidding. In that beat-up uniform? Don't make me laugh. Just run along back to Honnouji Academy. *I'll* take over from here."

Rei Hououmaru was *shocked* by the Grand Couturier's blasé disregard concerning Operation Laisse Faire. Despite her carefree personality - the whims of an artiste - she *never* ignored her mother's orders. This was an unequivocal disaster. If Kisuke Urahara somehow captured Amu, *or worse*, Shinra Koketsu would remain unfinished, preventing the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet from reaching fruition. It explained why the Grand Couturier was *dérangé* . The loss of her sister against the shopkeeper meant her purpose, the only reason she existed, was gone.

"Grand Couturier, what do you hope to accomplish by disobeying Lady Ragyo?"

Despite the teenager holding a higher position within Revocs, *she* was still the commander of Xcution and Lady Ragyo's most dedicated servant, "Don't forget that your part in Operation Laisse Faire was simply to eliminate Kisuke Urahara. You failed... losing Amu in the process. You *must* return to Honnouji Academy before that man's allies realize the precariousness of our position. Determining how to finish Shinra Koketsu without Amu's assistance takes priority over everything -"

"Say her name again and I'll kill you."

The pitter-patter of the Grand Couturier's boots as she marched towards the edge of the roof, head tilted slightly to the right, drew Hououmaru's undivided attention, "I don't care what Lady Ragyo said. Amu is gone... and it's all *his* fault. So just shut up and leave. Your voice is getting annoying."

"... as you wish."

Hououmaru bowed her head, sighing at the teenager's rebellious behavior. Turning around as the Grand Couturier leapt away without another word, vanishing faster than her eyes could follow, she walked across the rooftop towards the somehow *still conscious* Kugo Ginjo. Her heels clacking, gaze petrifying from righteous indignation, she reached down and grabbed Ragnarok, the weapon fitting perfectly in her hand.

"Farewell, Kugo Ginjo. Your service to Lady Ragyo is no longer required."

Pieces of her Écusson Raiment flaked away, dissolving into wispy strands of multicolored threads as Hououmaru callously left the dying traitor to drown in his own blood. The seconds passing in silence as he watched her leave through half-lidded eyes, Ginjo's fingers twitched, grasping weakly at the rooftop. If the Grand Couturier was meeting Ragyo... and Hououmaru heading to Honnouji Academy... that meant only one thing. Coughing harshly, blood oozed from where the Grand Couturier stabbed the Needle Blade as he mustered the final dredges of his strength and smirked.

" *I really screwed things up, didn't I Isshin?*"

It was getting difficult to breath, his collapsed lungs filling with blood, "*Ichigo... Masaki... Genesis. I couldn't save anyone. I should have... done something... anything...*"

His arm fell limply onto the roof, bloodied fingers splayed across his darkening vision, " *But Yuzu and Karin... I kept them safe. That's all... that matters. Ragyo won't lay... a hand... on them...*"

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Yoruichi Shihoin panted heavily, her chest rising and falling as Ragyo Kiryuin was engulfed within the column of spiritual electricity.

Blood dribbled from her fingers, squeezing between the clenched digits, as she staggered, Shunko dissipating in an underwhelming flicker. Staring at the devastation caused by Shunko: Raijin Senkai, entire neighborhoods reduced to smoking rubble from its destructive power, she winced when her broken ribs shifted. Never in a hundred years would she imagine using the technique inside Karakura Town. It was simply too powerful, the collateral damage immeasurable in populated areas.

But she couldn't afford holding anything back against someone like Ragyo Kiryuin. Especially after the woman walked away unscathed from a fight with *Sosuke Aizen* .

With a casual application of Shunpo the self-professed Goddess of Flash reappeared on a building several hundred feet away, one hand pressed against her broken ribs. She had placed everything into that technique, drawing on reservoirs of spiritual energy she didn't know existed, but Yoruichi highly doubted it killed Ragyo Kiryuin. That would be *far* too easy. The woman was a monster. The most she could hope to accomplish was keeping Ragyo's attention focused on anything *but* Orihime.

A task far easier said than done.

Yoruichi ignored the pungent taste of copper as Shunko: Raijin Senkai dissipated, exposing the heavily smoking and ruined streets of Karakura Town. Staring into the rubble, the former captain frowned. Something didn't feel *right* . Eyes narrowed, senses pushed to their limits in preparation for anything Ragyo Kiryuin might attempt, an annoyed curse escaped her lips when she felt *nothing* . She couldn't sense a trace of the woman *anywhere* .

Stepped backwards, boots crunching against the gravel-covered roof, Yoruichi stiffened at the familiar sound of a heel *clacking* . Time slowing to an agonizing crawl, eyes widening in realization, she looked over her shoulder, cursing at the Scissor Blade swinging towards her neck.

How did Ragyo Kiryuin slip *completely* through her senses!?

Spiritual energy transformed into crackling lightning encompassed her body as she *twisted*, spinning beneath the hardened Life Fiber weapon. Her leg arcing backwards, smashing into the descending wrist with a resounding *crack*, Yoruichi barely caught Ragyo Kiryuin's taunting grin. Vaulting backwards, desperately weaving between the matriarch's following *seven* attacks, spittle mixed with blood when a heel *slammed* into her broken ribs. Teeth clenched as she bounced off the roof, boots skidding against solidified platforms of spiritual particles, the former captain grimaced, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

This *wasn't* good.

"Heh... this *really* isn't good," Yoruichi crossed her arms, Shunko: Raijin Senkai reactivating alongside an explosive burst of spiritual energy. Switching stances, the drum-like constructs encircling her body crackling from the intense power, she forced herself to grin, "I should start training harder. I'm the Goddess of Flash and I couldn't even *sense* your movements."

"Your ability to dodge is impressive. That attack *should* have severed your head from your shoulders."

Ragyo sighed indifferently, fingers splayed as she slowly raised her left hand towards the approaching shinigami, "I can see how the Grand Couturier had trouble dealing with you."

The former leader of the Onmitsukido immediately stiffened at the innocuous movement. Boots skidding against platforms of spiritual particles as she *halted* mere feet away from the woman, Yoruichi

retreated backwards without hesitation, apprehensive eyes narrowed as she reappeared back in the sky. A strange sensation coursed through her body, growing dread sending goosebumps racing down her arms. Was Ragyo Kiryuin preparing the same attack she used against Satsuki and Sosuke Aizen? No, that was impossible. At this range Orihime and half of Karakura Town would be vaporized.

So what the hell was she planning?

" *Nerveux*, Yoruichi Shihoin?"

Ragyo rotated her wrist, curling all but one perfectly manicured finger, "Retreating at the slightest perception of danger is *unbecoming* of a shinigami. You fought the Grand Couturier to a standstill, most likely defeated one of my hard-working employees and wasted several minutes of my *valuable time* . Did you honestly believe you could do all that... and *not* suffer the consequences?"

A light breeze accompanied the matriarch's question, gently rustling her silver hair, before Yoruichi flinched, gasping when *something* stabbed into her left arm. First once than dozens of times. Eyes widening in stunned horror, aware of the other woman's broadening smile, she watched as multiple Life Fibers angrily wove their way into her skin, "W-What!?"

"Marionette Threads are *far* more versatile than you people can imagine."

With a twitch of her finger, eliciting a pained grunt from the shinigami, Ragyo allowed herself to feel *some* satisfaction from this unnecessary interruption, "After all, the body is nothing more than a plaything of the mind!"

There was a sickening *squelch* when Yoruichi Shihoin's threaded arm abruptly snapped clockwise, blood gushing as muscles and ligaments tore themselves apart. Her bones crunched loudly, cracking despite the supernatural resilience granted by Kisuke Urahara's special Gigai. Gasping, eyes quivering at the misshapen



lump of flesh, the former captain reacted when the intrusion began spreading. Lightning crackling around her right hand, Yoruichi sliced downwards, severing the infected limb just before the Life Fibers reached her shoulder.

"Oh?"

Ragyo hummed at the shinigami's lack of hesitation. *This* was unexpected. Eyes widening as the Marionette Threads abandoned the shredded flesh, blood spurting through the air when the limb fell towards the ground, she observed the panting woman with faux curiosity, "You severed your arm without hesitation, saving your life in the process. Your reflexes must be superb to counter my Marionette Threads. Perhaps I've underestimated your power."

"I guess I'm just full of surprises," Yoruichi commented, sweat dripping down her face.

"Indeed," Ragyo concurred as the shinigami tightly gripped her bleeding stump of a shoulder. It seemed the woman was far tougher than expected. But spending any more time torturing Yoruichi Shihoin, discovering the limits of her endurance, was pointless. This was a frivolous battle with little reward outside personal satisfaction. And while she could easily eliminate the shinigami, a quick death just wouldn't suffice. Yoruichi Shihoin needed to *suffer* .

She needed *time* to contemplate her *many* mistakes.

"But let's be honest..."

A breathless sigh whispered through the autumn wind as she turned away from the heavily wounded shinigami, "Shinigami simply cannot compare to one blessed by the Original Life Fiber. Even after dealing with my troublesome daughter and that *atrocious* man, the difference between our powers is comparable to heaven and earth. Farewell, Yoruichi Shihoin."

It took less than three seconds to return to Karakura General Hospital, leaving the impotent shinigami bleeding to death on the adjacent rooftop. Her heels clacking softly as she landed in the empty parking lot, Ragyo ignored the headless corpses, staring past the dead nudists at the bloodstained crater where Satsuki had been laying only a few minutes ago. It appeared her daughter recovered faster than anticipated, no doubt due to the efficiency of Orihime's abilities. Casually looking around the deserted streets, acutely aware of the silence, she turned back towards the hospital's shattered façade, smirking at a familiar presence.

Her daughter couldn't escape so easily.

"Do *you* intend to stop me?"

The arrogant Quincy standing to her right, blue eyes reflecting the spiritual energy gathered within his hands, didn't respond, eliciting an amused smirk. Adorned by an extremely tacky suit of glowing white armor, Ryuken Ishida stood unflinching, his white hair rustling slightly in the wind. How *laughable*. Did the man believe changing clothes would level the playing field? An idiotic notion born from the mind of a lesser creature. Only clothing woven from Life Fibers - Kamui - could claim such a blasphemous boast.

She stopped short, however, of presuming the man posed *no* threat, "You Quincy simply refuse to accept the basic truths of this world."

"I'm curious, Ragyo Kiryuin."

Ryuken pushed aside the growing nausea, the overwhelming disgust towards the Kiryuin matriarch's existence. Eyes narrowing behind designer glasses as the ambient spiritual energy throughout Karakura Town was absorbed by the Reishi Heiso, fingers tightening around the taut drawstring of his Heilig Bogen, he politely inquired, "Were you aware that Masaki told me *everything* about your confrontation seventeen years ago?"

A single Heilig Pfeil left his bow, crossing the relatively large distance to Ragyo Kiryuin before she could mount an unsuccessful argument. Energy exploded from the antiquated Reishi Heiso as the accompanying shockwave rippled through the streets, wiping the pretentious smirk off the woman's face. Remaining steadfast when the matriarch raised the Scissor Blade, her mouth twisted into a snarl, multicolored light enveloped *everything* as his arrow directly struck the hardened Life Fiber weapon.

Just as he expected.

Observing the woman's twisting expression as she was *forced* backwards, crashing through multiple buildings from the abrupt transfer of momentum, Ryuken slowly lowered his bow before retroactively announcing, "Reinigung Pfeil."

"Bon sang..."

Her heels dug into the ground, asphalt vaporizing as she angrily twisted her wrist, deflecting the spiritual arrow skyward off the Scissor Blade. Slouched forward when her momentum reversed, bangs of silver hair falling across her face, Ragyo scoffed in annoyed contempt. Staring at the multicolored sword, smoke wafting from its unmarred and polished surface, she sighed, adjusting her disheveled appearance with nothing more than a thought. These Quincy were just *full* of surprises. Every time she figured out their abilities, someone like Ryuken Ishida announces something *new*. Yet her irritation was tempered by a very simple fact.

Despite his best efforts, the pitiful Quincy simply didn't possess the required uniqueness necessary to damage her marvelous body.

Standing tall, the Scissor Blade resting delicately within her manicured fingers, she took a moment to calmly assess the situation. Ryuken Ishida was a businessman possess ruthlessness and acumen rivaling her own. Ishida Pharmaceuticals was, after all, the only conglomerate on the planet with more money... more *power*... than Revocs. So *of course* watching the same man who

rejected her generous proposal to supply his hospitals with tailor-made uniforms behaving so strangely garnered her suspicions. He couldn't honestly believe his strength was sufficient to overcome the divine power of the Original Life Fiber?

Her lips curled into a malicious smirk at the answer.

Ryuken Ishida assumed his strength - that of a mere *Quincy* - could successfully occupy her attention. She chuckled at the absurdness, laughing before *vanishing*, flying back towards Karakura General Hospital.

If the Quincy wished to pointlessly sacrifice his life, she was more than *happy* to oblige!

She *danced* through the ensuing onslaught of Heilig Pfeil, twisting around the spiritual arrows. The Scissor Blade *blurring* when the deluge intensified, streaks of blue-white shattering against the hardened Life Fiber weapon, Ragyo smirked at the azure glow radiating from Ryuken Ishida's armor just before he disappeared. Displaying dissonant serenity befitting one of her stature she pivoted with a single, soft *clack* of her heel against ephemeral platforms of spiritual energy, crumpling the pavement into a deep crater as she *flew* towards the escaping Quincy.

La vie est drôle!

With a single swing of the Scissor Blade she *shattered* the Seele Schneider in Ryuken Ishida's left hand, the spiritual energy composing the sword-like arrow dispersing into shards that glimmered in the sunlight. Her smirk broadened at the Quincy's subsequent retreat, thousands of arrows blanketing the growing overcast skies in hues of blue and white. Moving forward without stopping, the spiritual storm shattering against her skin, maroon eyes narrowed when the man reached into his belt, fingers looping around several Seele Schneiders. She *laughed* upon instantly closing the distance, grasping Ryuken Ishida's neck *through* the armor's collar.

Ragyo *grinned* as she continued squeezing the Quincy's windpipe. Pirouetting while ignoring the faint pattern flickering across his bruised skin, sending the man rocketing back towards the ground with a casual flick of her wrist, she calmly raised the Scissor Blade before vanishing in a flash of speed.

Her heels clacking upon the pavement outside Karakura General Hospital, she *chuckled* as blood dripped from the Scissor Blade.

"Au revoir, Ryuken Ishida."

The obstinate Quincy slammed into the ground with a sickening thud, blood oozing from the wounds covering his nearly naked body. Briefly amused when Ryuken Ishida struggled to move, strands of glowing energy connecting various limbs before snapping, Ragyo walked away without a second thought, flicking the Scissor Blade to remove his ugly blood. It was astonishing the man was still conscious, but determination and willpower simply weren't enough.

After all, he was a *Quincy* .

A faint sheen of multicolored energy enveloped the Scissor Blade as she marched towards Karakura General Hospital, her eyes shifting downwards. After all that nonsense, forcing her to deal with shinigami and Quincy, *this* is their plan? Carelessly swinging the hardened Life Fiber weapon, destroying the already damaged building's façade and sending shockwaves rippling across Karakura Town, Ragyo's smirk slowly shifted into an annoyed frown.

"Today's youth..."

Faux disappointment filled the matriarch's sultry voice as she gazed into the darkness resting beneath the hospital, platforms of varying height rising from the floor. Now why on earth would Ryuken Ishida have something like *this* built underneath his property? Her footsteps echoing softly as she strutted forward, the rhythmic *clacking* of her heels overwhelming the surprised whispers from the humans, Ragyo

shook her head at the golden-orange barrier enveloping her eldest daughter.

"... and after I went through *so much* trouble teaching Satsuki to respect her elders."

She momentarily focused upon Moe Shishigawara lying trussed and unconscious, naked apart from the ropes binding his limbs, before swiveling past Satsuki and Junketsu, their well-deserved injuries healed. Staring at the otherwise nondescript human next to Ryuken Ishida's son, the strange raiment adorning her flesh woven with a peculiar stitching, Ragyo smirked at her eldest daughter's frustration, "Satsuki, I was under the impression your little Sewing Club was incapable of weaving such marvelous clothing. I suppose Kisuke Urahara or Isshin completed its stitching?"

"This is bad," Chad tensed, grimacing as Brazo Izquierda del Diablo flowed down his left arm, "How did she find us?"

"She must have sensed Orihime through the sperrschicht," Uryu flinched when Ragyo Kiryuin *appeared* several feet away, the woman grinning as she marched towards Satsuki. After Yoruichi intervened, Ryuken ordered them underground while he confronted the matriarch using the Reishi Heiso. It was all to buy enough time for Orihime to finish healing Satsuki's wounds.

Yet her mother was standing here... and he couldn't sense Ryuken's spiritual pressure.

Fingers clenched as muted shock transformed into seething hatred, Uryu stiffened when the woman chuckled, "Do you intend to fight me?"

Ragyo arched an eyebrow, half-heartedly watching her eldest daughter emerge from Orihime's barrier, Junketsu's activated configuration already gracing her body. While the venomous expression tainting Satsuki's otherwise flawless features was more than enough to force lesser individuals into submission, she simply

didn't have time for such foolishness. Staring at her errant daughters, their rebellious behavior mildly embarrassing, she sighed when Junketsu decided to speak her part, "Oh? Well, I can't deny you've synchronized with Satsuki *far* beyond my expectations. However, in my personal opinion..."

Planting her fist deep within Satsuki's exposed stomach, Junketsu accentuating every taut muscle, she smirked as her bewildered daughter gasped in agony, "... nothing is uglier than a person wearing clothes that don't fit them."

A muffled *bang* rustled her flaunting attire as Satsuki flew across the chamber, heels scraping against the bone-white platforms before slamming into the far wall. Smirking as the entire building shook, Ragyo's eyes widened in fascination when her eldest daughter extracted herself from the wall, blood trailing from her hairline. Even after expending most of her power ascending into her fashion week apparel, Junketsu's divine endurance hadn't decreased in the slightest!

Her heels clacked softly as she grabbed Orihime's wrist, vanishing in a flash of speed before the other annoyances could blink. She already suffered too many delays to her schedule to humor the humans with another farce of a battle. Reappearing outside the hospital without breaking her stride, Orihime's horrified gasp upon noticing Ryuken Ishida bleeding to death truly pleasurable, Ragyo looked over her shoulder when a familiar presence burst from the darkness.

"Your tenacity is nearly as impressive as Ichigo's..."

Satsuki landed outside with a soft *clack*, superheated steam erupting from Junketsu's vents as she seethed at her mother, "I won't allow you to leave, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

"What you *allow* doesn't matter, Satsuki," Ragyo lamented her daughter's adamant refusal to understand the absolute truth of the world, smirking when the traitorous Kamui expressed her opinion

rather vocally, "On the contrary, your declaration holds absolutely no weight."

An astonished grunt escaped her daughter's mouth when Junketsu transformed back to normal in a flash of muted sapphire, "What did you do to Junketsu!?"

" I didn't do anything."

She wrapped her arm around Orihime's neck, fingers caressing the threads composing her daughter's atrocious sweater. Was Satsuki *really* this dense? Basking in her eldest daughter's bewilderment, lips twisting into a smirk at the confused quivering of Junketsu's eyes, Ragyo lightly chastised, "This is all *your* fault, Satsuki. The overwhelming strength you acquired by absorbing my COVERS strains Junketsu's Life Fibers. Even Orihime's marvelous abilities cannot reject such callous damage so easily. It's simply the price one must pay for wearing Kamui that don't belong to them."

" *Ryuko*, on the other hand, would have no such issues..."

The unspoken threat lingered, mixing with her eldest daughter's combination of impotent hatred and childish ignorance. Despite all claims to the contrary, she wasn't lying. There really wasn't anyone Satsuki could blame for Junketsu's pitiful condition. It was a miracle the Kamui managed transforming into her active configuration after straining her Life Fiber to such an extent. Turning around with a regal flourish, the final blemishes adorning her body and clothing fading, Ragyo subconsciously tightened her hold upon Orihime's neck, mouth pursed in parental disapproval.

"I assure you, my dear weaving princess, that using your powers will end with everyone you care about - including my troublesome daughter - dying a cruel and pointless death."

Orihime flinched, the golden-orange light shining from her plastic hairpins fading, "W-Why are you doing this?"



"Such a ridiculous question," Ragyo marched away from Satsuki, dragging her terrified daughter along without hesitation, "The beginning and end of *all things* can be found within the Original Life Fiber."

"RAGYO KIRYUIN!"

Her arm *blurred* as she effortlessly deflected the barrage of Heilig Pfeil, each spiritual arrow shattering against the Scissor Blade. Oh dear... it seemed Ryuken's son discovered the fate of his father. She sighed when the young Quincy's presence increased, sending hundreds of projectiles screaming towards her location. How annoying. *She* could deal with the Quincy's pathetic attacks. After all, they posed absolutely no threat to someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber.

Orihime, on the other hand, was a different matter. Due to the nature of her powers, there existed the possibility her daughter didn't possess regeneration like Amu and Nui.

She frowned, attention shifted from the apoplectic Quincy, when a shimmering green barrier encompassed the street. These shinigami were truly beginning to test her patience. Glaring over her shoulder at Tessai Tsukabishi, eyes narrowing at the lightly injured man once more standing upon the hospital's roof, Ragyo scoffed in audible irritation, "You again..."

Her eyebrow twitched when Yoruichi Shihoin appeared next to the former captain, a makeshift tourniquet wrapped around her shoulder. Damn! The shinigami should have bled to death by now! Heels clacking softly as she turned around, energy wafting from the Scissor Blade clasped within her tightening fingers, Ragyo scowled when the dark skinned woman clenched her remaining hand into a fist, "Let go of Orihime!"

"Or what? You'll kill me?"

Ragyo smirked at Ryuken's son, the young Quincy conflicted between helping his dying father and fruitlessly attempting to end her life. Stroking a finger across Orihime's cheek, the motherly gesture drawing the attention of everyone's presence, she chuckled under her breath, "I'm afraid you already had your chance, Yoruichi Shihoin. And you failed. Even that *man* couldn't defeat me! Neither human nor shinigami can stand against the power of one blessed by the Original Life Fiber!"

"That's where you're wrong!"

Ira Gamagori landed outside the spiritual barrier with a resounding *crash*, the ground shaking from the impact. Arms spread wide, chains of purple electricity coiling around his Shackle Regalia Mark II, the former Chair of the Disciplinary Committee glowered upon noticing Orihime. With cracks and dents covering his Goku Uniform, damage sustained battling against the inhuman abilities of Riruka Dokugamine, he bellowed at the top of his lungs, "And no amount of bluffing will save you from our righteous fury!"

"Sorry we're late, Lady Satsuki!"

Uzu Sanageyama grinned beneath the helmet of his Blade Regalia Mark III as he appeared in front of Satsuki, shinai pointed at the Kiryuin matriarch, "But dealing with Xcution wasn't easy!"

"There's nowhere to run, Ragyo Kiryuin," Satsuki's tone was unyielding, lacking the fatigue and exhaustion plaguing her body, as Jakuzure hovered overhead, the musical cannons of her Symphony Regalia Mark III aimed at her imprisoned mother, "Your army of COVERS are unraveled! Xcution lies defeated by those you deemed inferior! And despite your callous disregard, your power has *weakened*! Release Orihime Inoue! It's over!"

"... is that right?"

Multicolored light enveloped the Kiryuin matriarch as her presence blanketed the area, causing the very atmosphere to *tremble* .

Smirking when the shinigami's spiritual barrier shattered beneath the divine weight of her power, Orihime gasping lightly at the majestic display of the Original Life Fiber's might, Ragyo chuckled as every Quincy, human and shinigami were driven to their knees, some requiring more effort than others. It filled her with pride watching Satsuki struggling to stand, her eldest daughter quivering from the strain. Such determination was truly inspiring. But without Junketsu's magnificent power, the immense strength flowing through the Kamui's Life Fibers, her petulant daughter simply couldn't withstand the full presence of the Original Life Fiber.

Slightly widening her eyes, increasing the pressure enough for Yoruichi Shihoin and Tessai Tsukabishi to collapse, inhuman pleasure coursed through the matriarch's soul when Satsuki crashed face-first onto the ground. Marching around the struggling members of her daughter's Elite Four, their Goku Uniforms affording them *no* protection, Ragyo paused at a familiar pitter-patter, manicured fingers tightening around Orihime's limp wrist.

"So *you're* the reason we came to this stupid city..."

Nui Harime slowly walked across the parking lot, completely unaffected by the immense spiritual pressure pinning everyone else to the ground. Staring curiously at Orihime, her head tilted slightly to the right, she blinked at the familiar sensation pulsing in her chest, "Gosh, I knew there was something special about you."

Ragyo's smile disappeared at the Grand Couturier's unexpected arrival, replaced by growing apprehension in the pit of her stomach. *Something* happened. There was no other explanation for dearest Nui disregarding her orders to immediately return to Honnouji Academy upon eliminating Kisuke Urahara. Eyes widening at her daughter's haggard appearance, the lovely blonde pigtails lying in limp curls against her back, she felt the multicolored undertone from her own hair diminish, "Nui... *where's* Amu?"

"Amu's gone, Lady Ragyo," Nui's voice contained little inflection, darkened sapphire eyes swiveling from Orihime towards Satsuki,

"That stupid man took her away... he killed her..."

"What!?"

Her façade cracked, eyes twitching at the Grand Couturier's answer. Impossible! Kiskeya Urahara couldn't have killed Amu! No... the peculiarities of Nui's response implied her daughter was still alive. Relief coursed through her Life Fibers, the overwhelming dread replaced with righteous indignation. She would *not* allow the shopkeeper to take Amu. Not before Shinra Koketsu was finished! Snapping her head towards the shinigami's place of business, the Scissor Blade shimmering dangerously in her trembling fingers, Ragyo stiffened when something pulsed against her mind.

"Isshin..."

She frowned, tensing angrily at the unexpected and unwanted development. Isshin should have been rendered impotent by the Bleach Bomb for another twenty minutes. His Life Fibers couldn't have *possibly* recovered so quickly! Unless... *merde*, he was truly one resilient man, "Nui, can you finish Shinra Koketsu without Amu?"

"W-What?"

Nui's dulled expression shifted, genuine confusion appeared in her eyes. The Needle Blades trembling beneath her mother's stern gaze, shaking as flashes of anger towards that shinigami pierced through her mind, she quietly muttered, "Only the finishing touches are left. And I still have to double-check the stitching from top to bottom. I can do it! But without Amu I'm all -"

"I suppose that's good enough."

A faint breeze accompanied the Kiryuin matriarch's annoyed sigh as her heels left the ground. The loss of Amu was a tragic setback. But the fate of her daughter wasn't relevant as long as the Grand Couturier could finish Shinra Koketsu. *Nothing* mattered without the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. Wrapping her arm around Orihime's

waist, protectively embracing her previously lost daughter, Ragyo stared into the steadily growing overcast skies, "Come Nui, we're leaving."

The Grand Couturier stiffened, her voice momentarily cracking, "But what about Amu!?"

"I'm afraid rescuing your sister is all but impossible," Ragyo frowned at Isshin's growing presence. Judging from the sensation radiating through her Life Fibers, the man was genuinely *furios*, "However, all is not lost. Kisuke Urahara might have kidnapped Amu but Operation Laissez Faire was a complete success. I trust you can delay seeking retribution against that contemptuous man until *after* finishing Shinra Koketsu?"

"... of course, Lady Ragyo," Nui hesitated before ascending towards the matriarch, pink boots tapping softly against invisible platforms.

"Oh, and Satsuki..."

Ragyo grinned at the defiance etched across both her daughter *and* Junketsu's expressions, their seething hatred filling her soul with pleasure. As the Grand Couturier loyally floated at her side, strangely silent and contemplative, she laughed, "Please give my regards to Isshin once he returns. Tell that *exaspérant* man I'm truly grateful. After all, the power dwelling in Orihime's Life Fibers wouldn't have matured without his assistance!"

In a blinding flash of multicolored light Ragyo vanished into the darkening skies, disappearing over the horizon alongside Orihime and the Grand Couturier. As the overbearing spiritual pressure upon her shoulders lessened, dissipating alongside her mother's departure, Satsuki snarled, slamming her clenched fist against the ground, "Damn you, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

"Lady Satsuki!"

Satsuki remained silent as she stood up, focusing her anger upon the battles waiting in the future. She couldn't allow the hatred of Ragyo Kiryuin cloud her judgment, not at this crucial junction. Scowling when the Elite Four gathered at attention, their Goku Uniforms signifying the hardships and difficulties experienced within the last thirty minutes, she subconsciously smoothed the creases blemishing Junketsu, "Your concern is appreciated, Gamagori. What's the status of Karakura Town?"

"Riruka Dokugamine has been successfully neutralized... with my father's assistance. Her Duveteux Raiment was collected by Nudist Beach and awaits transportation towards a secure facility," the massive teenager reported without hesitation, "Jakuzure's past background with Dokugamine proved invaluable in countering the enemy's self-proclaimed 'Dollhouse.'"

"That arrogant *bitch* deserved getting her face plowed into the ground," Nonon snarled.

"Yoruichi took down Yukia while I fought his stupid imaginary friends," Sanageyama scoffed, his sewn eyes narrowing at the woman's spiritual pressure. Even *he* could sense something was wrong, "... damn. She must have seriously pissed off Ragyo Kiryuin to lose her arm."

"How can you see anything!?"

"Yoruichi Shihoin's intervention bought enough time for Orihime Inoue to heal my wounds," Satsuki admitted, unconcerned when Gamagori tried chastising Nonon about her indignant outburst. Somberly watching Uryu kneel at his father's side, Tessai Tsukabishi creating a glowing yellow barrier around the heavily wounded Quincy, she turned back towards the Elite Four as thunder rolled over the horizon, "However, the strain of Junketsu Shinzui proved greater than expected, allowing my mother to kidnap Orihime Inoue."

"While a previously unknown third configuration for Junketsu is interesting, the salient question involves our next course of action,"

Houka Inumuta sat on the ground, a laptop between his legs, "It's clear our original hypothesis concerning your mother's objective was incorrect. Orihime Inoue wasn't targeted because of the threat posed by her powers. Rather, judging by Ragyo Kiryuin's single-minded determination, it would seem Orihime is somehow necessary for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. *How* she's important, on the other hand, remains uncertain."

Satsuki's fingers twitched at the phantasmal pain radiating from her stomach - where Isshin Kurosaki's weapon pierced flesh and bone - before regaining her composure, "Nui Harime's behavior in front of my mother suggests Kisuke Urahara successfully rescued Ururu Tsumugiya. And without Ururu's assistance, weaving the finishing touches on Shinra Koketsu will take exponentially longer."

"So even if Orihime's necessary for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet to reach fruition, we have time to regroup and strategize," Inumuta contemplated, fingers typing across his laptop.

"I suppose that's some good news."

Yoruichi winced as she leapt off the roof, blood dripping from the impromptu tourniquet around her left shoulder. Landing on the ground, briefly stumbling from her changed sense of balance, she asked, "How long do we have until Shinra Koketsu's complete?"

"It's difficult to say," Inumuta stopped typing long enough to adjust his glasses, "There's very little data on Shinra Koketsu, which makes determining an accurate timeline concerning the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet nearly impossible. However, I'm fairly confident we don't have *much* time."

"Then our choice is clear."

Satsuki's hair rustled as storm clouds, previously dispersed by her mother's overwhelming attack, covered the heavens once more. As rain fell upon her face, the autumn wind causing Junketsu to shiver around her bruised body, she focused on the inaudible whispers in

the back of her mind. Fingers twitching, searching for a weapon no longer in her possession, blue eyes narrowed furiously, "We shall not allow my mother to emerge victorious! She might have dealt with Isshin Kurosaki... but such miracles only happen once!"

Her passion pierced through the pouring rain, the sapphire-tinted backdrop of light illuminating her determined features. Scowling as she watched Uryu kneel by his father, the spiritual barrier healing the older Quincy's wounds at an excruciatingly slow pace, she turned towards Yoruichi Shihoin and her Elite Four with a loud *clack*, "Kisuke Urahara's victory over the Grand Couturier and Ururu Tsumugiya shall not go to waste! Inumuta, Osaka might be compromised but our options are not limited! Can you contact London?"

"Of course, Lady Satsuki," the blue haired youth leaned forward, slouching to keep his laptop safe from the rain, "Unfortunately your mother destroyed my remote access to the Ishida Pharmaceutical communications network. I'll need to manually reconnect my Probe Regalia with the servers inside Karakura General Hospital. That's assuming, of course, they weren't destroyed."

Satsuki frowned at the unwanted news, her attention drawn towards the damaged Denreishinki in Yoruichi Shihoin's remaining hand. Her mother might have won the battle, successfully kidnapping Orihime Inoue despite their best efforts, but Ragyo Kiryuin overplayed her hand! The war *wasn't* over, "Kisuke Urahara was constructing a device to bypass the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier. It should be nearly finished, allowing a full-scale assault upon Honnouji Academy once Ichigo and Ryuko return from London. With the power of four Kamui my mother *won't* survive to witness her plans come to fruition!"

"That's quite the interesting plan, Satsuki Kiryuin."

Sosuke Aizen marched down the street, mouth curled into an amiable smirk. Ignoring the shocked expressions from the few people aware of his past actions, Yoruichi Shihoin's widened eyes



proof enough that Kisuke Urahara hadn't told his colleagues anything, he looked to the east before asking, "But what do you intend to do about the Original Life Fiber? The creature that, as we speak, is awakening in response to your mother's actions?"

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### **Kamui Tales #34 - The New Student Council President**

Ryuko Matoi glared at the closed entrance to Shin'ō Academy, her eyes wandering towards the massive gateway barring their path. Arms folded across Senketsu, the normally talkative Kamui strangely silent, she grumbled for the third time since arriving in the Soul Society, "Why do we have to check on Satsuki?"

"Because my old man wanted *someone* to check on her," Ichigo answered, standing at her side with the same annoyed expression on his face.

"Then why couldn't Hat-and-Clogs? It's HIS damn fault!"

Ichigo thought back to the twitching heap lying on the floor, smoke wafting from Kisuke's body as a furious Yoruichi punched him repeatedly. He remembered the shopkeeper's frantic cries for assistance after "accidentally" giving Satsuki shinigami powers. Mugetsu's, and surprisingly Senketsu's, amused laughter hadn't helped, "Tessai said he's still recovering after eating some bad food. Apparently healing Kido can't help with food poisoning."

" ***Something about this place rustles my Life Fibers,***" Senketsu shivered, staring at the feudal architecture throughout the Seireitei, ***"It feels like somebody's watching us. Can we go home, Ryuko? It's Wednesday. You forgot to iron me. I'm getting wrinkles."***

"Ichigo?"

Renji Abarai leapt off the wall across from the academy, one hand resting upon Zabimaru's hilt. Confused by the former substitute shinigami's presence, the lieutenant briefly stared at Mugetsu, the Kamui's shifting eyes sending shills down his spine. Since when could clothing *move* ? It had to be a trick of the light... or something Kishu Urahara invented during his spare time, "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes. And who's your friend?"

He looked at Ryuko, gaze momentarily settling on her revealing Kamui, before grinning, "Don't tell me you've got yourself a *girlfriend*."

"What the hell did you just say!?"

Stunned by the strangeness of Ryuko's spiritual pressure, the eye on her uniform's lapel *moving*, he quickly backpedaled, "Err... sorry. Anyway, I'm guessing Kishu informed you of the situation?"

"Situation?"

Renji stared at Ichigo and Ryuko, shoulders slumped in confusion. They *seriously* had no idea what happened? The only reason Ichigo would come back to the Seireitei after losing his shinigami powers - and with a friend - was if Kishu Urahara somehow thought he would be useful in solving the problem. Pointing vigorously at Shin'ō Academy, the looming gates extruding a sense of foreboding, the lieutenant shouted, "That! Can't you feel it?"

Head cocked sideways, arms folded across Senketsu, Ryuko listened patiently for *anything* before scoffing, "Are you insane? I can't feel anything. Ichigo, you can talk to Mr. Pineapple but I'm going to see Satsuki."

"Hold on!"

Dramatically sliding in front of the teenager, Renji's eyebrow twitched at the girl's obnoxious nickname. His hair only *superficially* resembled a pineapple, "I'm sorry Ichigo but nobody can enter Shin'ō

Academy. At least until Captain Kurotsuchi develops a countermeasure against *that* Kido."

A feeling similar to déjà vu washed over Ichigo, bringing up unpleasant memories, as Renji continued, "Three weeks ago someone infiltrated the academy. Posing as a new student they overthrew the instructors. Captain Zarakī was the first one to respond. When I arrived several minutes later the captain was lying unconscious outside the academy. Apparently the last thing he remembers after kicking open the doors was an overwhelming blue-white light."

"We don't know who we're dealing with, but they've created Kido powerful enough to knock out captains."

"Hey," Ryuko leaned over, jabbing Ichigo in the ribs before whispering, "Yoruichi brought Satsuki to this crappy place three weeks ago, right? You don't think..."

"Yes, she probably did," Ichigo groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose as Mugetsu snickered. *Of course* his Kamui would find the situation hilarious, "So why are you here, Renji?"

"Because I drew the short straw," Renji grumbled, remembering the exact sequences of events that led to the current situation, "Ikkaku was ordered to patrol today but Rangiku convinced him to go drinking last night... where he accidentally unleashed his Bankai in the middle of the Third Rukon District. After *he* landed in jail, Momo and Kira were next on the list. But they both vanished. Apparently some clothing company in the World of the Living is having a big sale. Isane volunteered... but she's stuck helping Captain Unohana keep Captain Zarakī away from the academy."

"Are you kidding me!? I'm NOT putting up with this shit a *second* time!"

Ryuko angrily stormed towards Shin'ō Academy, planting her fist squarely in Renji's face when he stupidly tried stopping her. Bringing

her leg up, Senketsu's lower half accentuating every shadowed curve, she *kicked* the door, sending the metal structure crashing to the ground with a screeching *bang* . The dust settling as she stomped into the academy's front grounds, she scowled when an overwhelming blue-white light assaulted her senses. "Of freaking course..."

**" *We probably should have expected something like this, Ryuko* ."**

"You're right about that, Senketsu," Ryuko scoffed, more annoyed than frustrated, at the silhouetted figure across the courtyard. She made a mental note to kick the old goat's Life Fiber ass upon returning to Karakura Town. Sending them to check on Satsuki because he was worried she was having trouble? What a load of bullshit! Kisuke probably paid Ichigo's dad to make up that stupid excuse!

"I see you've been busy, Satsuki," she folded her arms, sneering at the students wearing the standard shihakusho of Shin'ō Academy's lining both sides of the entrance. Leave it to her sister to take over an academy... *in the freaking afterlife* .

"Oh great," Ichigo sighed at the silhouetted figure marching through the rows of obediently standing students, Mugetsu sharing his tired resignation, "Here we go again..."

"The hell does that mean!?"

Renji grabbed Mugetsu, pulling Ichigo until the former substitute shinigami was inches from his face. Unaware of the Kamui's annoyance, the feminine growling reverberating through her Life Fibers inaudible, he pointed at the overwhelming blue-white light, "You know about *her* !?"

**" *Ichigo, tell him to let go. My threading's getting ruffled.*"**

Ignoring his Kamui's rapidly growing level of annoyance, her growling falling upon deaf ears, Ichigo grabbed Renji's shihakusho before shouting at a slightly *higher* volume, "Yeah, I know Satsuki! What I'm *really* curious about is how you people managed to LOSE the academy!"

"Satsuki, or whatever the hell her name is, took over the academy using that powerful Kido," Renji remained unable to hear Mugetsu's intensifying hatred as she clenched his hand into a fist, earning a strangled curse from the Kamui, "But you seem *awfully* familiar with her methods, Ichigo. So why the hell didn't you warn us about her!?"

**" *Ichigo, he's getting sweat and oil in my Life Fibers,*"** Mugetsu's eyes twitched, her sleeves shifting angrily around Ichigo, **"*I'm going to need a good scrubbing tonight.*"**

Ichigo raised his voice, accidentally ignoring Mugetsu's righteous indignation, "Because I didn't think someone like *Byakuya* would let this happen!"

"So it IS your fault!"

Satsuki Kiryuin smirked as the holy backlight representing her unyielding determination faded into nothingness. Her zanpakuto slammed against the ground with an echoing *clack*, the bone-white sheath shining brightly in the sunlight, she listened to Ichigo's redundant argument with Renji Abarai before addressing Ryuko's concerns, "I'm assuming Isshin Kurosaki tricked you into visiting the Seireitei?"

"Yeah, the old goat tricked us," Ryuko grumbled, eyes drifting towards Satsuki's red and white shihakusho.

**" *Satsuki's zanpakuto looks familiar, Ryuko,*"** Senketsu focus on the spiritual weapon, the faint shimmer of metal causing him to shiver, **"*I don't think Junketsu will be happy about this. Perhaps we should let Mugetsu break the news? Last time I told*"**

***Junketsu something new about Satsuki's shinigami powers she wouldn't stop crying! I still have water in my Life Fibers!"***

"Tch... was ruling over Honnouji Academy not good enough for ya?"

Ryuko ignored Senketsu's whining about Junketsu to focus on something *actually* important. Alright, *maybe* the Kamui became a little clingy over the last few weeks. And maybe she tended to mope around Ichigo's house. But she'd never seen Junketsu cry, "Wait just a damn second! Does this place even *have* a student council!?"

An explosion of light reappeared behind Satsuki as her heel, an accessory *not* part of the standard academy shihakusho, clacked against the ground. As Ichigo rolled his eyes, the sudden illumination blinding Renji, she passionately declared, "The academy's curriculum was insufficient! Upon my enrollment I found this place lacking both discipline and motivation. Half the student body relentlessly sought the slightest taste of POWER with aggression akin to Hollows! Those left behind in the gutters were too cowardly to address their grievances! They feared retribution from the entrenched and decadent nobility!"

"So I took control over this derelict institution!"

Satsuki's eyes shone with determination and conviction, her black hair rustling in the breeze, "As the first Student Council President of Shin'ō Academy I shall work diligently to train my fellow students! Transforming them into shinigami WORTHY of joining the Gotei 13!"

Subconsciously smoothing the wrinkles covering Mugetsu as Renji grabbed his watering eyes, the Kamui greatly annoyed by the red-haired shinigami getting dirt and sweat in her Life Fibers, Ichigo frowned at Satsuki's amused smirk. He *knew* that look, "However, taking control of Shin'ō Academy without forewarning would be dishonorable. It took Kisuke Urahara considerable effort to authorize my enrollment. So I worked inside the system! Gaining approval for my actions from the highest authorities!"

"I see things are progressing quite splendidly, Miss Kiryuin. Excellent work."

Ryuko twisted sideways, instinctively reaching for the Scissor Blade she left in Karakura Town, when the captain-commander appeared out of nowhere, an approving expression on his face. Taking a moment to register the situation, eyes widening comically as the elder shinigami walked into Shin'ō Academy unbothered by the blinding Kido, Renji stared into the holy backlight, "C-Captain-Commander!? You know about Satsuki?"

"Miss Kiryuin came to the First Division three weeks ago with a single proposition - restructuring Shin'ō Academy into an institution second-to-none," Yamamoto's gnarled cane tapped with every purposeful step into the blinding backlight, "She argued with inspiring conviction that the teaching methods - first implemented by myself - were antiquated. Upon reviewing the evidence, I conceded she had a point."

"She knocked out Captain Zaraki!"

"Such a powerful technique should be honed, Renji Abarai," Yamamoto ignored Renji's incoherent flustering, his perpetually closed eyes somehow *narrowing*, "That is why I allowed Miss Kiryuin free reign over the academy and its students."

"Your approval is greatly appreciated, Genryusai Yamamoto," Satsuki stood firmly, addressing the strongest shinigami with respect worthy of his station.

Unconcerned by Renji's sudden unconsciousness, induced upon hearing her speak with the captain-commander as an equal rather than a subordinate, Satsuki began discussing how to further improve the institute's curriculum. Watching the exchange through resigned eyes, Mugetsu *laughing* at Renji's twitching form, Ichigo sighed. This was going to be a *long* three days.

# Stairway to Heaven

*Aftermath chapters are interesting to write. On the one hand, they take place in a period of 'cooling down,' where the characters are coming to terms with what happened. On the other hand, it's a grace period. A reprieve before the next arc/battle starts. And sometimes - as in this chapter - it's the merging of two simultaneous arcs coming together - the Karakura Town Assault Arc and the Hellsing Arc. Which means, of course, that Ichigo and Ryuko are back in Karakura Town. It took some time - more than expected - getting back into the feel of writing their personalities after dealing with Aizen, Satsuki, Ginjo, Ragyo and the other characters of the previous arc.*

*Enjoy the chapter and leave a review. And if you have questions about anything - even old material - feel free to PM me.*

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## Chapter 58 - Stairway to Heaven

The familiar presence of Life Fibers penetrated the filtration mask covering Kisuke Urahara's face, causing his nose to slightly itch. Resisting the urge to scratch - which would require removing the only thing preventing the Life Fibers from entering his Gigai's lungs - the former captain turned shopkeeper reached to the left, grabbing the tattered remnants of Riruka Dokugamine's confiscated Duveteux Raiment. Pulling a single Life Fiber from the crumpled uniform's sleeve, the multicolored glow betraying its origins, he carefully wove the thread into the disassembled circular device scattered across the workbench.

His eyes narrowed when the computer beeped, the information scrolling down the screen disappointing. This wasn't working. The inclusion of Life Fibers from Xcution's raiment only marginally



improved compatibility between Kamui and the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier. Sighing hard enough to fog the inside of his mask, the needle in his bandaged fingers fell onto the workbench with a metallic clatter.

What was he missing?

He suppressed a yawn, weary eyes examining his invention for mistakes. The lack of discernible progress was concerning. Introducing Life Fibers from Xcution's raiment were helpful, increasing the strength of the Elite Four's Goku Uniforms as a beneficial side effect, but replicating the results for Mugetsu and the rest of the Kamui was proving difficult. Their unique physiology and sentience prevented him from considering the same approach. Satsuki Kiryuin demonstrated quite clear during her little field trip what happens when foreign Life Fibers are involuntarily woven into a Kamui's stitching.

Yet without extensive testing and unrestricted access to Ragyo Kiryuin's barrier designs, completing everything within the next twelve hours was virtually impossible.

"Couldn't sleep, Isshin?"

Kisuke recognized the spiritual pressure before Isshin Kurosaki entered the refurbished Nudist Beach medical tent, the former shinigami unaffected by the Life Fibers floating throughout the enclosed space, "This must be important."

Isshin didn't initially acknowledge the greeting, the multicolored light emanating from his silver hair dimming when he noticed the small figure sitting on the nearby cot. Arms clasped around her knees, half-lidded sapphire eyes staring at the ground, Ururu's emotionless expression caused his heart to sink. Brushing Life Fibers from his clothing, the unnatural silence making things difficult, he steeled his gaze, "I finished checking over Junketsu. It looked bad... but luckily the strain from fighting Ragyo didn't damage her Life Fibers."

The seconds passed in silence, interrupted only by the consistent *clicking* of industrial tailoring equipment, before Isshin asked, "Will they be ready in time?"

"... no."

The chair creaked as he swiveled around. Unconcerned by Isshin's lack of a reaction to the otherwise worrisome answer, he muttered, "I analyzed the data Yoruichi gathered on the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier."

Kisuke's shadowed eyes narrowed, "We already know Ragyo Kiryuin used the information Satsuki's obtained during her field trip to replicate your barrier. But I'm convinced she took things several steps further. The random fluctuations of the high-velocity Life Fibers and shifting spiritual energy density suggests Ragyo Kiryuin anticipated someone would eventually attempt to penetrate her barrier's security measures."

"That *does* sound like Ragyo. She's always been a brilliant woman."

Isshin chuckled, attempting to drive some humor into the conversation, "So where's Aizen? I thought you two were working together."

"Sosuke believes an external device capable of tricking the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier is currently impossible. And I completely agree," Kisuke glanced out of the corner of his eyes at Ururu, his expression tightening, "The problem isn't bypassing Ragyo Kiryuin's IFF protocols. That's relatively easy for Goku Uniforms. Allowing the Kamui to enter Honnou City without compromising their mental stability? That's a little more difficult. At this point, spending days solving the problem when we might only have *hours* remaining before the Grand Couturier finishes Shinra Koketsu seems counterproductive."

"Olivier won't be happy about this."

Kisuke stiffened at the name. The leader of Nudist Beach was one of the most terrifying women in existence, second only to the normally amiable captain of the Fourth Division, "Dying at the hands of the infamous General Armstrong would be horrible. However, I have the strangest feeling you already knew my invention wouldn't be ready."

"Pretty much..."

Isshin shrugged his shoulders, ignoring the *clicking* of the industrial sewing machines across the repurposed pavilion. Even without looking he could instinctively sense the mistakes in the Sewing Club's work, the surviving members of the club creating moderately well-stitched Goku Uniforms despite the early hour, "Nothing gets into Honnou City without Ragyo's permission. I should know... she copied my designs. It took Hououmaru..."

He trailed off with a grimace, the sting of betrayal still strong, "Getting Mugetsu and the others into Honnouji Academy will be difficult without taking down the barrier."

"And creating a Bleach Bomb requires more than a week of preparation even for someone deeply influenced by the Original Life Fiber."

Kisuke allowed the comment to sink into Isshin's subconscious as he returned to work, the circuits comprising the disassembled device's systems emitting curling wisps of purple and crimson smoke, "This plan also depends upon Ragyo Kiryuin allowing the Bleach Bomb - one of the only weapons capable of negating her regeneration - through the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier in the first place."

"You're right, Kisuke. I screwed up badly."

Isshin looked away from Kisuke, yesterday's events still fresh in his mind, "I trusted Hououmaru. She risked everything passing along enough information to keep Nudist Beach ahead of Revocs for years . I never thought she'd remain loyal to Ragyo. After what happened

to Xcution... and Ichigo... it never crossed my mind she was playing me for a fool."

"Sometimes people aren't who they claim to be..."

The needle in Kisuke's hand twitched when Ururu shivered, dulled eyes sinking beneath raised knees. He felt his heart sink, guilt clawing down his spine. The abrupt desynchronization with the Grand Couturier caused lingering effects, symptoms he *had not* expected. His mouth pursed into a pained grimace. Hours after regaining consciousness, memory and personality restored, Ururu remained unresponsive. Nothing Yoruichi or Tessai said could get his daughter to open up, to say *something*. Even his attempts as her father - and he *was* her father no matter what Ragyo Kiryuin claimed - couldn't break through her shell.

"Why did you come here, Isshin?"

Flickers of crimson mixed with purple and blue flashed across his face, "You wouldn't leave Yuzu and Karin alone unless there was something important on your mind."

"I wanted to apologize."

Maroon eyes narrowed in disgust - at himself, his naïve trust in Hououmaru and Ragyo - while fingers strong enough to shatter concrete clenched into fists, "I sent Ururu to Honnouji Academy to protect Ichigo and Ryuko. But I wasn't blind. It was only a matter of time before Ragyo realized the truth. I thought I could handle whatever she was planning. Maybe if I said something to Yoruichi. Or told Ichigo..."

"We both know the Original Life Fiber would have made that virtually impossible."

Turning around, a mirthless grin twisting the corners of his mouth, Kisuke noted Isshin's surprised reaction, "It wasn't difficult piecing everything together. Your explanation on the Celestial Cocoon Seed

Planet lack specifics, details that could have given Nudist Beach the advantage long before Ragyo went on the offensive. Your answers were rehearsed, as though you *couldn't* say too much. Someone in your position - with your history and background - wouldn't hold secrets. Yet everything you say involving the Original Life Fiber requires an audience capable of filling in the blanks from minimal information."

Kisuke hummed under his breath, shadowed eyes narrowing, "If this wasn't true, you would have gone straight to the Captain Commander years ago."

"The old man wouldn't have believed me," Isshin scowled, remembering how stubborn the Captain Commander was before Ichigo defeated Aizen and 'saved' the World of the Living and Soul Society, "Alien threads working to devour humanity? That doesn't exactly sound believable. Besides, I had basically betrayed the Seireitei to marry a Quincy only to become an immortal servant of that *thing* underneath Ragyo's house. He would have incinerated me to ashes. Or worse... given my body to Mayuri."

The shopkeeper smirked at the mental image, "I'm sure Sosuke had a plan to rescue you from my former assistant."

His smile vanished when Ururu moved for the first time in hours, tired eyes briefly glancing at Isshin before returning to the empty spot between her feet. Sighing, the protective mask hiding his pained expression, he removed his hat, shredded Life Fibers falling from the damaged accessory, "I never expected someone quite like the Grand Couturier visiting my store."

The remains of his invention crackled softly, acrid smoke drifting upwards into the ventilation system. Frowning at the loss of progress, however minimal, Kisuke placed his bucket hat on the workbench, "I have contingency plans for every possible scenario. Faking my death using a portable Gigai should have been relative straightforward. But her connection to Life Fibers and Revocs piqued my curiosity. Once Nui Harime left Karakura Town I went into hiding,

using the information from Souichiro's journal to track down the source of Life Fibers beyond the Kiryuin Conglomerate. Speaking of which, Ragyo Kiryuin *really* should improve security at the Tokyo Distribution Facility."

"I'll give her the message."

Isshin glanced away, pausing momentarily before his voice hardened, "What did Aizen tell you, Kisuke?"

"Everything."

That single word - short and concise - meant *far* more than emotions could effectively convey. Simply *knowing* Kisuke knew everything about the Original Life Fiber's plans lessened the burden on his shoulders. Years of being unable to directly warn *anyone* - even Nudist Beach - about the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet had been torturous. But no matter how much Aizen told Kisuke, the weight from the knowledge wouldn't disappear. Not only that *thing* was permanently stopped, "That saves me the trouble of leaving subtle clues throughout our conversation."

"True..."

"Although I can't help but feel somewhat embarrassed," Kisuke sighed, the sound muffled by the air-tight mask, "I spent decades preparing countless plans for defeating Aizen. I was ready for anything. Yet he successfully tricked me into believing that 'mastering' the Hogyoku made him throw caution to the wind. In hindsight, the subtle chances in his behavior after speaking with you *were* obvious. It was too forced. If the circumstances were different I would be ashamed of myself. But falling for your plan perhaps saved humanity in the long run."

Isshin snorted, "It was actually Aizen's plan."

Kisuke nodded, half-listening to Iori Shiro barking orders in the background. As fully-suited members of the Sewing Club marched

back and forth, some carrying spools of Life Fibers while others vacuumed loose threads into special containers, he watched their president adjust the stitching on Ira Gamagori's new Shackle Regalia with growing appreciation. Several bones in his Gigai popping when he stood up, hands pressed against the edge of the workbench, he thought on what he learned from his discussion with Aizen. The depth of the man's knowledge on Life Fibers was impressive, the culmination of nearly two centuries of diligent study and experimentation.

To think *his* Hogen was created from the Original Life Fiber.

"Ishtar, there's something I need to know..."

He ignored the man's reaction when Ururu finally succumbed to exhaustion. Her eyes slowly closing, head tilted forward onto her knees, Ururu breathed steadily as the previous day's events were forgotten, lost in her first sound sleep in weeks. His expression unreadable, Kisuke walked towards the slumped form of his daughter, the light *clomping* of his wooden geta echoing with every step. Gently tucking Ururu beneath the thick blankets, the bandages around his fingers making the normally simple task painful, his voice noticeably hardened when he finished, "I'm aware your connection with the Original Life Fiber prevents you from destroying it. What I'm asking is entirely different..."

"Are you willing to kill Ragyo Kiryuin?"

A moment passed... and then another... before Ishtar somberly answered, "If it comes to that, I'll put Ragyo out of her misery once and for all."

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Ichigo stared at the large iron-wrought gates barring his path. Constructed from stainless steel, hints of rust just beginning to creep

around the welded joints, the massive entrance loomed imposingly over the otherwise normal suburban street. He snapped his head downwards when an electric buzz pierced through the air, the following metallic *creak* masking the whirring of helicopters overhead. Hands folded inside his hoodie as he walked into the Ishida Estate, damp leaves crumpling beneath his sandals, he stopped when the front door opened. Frowning at the white bandages wrapped around Uryu's arms, he hesitated before offering a half-hearted greeting.

"Hey, Uryu."

"Forgive the mess," Uryu ignored the debris scattered throughout his father's estate with practiced indifference, "Ryuken sent what few servants he employs overseas on extended paid vacation."

"I don't blame him."

Ichigo shrugged, his mind focusing on something more important. The Ishida's were supposed the richest family in the world, exceeding the Kiryuin's. Yet for some strange reason his first visit to Uryu's house, and not the apartment closer to Karakura High School, felt severely... underwhelming. While the estate was breathtaking, it wasn't the *largest* he'd seen over the last few months. Sparing one final look around the normally well-groomed landscape, he scoffed under his breath, "This place is a lot smaller than I expected."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

He pointed over Uryu's shoulder, fresh cracks covering the estate's white façade, "Isn't it obvious? You're richer than Satsuki but I'm pretty sure your house could fit inside her garage."

"My family has owned this property for several generations. Even after making his fortune, Ryuken saw no point in flaunting his wealth to the world."



Uryu found himself irritated *and* insulted by Ichigo's bunt and highly ignorant comment. As the eventual heir to Ishida Pharmaceuticals, including every daughter company within the medical conglomerate, he was aware of the world-renowned Kiryuin Manor. Several floors with hundreds of rooms, an all-inclusive bath house and an estate covering more than three thousand acres. It was the largest private residence in the world, a masterpiece of structural engineering first built during the Edo period, "But more to the point, we *don't* need the extra space. Because we're not harboring an eldritch creature in our basement."

An awkward silence followed the mentioning, however indirectly, of the Original Life Fiber before Uryu decided to change the subject, "I'm surprised Ryuko's not with you."

"She's hanging out with Mako."

Ichigo pointed in the general direction of Mako's house, which miraculously emerged from Ragyo Kiryuin's attack completely undamaged. Mako had been waiting for them when their helicopter landed, waving enthusiastically while standing on Gamagori's shoulders. After attempting - and failing - to tackle Ryuko into a hug, knocking over Gamagori in the process and sending what remained of their luggage scattering, she'd insisted on going back to her place. Apparently, her mom returned from her 'vacation' in Osaka several hours after Ragyo Kiryuin's attack, bringing back food and souvenirs for them to enjoy.

How Mako *still* didn't realize Sukuyo was one of the deadliest snipers in the world - and was working for Nudist Beach - gave him a headache.

His expression tightened upon remembering Ryuko's relieved reaction to seeing Mako alive and well. Yoruichi's call hadn't done *anything* justice. During the flight from London they had planned on interrogating Kisuke and his old man about Ragyo Kiryuin. But after everything that happened - fighting Millennium, Alucard's rampage and Anderson's death - Ryuko deserved the chance to relax, at least

for a few hours. He glanced aside, fingers clenched tightly within his hoodie. Seeing Osaka burning as they descended through the clouds, half the city covered in jagged spikes of ice, had reminded him of London.

And then he found out from Olivier Armstrong that Rei Hououmaru had tried killing Yuzu and Karin.

Turning back to Uryu, Ichigo stared at the leaves rustling around his feet, "I heard about Ginjo."

"He gave everything protecting your sisters," Uryu parsed his words carefully, the memory of the former substitute shinigami's body still fresh.

"I know..."

The response was barely louder than a whisper. Despite everything, Ichigo didn't know what to think about Ginjo. Even after a few weeks, learning how he obtained shinigami powers and fought Hollows in the World of the Living, Ginjo always gave the feeling he was hiding something. But he never tried getting answers because it didn't seem important. What was the point? If he needed to know something, *anything*, he would have tracked down and beaten the information from his old man.

A heavy sigh left his mouth.

He had half-expected his old man to be waiting when they landed, prepared to ambush him despite the seriousness of the situation. It was simply something his dad would do, using the assault as an excuse to explain Ragyo Kiryuin's motivations. At least, that was what he *expected*. Instead, after Mako unsuccessfully tackled Ryuko and smashed head-first into the side of the helicopter, he found himself standing face-to-face with Satsuki, her posture unyielding despite not wearing Junketsu. He *knew* she wanted to speak. But when she remained silent while Yuzu and Karin hugged

him, the former nearly in tears, he'd noticed her seemingly permanent scowl being softer than he remembered.

"Yoruichi didn't say much over the phone," Ichigo frowned as the sun vanished behind a cloud, "Nudist Beach told me about Hououmaru. And Satsuki..."

There was a measured pause before he finished, "Satsuki... she explained what happened to Orihime."

Uryu grimaced at the nightmarish details of the previous day, the memories fresh in his mind. Ragyo Kiryuin's *amusement* when she confessed to orchestrating the murder of Orihime's brother, her monstrous spiritual pressure that surpassed anything he experienced in Hueco Mundo, was something he could never forget, "It seems almost impossible to imagine. I never expected Orihime to be related to the Grand Couturier."

"But there's something else."

His expression shifted as he turned back to Ichigo, "I've thought about what Ragyo Kiryuin said. Her *exact* wording. If she wasn't lying about Orihime's relation to Nui Harime, then we must consider the possibility her Shun Shun Rikka is somehow connected to Life Fibers."

"Yeah..."

Ichigo remembered the aftermath of his battle with Ulquiorra, brow furrowed in confusion, "But if that's true, why didn't you react to her Soten Kisshun? Orihime's healed your wounds several times."

"I don't know," Uryu painfully confessed, shaking his head in resignation, "As a Quincy I should have noticed something *off* with her Shun Shun Rikka, Yet Orihime's spiritual pressure always felt *human*, if a little strange. But nothing warranting suspicion."

Ichigo stared at the ground, nodding without really paying attention. Whether he liked it or not, Uryu had a point. There was something special about Orihime's abilities. Healing wounds by rejecting the damage wasn't exactly a common ability, even in the Soul Society. Yet he never bothered thinking too much about it. But if Orihime was related to Ragyo Kiryuin, then she was just like Ururu and Nui Harime... just like Ryuko and himself. His mouth twisted into a frustrated grimace. Did this mean she was a Life Fiber Hybrid?

He remembered when Yammy attacked Orihime and immediately all doubt left his mind.

"It doesn't matter."

The autumn wind coursing through Karakura Town, whistling around the damaged and destroyed buildings, ineffectively battered his hoodie as his expression hardened, determination filling his eyes, "No matter what, she's still our friend. This doesn't change anything. Satsuki said her mother probably brought Orihime to Honnouji Academy. So we'll just storm the school and take her back."

Uryu listened attentively, his eyes narrowing by the time Ichigo finished speaking. It was a reckless plan, something he honestly expected from Ryuko. Attacking the academy without accounting without a fool-proof plan was suicidal. But he *knew*, with clarity born from experience, that Ichigo was fully aware stopping both Ragyo Kiryuin and the Original Life Fiber was far easier said than done. Breaching the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier surrounding Honnou City aside, getting to the woman meant fighting the remnants of Xcution, the Grand Couturier and whatever COVERS remained in the city. It would be difficult, bordering on impossible, to defeat the matriarch when she knew they were coming.

But at least *this* time they weren't going alone.

"I'm sorry."

The apology left a bitter taste in his mouth, "But I can't fight with you this time."

"I figured you would say something like that."

Ichigo rubbed his neck, attention focused on the strange landscaping of the Isshin Estate, before shrugging his shoulders, "After all, Quincy are weak against Life Fibers. Your arrows didn't work against Junketsu during the Raid Trip and Ragyo Kiryuin is certainly stronger than her. So even if you wanted to come, I would have refused your help."

"That's not what I meant."

Sunlight reflected off his glasses, turning the square lenses opaque, as Uryu matched Ichigo's annoyed scowl, "I'm painfully aware my skills pale in comparison to the Grand Couturier and her mother. But just because I cannot fight at your side does not mean I'm completely useless. Ragyo Kiryuin brought thousands of COVERS yesterday, but Nudist Beach estimates another half a million are spread across the country. What do you think will happen if she summons them to Honnouji Academy... *while* you're fighting her?"

He waited a moment, allowing the point to sink in, before continuing, "COVERS might be woven from Life Fibers but they don't possess anything resembling Nui Harime's monstrous spiritual prowess. I might be a *simple* Quincy - a mere 'footnote' to Ragyo Kiryuin - but dealing with a few thousand COVERS will be child's play."

Ichigo scoffed at the pathetic excuse, "Then what was with that 'I can't fight with you this time' crap?"

Uryu chose not to answer, instead focusing his attention on the half-destroyed residences across the street from his family's estate. How dense was Ichigo? It should have been obvious he meant directly fighting Ragyo Kiryuin was out of the question. Of course he was going to help rescue Orihime! His pride as a Quincy demanded it! How could he possibly stand on the sidelines while everyone else -

Ichigo, Ryuko, Satsuki and even Chad - risked everything to stop the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet?

An eyebrow quirking upon *finally* noticing the lack of strangeness in Ichigo's clothing, the normalcy throwing him off balance, Uryu decided to change the subject. Pointing at the blue hoodie, the white shirt and pants clashing heavily with the open-toed sandals, he scoffed under his breath, "Wearing normal clothes now, Ichigo? And here I thought Mugetsu was your only set of clothing."

"I don't wear Mugetsu *all* the damn time!"

Uryu took Ichigo's unconvincing denial in stride, "Oh? Then I suppose she was content with *not* being worn?"

Ichigo refused to take the obvious bait. After a long night fighting undead Quincy in literal rivers of burning blood... and an even longer flight back from London... Mugetsu needed to be washed.

*Thoroughly*. And that meant finding another set of clothing while he cleaned her Life Fibers. Which was a major pain in the ass since *everything* he brought to England was either buried beneath several tons of rubble or burnt to ashes. Heading home after saying goodbye to Satsuki - and refusing Mako's invitation for lunch - was meant to salvage something from his closet. A single change of clothing he could wear long enough to properly wash Mugetsu.

It had taken her *three* seconds after walking into his room to piece together what he was planning.

He only avoided the oncoming argument, Mugetsu's tear-filled eyes and annoyed growling foreshadowing her intense displeasure at his 'betrayal,' by promising to give her a thorough ironing. *And* wash her Life Fibers with her favorite brand of detergent. It didn't make any sense to him, but for some reason London didn't have the detergent Mugetsu claimed 'removed even the deepest dirt and oil from her lapels'. Something that had given his Kamui endless frustration and grief.

Yet by the time he knocked on Mako's front door, his current ensemble tucked under one hand, Mugetsu had already begun backpedaling. If Ryuko and Senketsu hadn't distracted her at the last second, allowing him to escape to freedom through the bathroom window, his clothes would be lying in shreds across Mako's living room.

"What the hell do you think?"

"There you are, Uryu."

Ryuken Ishida didn't express his disappointment at Uryu leaving the front doors open in the middle of November as he walked outside. Covered in bandages, the gauze visible beneath the half-buttoned dress shirt, an expensive imported overcoat hanging from his shoulders, he pushed aside the numb pain running rampant throughout his body. A noticeable limp in his stride despite Ransotengai overcoming the temporary disability, he gave his son a brief but courteous nod before turning to Ichigo, "Forgive me, I did not realize you were still speaking with my son."

The cigarette between his lips fell to the ground, smoke curling upwards before vanishing beneath his heel, "I understand if you do not wish to speak about London. However, there is something I must ask you, Ichigo."

Ichigo frowned as the wind picked up, "Alright."

"I'll speak quickly in the interest of time. This morning I received a message from Nudist Beach concerning their newest prisoner, a Quincy going by the moniker 'the Doktor,'" Ryuken noted his son's genuine surprise at the admission. Uryu might know most of the details surrounding the events of London - no doubt from Satsuki Kiryuin's newfound relationship with Nudist Beach - but he remained in the dark. At his insistence. It was a matter of necessity. Weighing his son's shoulders, burdened by guilt after Ragyo Kiryuin's kidnapping of Orihime Inoue, with the more disturbing details of the

clash between the creature known as Alucard and the Jahrtausendarmee was antithetical to good parenting.

"And while I'm confident the esteemed Olivier Armstrong can extract information from the man, my question does not involve the Wandenreich's rank-and-file soldats."

With a subtle sense of urgency missed by Ichigo and his son, Ryuken glanced aside, eyes narrowed in thought, "Ichigo, the man you confronted after Alucard's disappearance... was he the Father of the Quincy or merely someone pretending to be Yhwach?"

"I don't know."

Ichigo glowered at the memory of that man... Yhwach or whatever his name was... proudly announcing the deaths of millions of innocent people, his shadowed form silhouetted against the burning ashes of London. Yet even after more than a day, his dreams returning to the single moment he confronted the man, the disturbing sense of nostalgia upon seeing the Quincy King hadn't wavered, "He claimed to be Millennium's leader but I never got his name."

"I see..."

The unfinished phrase carried more weight than Uryu could understand as Ryuken contemplated the troubling information, his thoughts cycling around *his* purpose for assaulting both London and Alucard. Ignoring his son's suspicious frown when he abruptly turned around, the empty sleeves of his overcoat fluttering in the unending autumn wind, Ryuken marched back towards his estate, but not looking over his shoulder at Ichigo, "When you see Isshin, tell him to finish the job he started seventeen years ago."

"Wait... are you talking about Ragyo Kiryuin?"

The self-professed 'Last Quincy' didn't acknowledge the question as he tossed a set of keys at his surprised son, "I've taken the liberty of



restocking the storeroom in the basement. Be sure to lock the door when you're done."

Uryu caught the brass keys - embossed with the Quincy Zeichen - without taking his eyes off Ryuken. There was no mistaking his father's motivation for awarding him something so valuable, even if his behavior suggested otherwise. Watching his father leave without speaking another word, goosebumps racing down his bandaged arms from something unrelated to the autumn weather, he turned back to Ichigo, "I don't need to tell you to be careful at Honnouji Academy, Ichigo."

He briefly paused, eyes narrowed at the memory of the Kiryuin matriarch's overwhelming and disturbing presence, "Mugetsu might be enough to defeat the Grand Couturier. But Ragyo Kiryuin's strength is on an entirely different level. Don't let your guard down."

Ichigo nodded, his thoughts still on Ryuken's parting advice, "Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

Seconds passed in awkward silence, broken only by the almost clockwork rotation of Nudist Beach aircraft entering or leaving Karakura Town, before Ichigo's eyes widened. His mouth pursing into a grimace, heart rate rapidly increasing, he cursed. Damn it! How could he forget something so important? Rushing through the wrought-iron gates, waving over his shoulder at a thoroughly bewildered Quincy, he nearly stumbled when Uryu's voice pierced the tension, "Give my regards to Mugetsu."

"Like hell I will!"

Ichigo's vehement dismissal could be heard halfway down the block, "She threatened to destroy everything in my closet... *again*... if I didn't find her favorite detergent. And I actually like this shirt, damn it!"

"I wish you the best of luck, Ichigo."

Sunlight reflected off his glasses while a cruel, but entirely well-meaning smirk pulled on the corners of his mouth. As the gates automatically closed, shutting with a metallic *clang*, he listened attentively to Ichigo's subsequent cursing, "Because if you're referring to the brand of detergent Satsuki uses on Junketsu, I'm afraid it's been out of stock for days."

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Ryuko stared at the clock hanging above the television, the cartoon dog's tongue wagging back and forth every second. Slouching further down the couch, Senketsu's lower half hiking several inches up her thighs, she yawned loudly, rousing the exhausted Kamui from his light slumber. This was her first peace and quiet in *days*. There weren't any Quincy or shinigami to fight. And *not* having to deal with bullshit supernatural powers that made no damn sense was a *huge* relief.

While Ichigo was... somewhere... in Karakura Town she could relax for a few hours and hang out with Mako.

She growled self-consciously at the idiotic thought. How the hell could she relax at a time like *this*!? Anderson was dead - murdered by the bastard Alucard. Millions of innocent people were killed by the Quincy. People she had desperately tried saving from the vampirized bastards only to fail. And she still had tons of questions for Heinkel Wolfe. Like how she grew up in an orphanage despite not remembering anything. The bang of crimson hair fell gently across her forehead as she leaned back and grumbled. Damn it! Why was everything getting so complicated? Ignoring Senketsu when *he* yawned, her eye *twitched* at the annoying muttering from across the room.

" ***Ichigo...*** "

Empty white sleeves pressed against the room's single window as Mugetsu searched the empty streets for any sign of her wearer, multicolored eyes on the verge of tears. Briefly gasping when someone walked into her field of view, causing Ryuko to preemptively lean forward on the couch, the fanged maw in the center of her body closed upon realizing the three Nudist Beach soldiers *weren't* Ichigo. Mouth pursed into an irritated scowl, Senketsu mimicking her displeased, Ryuko scoffed under her breath. She was going to kick Ichigo's ass when he got back! After more than half an hour - including five minutes spent rampaging throughout Mako's house - Mugetsu finally settled down only to become even *more* annoying!

Her eye twitched twice when the Kamui called out for Ichigo... *again* .

"Hey mom, where do I put the octopus?"

Ryuko frowned, looking over her shoulder as an explosion followed by a cloud of flour billowed from the kitchen. As Senketsu shivered nervously at the white powder slowly creeping down the hallway, she could *sense* her best friend's widening smile when Sukuyo Mankanshoku cheerfully replied, "It goes with the other special ingredients in the oven, Mako."

There was a noticeable pause before a loud *crash* shook the house's foundation, "Alright! These super special mystery croquettes will give Ryuko and Ichigo lots of energy! Enough to defeat her mom and save the world!"

" ***Your blood pressure is rising, Ryuko.***"

She grumbled at Senketsu's criticism, collapsing against the couch with an annoyed scoff. Did he really need to state the obvious? Refusing to look her Kamui in the eye, his concerned expression causing her to feel *terrible*, Ryuko groaned before angrily resting her head on the couch's plastic armrest, "Of course I'm upset."

Senketsu gave the Kamui equivalent of a sigh at the answer, **"Moping won't change anything. We were in London dealing with the Quincy when Ragyo Kiryuin attacked. There was nothing we could have possible done to prevent her from kidnapping Orihime."**

"Yeah, I know..."

Her leg bounced irritably against the floor, "But how did she know to attack Karakura Town at -"

**" What are you idiots mumbling about!?"**

Mugetsu's upper half folded as she turned away from the window, one empty sleeve pointing furiously towards the front door. Motioning at the latch just out of reach, taunting her with delusions of freedom, she seethed at Ryuko with bloodshot eyes, **"Stop talking about useless things and unlock the door!"**

"Give it a rest, will ya!"

**" It's your fault Ichigo's not wearing me,"** Mugetsu ignored the teenager, her voice full of desperation, **"I have to find him!"**

Ryuko refused to back down, Senketsu bolstering her resolve as she met the enraged Kamui's accusatory glare without flinching, "Like hell you are! You're not getting out of here! So *don't* try escaping or I'm going to lock you in the dryer!"

Mugetsu growled at the subtle threat to her happiness and safety. Twisting away from Ryuko with a taunting huff, she pressed her sleeves back against the window and sighed. Nothing made sense. Why did Ichigo betray her for other clothing? She was his Kamui, tailor-made for his body. There was nothing more fitting for him to wear than herself. Even if she needed a good pressing, dirt and oil scrubbed from her Life Fibers, it was depressing to know Ichigo would abandon her for second-hand store rejects at the first opportunity. Another miserable groan rippled through her threading.

She could sense Ichigo somewhere in Karakura Town, a faint presence that only made her feel worse .

Her sleeves dragged against the window. Wasn't she good enough for Ichigo?

**" You should relax, Ryuko. As your Kamui, it's my duty to make sure you're in the best of health,"** Senketsu couldn't hide the smugness in his voice as he gave the Kamui equivalent of a smirk. His eyes shifting away from Mugetsu when she rustled, bristling at the thinly veiled insult, he hesitated before adding, **"I can tell you're worried about Orihime. Or rather, what Ragyo Kiryuin plans to do to her."**

"It's just... I heard what she did to Ururu," Ryuko stared at the floor, fingers trembling from a mixture of worry and anger.

**" Don't worry. I'm more than confident we'll save Orihime from whatever plan Ragyo Kiryuin has in store,"** Senketsu paused, his attention drawn towards Mugetsu when the other Kamui stopped mumbling for a moment, **"However, you shouldn't allow yourself to feel guilty over things you couldn't control. It's also apparent from your dwindling energy and constant yawning that you're still exhausted from London. Pushing yourself after fighting that horrible shinigami and her Bankai won't help rescue Orihime."**

Ryuko rolled her eyes at Senketsu's advice, "Yeah, I suppose you're right, Senketsu."

**" I also recommend eating more of Mrs. Mankanshoku's home cooking. Her mystery croquettes are full of nutrients and energy. Just don't overindulge yourself like last time."**

Senketsu ignored Ryuko's flinching at the honest criticism of her dietary habits, humming thoughtfully as she fell onto the floor with a loud *thump* . While she was rubbing the back of her head, grumbling at his blunt but necessary commentary, he continued, **"This**

***shouldn't be surprising, Ryuko. All that extra salt and fat makes your blood taste horrible."***

"Hey!"

Ryuko furiously grabbed her Kamui's neckerchief, pulling on the fabric hard enough to get his undivided attention, "What the hell do you mean by *that* !? You didn't say anything when I tried that strange English food!"

Senketsu grumbled at the rough way Ryuko was manhandling his delicate threading, ***"I did argue against eating such rich foods, Ryuko. But you were determined to spend every last cent of Nudist Beach's money on something that didn't taste dry and awful."***

Ryuko's eye twitched alongside the corner of her mouth. After everything that happened in London she had completely forgotten about that argument. *And* Mugetsu's insistence about visiting every possible landmark in the city. But like *hell* would she admit being wrong to Senketsu! Pulling slightly harder on his neckerchief, which only caused the Kamui to reiterate his point with an annoyed huff, she stopped when a thin form draped itself over the couch, one sleeve floating onto the floor.

***" Ichigo..."***

The floor creaked as Ryuko stood back up, pushing Mugetsu's depression to the back of her mind. Letting go of Senketsu, her Kamui reflexively shaking away the new wrinkles in his Life Fibers, she collapsed with an exhausted groan onto the chair next to the television. As she involuntarily listened to Mugetsu's muffled sighing, the incessant ticking from the clock caused her scowl to grow with every passing second. Damn it... she *still* couldn't believe Orihime was related to Ragyo Kiryuin! Sure, she sounded a lot like Nui Harime. But she knew a lot of people with similar voices!

Wait a second...

Her mind ground to a halt, leaving Senketsu unsupervised to watch his fellow Kamui's embarrassing behavior. If Orihime was related to her bitch of a mom, then that meant they were sisters. A shudder raced down her spine, momentarily catching Senketsu's attention. Damn it! Why the hell was her family so complicated? Everything had been bad enough when she learned her mom wasn't actually dead but an insane sociopath bent on feeding humanity to Life Fibers. *Then* came the disturbing realization being Ragyo Kiryuin's daughter meant that she was also related to the Grand Couturier and Ururu.

And now Orihime?

A groan unrelated to Mugetsu's worsening depression filled the Mankanshoku's living room.

"Ryuko?"

Mako leaned out of the kitchen, her face covered in flour and several vegetables lodged in her hair, "Mom wants to know what vegetables you want baked in her croquettes. Asparagus and broccoli, right?"

"What? No!"

A disgusted shudder coursed through her body at the *thought* of eating asparagus, "You know I hate those things, Mako!"

"Oh... right!"

Mako nodded impishly, seeming to remember the same exact discussion they had several times over the last few months, "Sorry about that, Ryuko. Mom brought back lots of food from Osaka so we're going to have a little bit of everything for lunch. There's this weird purple vegetable that smells just like -"

The merciful sound of the doorbell cut her off midsentence.

Mugetsu was the first to react, excitement buzzing through her Life Fibers as she leapt off the couch. Hopping towards the front door, multicolored eyes fixated on whoever waited on the other side of the wooden frame, she had just enough time to gasp before *smashing* into Ryuko, who somehow managed to teleport across the room. How did she get there? Rubbing her lapels as everything came back into focus, she growled at the obstacle standing in her path. Ryuko and Senketsu were taunting her! *Daring* her to try and escape! But she refused to allow anyone, especially an annoying Kamui, stop her from finding Ichigo.

Even if that risked getting sent to the laundry room!

"Can you get the door, Ryuko?"

Ryuko resisted the urge to groan at the question, grumbling under her breath at Mugetsu's happiness towards Mako, "Sure..."

With a resigned sigh she unlocked the upper latch on the door, Mugetsu's lapels twitching from excitement *right* before she kicked the Kamui halfway across the living room. Like *hell* she was letting Mugetsu outside! Not after all her annoying crap! As the front door opened with a soft creak, Senketsu muttering something about Mugetsu, Ryuko stared at the massive figure blocking the sun, her eyes slowly tracking downwards from the imposing figure. Standing patiently in Gamagori's shadow, a black overcoat covering the normal-looking sweater and jeans, was Satsuki.

Yet before she could say anything - such as wondering why Satsuki's frown was way softer than she remembered - Ryuko flinched at the soft rustling of clothes.

"I told you to stay inside!"

Ryuko caught the white and black uniform attempting to leap over her shoulder without turning around. Struggling desperately as she was *yanked* backwards, her Life Fibers stretching from the



teenager's rough and malicious handling, Mugetsu deflated upon noticing Satsuki, ***"You're not Ichigo."***

The Kamui waved a sleeve at the former Student Council President, her eyes swiveling towards Ryuko, ***"Ichigo is out there wearing other clothing. Ask her where I can find him."***

***" Ryuko, I recommend taking Mugetsu's woes with a grain of salt,"*** Senketsu's eye narrowed at his fellow Kamui's irritating behavior, ***"Allowing Ichigo to wear other clothing was her fault in the first place. Such clingy behavior is highly embarrassing."***

Mugetsu redoubled her efforts to escape Ryuko's insanely strong grip, intent on unraveling Senketsu one Life Fiber at a time, ***"I'll show you clingy!"***

Ryuko mentally groaned when Senketsu decided to needlessly antagonize Mugetsu. Why the hell did they always seem to fight? The muscles in her arm quivering when Mugetsu tried grabbing Senketsu's lapels, intent on carrying out her promised threat, she stared at Gamagori, the corners of her mouth quirking at the slight discoloration on his cheeks, "Hey, what's wrong with you, Maxwell?"

"Do not call me that name, Matoi!"

Despite the anger in his voice, the way his shadowed eyes gleamed with a malevolent yellow light, Gamagori couldn't conceal the faint tinges of red on his cheeks. It appeared her time away from Honnouji Academy destroyed the minuscule respect Matoi developed towards authoritative figures. Straightening his posture, adding another foot to his height, he brushed aside the deliberately antagonizing comment from Lady Satsuki's sister, "If circumstances were different I would punish you for such flagrant rudeness! With or without Lady Satsuki's permission! HOWEVER, considering the importance of this visit I shall excuse your intolerant behavior! But just this ONCE!"

"... so why are you here?"

His left eye momentarily twitched at Matoi's suspicious undertone, a loss of control thankfully unobserved by Lady Satsuki, "Despite whatever half-formed thoughts are running through your mind, Matoi, I remain Lady Satsuki's invincible shield! Sworn to protect her life! Yet I am not without faults. I *do* make mistakes. Yesterdays demonstrated that my previous way of thinking was... inadequate. If not for my father's sound, if somewhat eccentric and unorthodox, advice, defeating Riruka Dokugamine on my own would have been impossible."

Ryuko exchanged looks with Mugetsu, the Kamui briefly stopping her struggling, before asking in a completely deadpan tone, "You're here to see Mako, right?"

"M-Matoi! What the hell are you -"

"I see your mood's improved, Ryuko."

Satsuki ignored Gamagori's flustered denial, obvious to anyone with eyes, while staring past Ryuko into the Mankanshoku's household, the emptiness pervading the living room all but confirming her suspicions, "I take it Ichigo isn't here?"

"Nah," Ryuko ignored Mugetsu's exaggerated sigh while motioning down the street, "And I don't know where he went."

The former heiress absorbed the mildly surprising news. Given recent events, Ichigo was probably speaking with the rest of his friends, assuaging his mind about their safety. After the harrowing battles in London, his blade clashing against both vampire and Quincy, she couldn't fault his concern. Yet judging from Mugetsu's continuing struggle to escape her sister's grip, a stark contrast to Iori's recordings of the Kamui's independent behavior back at Honnouji Academy, his departure from the Mankanshoku household was less than cordial.

Her breath visible as a faint mist in the sunlight, bangs of black hair waving gently in the late autumn wind, she sighed, "Very well..."

Gamagori will simply inform Ichigo of the situation when he returns."

"Situation?"

Ryuko tossed Mugetsu over her shoulder without a second thought, the Kamui desperately moving her sleeves before slamming into the far wall of the living room, "What happened?"

A flash of guilt marred Satsuki's stoic features, dragging buried memories to the surface of her mind, before vanishing behind an emotionless façade, "Kisuke Urahara has abandoned his research into allowing our Kamui to safely pass through the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier."

The front door shook when Ryuko slammed her hand against the wooden frame, faint cracks spreading from the point of contact. After everything that happened in London - failing to rescue more than a handful of people from that bastard Alucard and the Quincy, Anderson's death and Iscariot - she wanted to hear some good news! Like finding out Ichigo's dad had a secret weapon perfect for kicking her mom's ass! Wasn't Hat-and-Clogs the smartest person on the planet? How the hell were they going to rescue Orihime if he couldn't find a way to get Senketsu Into Honnouji Academy?

"You've got to be kidding me!"

Satsuki remained silent while Ryuko vented her frustration, refusing to bolster her sister's confidence with false platitudes and reassurances. This wasn't the time nor the place for such words. Her eyes narrowed, mouth pursing into a familiar scowl. Ragyo Kiryuin's recent unexpected actions had caught most of them by surprise. But the specific behind her desire for kidnapping Orihime Inoue was not important, a footnote in the grand scheme of things. If her mother required Orihime for some purpose, whether as a hostage against Isshin Kurosaki or ensuring the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet's eventual success, their path forward was clear.

"It is true the barrier surrounding Honnouji Academy is impermeable to everything - including our Kamui - without Ragyo Kiryuin's permission."

Stepping forward, heels *clacking* as she approached Ryuko, her expression hardened measurably, "But your frustration is not misplaced. On the contrary, it is the appropriate response to such a major setback. Everything was predicated on Kisuke Urahara finishing his invention. Yet it would appear to the casual observer that yesterday's events all but prevent us from stopping Ragyo Kiryuin and rescuing Orihime Inoue."

"Which is why Lady Satsuki developed a Plan B assuming Kisuke Urahara could not deliver on his promise," Gamagori announced, his voice booming down the street.

"Plan B?"

"There exists a drawback to the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier, a flaw our mother cannot eliminate," Satsuki ignored the slightly crimson sunlight filtering through the clouds before her brow creased in steadfast determination, "When Ragyo Kiryuin departed Honnouji Academy she was *forced* to adjust the IFF protocols. According to Isshin Kurosaki and Kisuke Urahara, such a significant change requires several days to fully reverse. And therein lies our opportunity! For our mother misstepped in her haste to achieve victory!"

A backdrop of blue-white flared into existence as Junketsu's heel clacked against the sidewalk, "Despite selling herself mind, body and soul to Life Fibers, someone else also encountered the Original Life Fiber! Someone whose body is woven from the *same* Life Fibers as Ragyo Kiryuin!"

Ryuko smirked, her mouth twisting into a predatory grin, "I think I get what you're saying..."

Satsuki felt a slight hint of disappointment at her sister's overconfidence. Things involving their mother were *never* simple. Isshin Kurosaki might temporarily possess the unique ability to penetrate the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier yet Ragyo Kiryuin was undoubtedly aware of the weakness in the otherwise impenetrable design. They could not solely rely upon his strength - magnitudes greater than Junketsu's normal power - to defeat their mother. Such shortsighted plans were foolish after she effortlessly eliminated him by exploiting his childish naivety surrounding Rei Hououmaru's true allegiance.

*She* would not make that same mistake.

"Do not underestimate our mother, Ryuko."

Ryuko rolled her eyes at Satsuki's warning, earning a stern glare in return that she promptly ignored. What was the point of telling her something so obvious? She already knew Ragyo Kiryuin was insanely strong. Their bitch of a mom managed to kick everyone's asses without breaking a sweat. Even that smug bastard Ichigo told her about - Sosuke Aizen - couldn't even slow her down. Folding her arms across Senketsu when Gamagori's eyebrow started twitching, she tossed her head back and groaned, "... alright, fine! But there's something else that's been bugging me!"

Jabbing a thumb against Senketsu, she cocked her head sideways, "Junketsu's new form, the one you used to kick mom's ass, how do I unlock it for Senketsu?"

"You're referring to Junketsu Shinzui?"

Senketsu's eye widened as Mugetsu leaned around Ryuko,  
**"Shinzui?"**

The former Student Council President didn't miss the sudden change in Mugetsu's behavior. She might remain unable to hear Kamui, only faint impressions of Junketsu's voice echoing in the recesses of her mind, yet their silent conversation was akin to an open book. They

were curious about Junketsu's ascended configuration. An eagerness for answers whose blame was her own fault. Junketsu Shinzui accomplished the impossible feat of unnerving their mother, the Kamui's transformation stoking apprehension in Ragyo Kiryuin's heart, "If it were possible I would demonstrate not only to Senketsu and Mugetsu - but also Danketsu - how to acquire their most powerful configuration."

Goosebumps raced down her arms when the wind briefly picked up, "However, replicating the transformation is current impossible. Ascending Junketsu to Shinzui required absorbing tens of thousands of our mother's COVERS, far more than the amount of Life Fibers remaining in Karakura Town. Even if you or Ichigo used every last Life Fiber available, neither of you will possess the necessary power to reach the same level as Junketsu."

"Damn it!"

Ryuko cursed at the explanation, slamming her fist once more against the door, "Mako told me how you kicked mom's ass! I thought if Senketsu gained that same power we could -"

"Why hello there, Satsuki!"

Sukuyo Mankanshoku was unconcerned about the tense conversation she interrupted involving Ragyo Kiryuin as she appeared behind Mugetsu, the Kamui instinctively hopping back when a glob of thick batter nearly landed on her sleeve. Resting a hand against her cheek, splotches of miscellaneous food covering the white cat-themed apron, she smiled pleasantly at Satsuki and Gamagori, "Ryuko didn't mention she invited friends for lunch."

"I'm afraid we're here on official business, Mrs. Mankanshoku," Gamagori apologized while clearing his throat.

"Don't be ridiculous! Mako will be delighted to know you stopped by for lunch," Sukuyo brushed aside the teenager's excuse with a wave

of her hand, sending small clumps of batter flying towards an increasingly terrified Mugetsu.

The former Chair of the Disciplinary Committee ignored the growing tightness of his collar. This was his punishment for absentmindedness! Given the developing situation involving Ragyo Kiryuin, he'd forgotten about his scheduled... *date*... with Mankanshoku. It was an unacceptable lapse in memory! His eye twitching at Matoi's smugness, the expression pushing the limits of his dwindling patience, he pulled on the cotton fabric constricting his airflow, "I'm sorry but Lady Satsuki doesn't have time to indulge in such -"

"Lunch sounds fine."

Satsuki returned Sukuyo's smile with a polite yet respecting nod, her heels *clacking* lightly as she walked around Ryuko into the Mankanshoku's household. Shivering under the sudden change in temperature as Gamagori closed the front door, stern eyes watching Mugetsu when the Kamui tried hopping to freedom, the corners of her mouth twisted downwards, shifting into a frown. As the woman returned to the kitchen she stepped aside, a reaction mimicked by Ryuko when Mako launched herself at Gamagori.

"W-Wait! Mankanshoku!"

Momentarily watching Gamagori chastise Mako Mankanshoku for staining his freshly-pressed shirt with batter, the absent-minded teenager apologizing profusely, she turned towards the window, frowning as the sun vanished behind passing clouds.

Her goal was within reach, giving purpose to everything sacrificed over the last thirteen years. Ragyo Kiryuin *would* suffer retribution for her crimes, paying for every life taken before their time. Yet she remained apprehensive and on guard, dark thoughts swirling around the battles still to come. She had no delusions - despite their comforting nature - that everyone would return from Honnouji

Academy. Kugo Ginjo's death at the hands of the Grand Couturier drove that concept into her soul.

"Mako! Go wash your hands!"

She surfaced from her turbulent thoughts when Ryuko backpedaled from Mako, Senketsu's eye quivering at the batter dripping from the teenager's hands. One eyebrow quirking when Mugetsu hopped over to the window, sparing her an annoyed huff while maneuvering around the food splattered across the floor, she allowed her expression to soften, mild frustration vanishing as she cleared her mind of such dark notions. Smirking faintly when Ryuko grabbed the back of Mankanshoku's collar, dragging her towards the bathroom down the hall, she halted Gamagori's attempt to leave with a stern scowl.

"Gamagori, inform Iori we won't be joining him for lunch."

As he proceeded to flawlessly carry out her orders, fishing a small cell phone from his pocket, Satsuki hung her coat over the couch and sighed. From the aroma filling every room with its pungent yet familiar odor, it seemed octopus was the main ingredient for today's batch of mystery croquettes.

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*Nui shivered as she stepped outside, the winter chill easily passing through her thin jacket. That was odd... she couldn't remember the last time she felt cold. Something that debilitating to normal humans just didn't affect people like her and Lady Ragyo. Even when hunting stupid nudists and traitors to Revocs she never wore anything besides her cute dress, which she stitched herself! But still... this was it, wasn't it? Karakura Town. She found it difficult to believe it's been almost a month since falling unconscious. It was strange. Glancing back and forth down the street, her eyes widened at the strange stillness in the air.*



*She couldn't sense any spirits. Not a single one.*

*Her heart plummeted in mild panic. This was impossible. It shouldn't be happening! After she fought that dark skinned shinigami who refused to die, tracking down other people without using her vision felt completely natural. Like plucking the Banshi from Satsuki's badly-sown Goku Uniforms. Even Lady Ragyo figured out the secret after meeting that old goat during Parent Student Day. Yet she couldn't sense anything, not a single soul. Nui sighed gently when a strange girl appeared in the corner of her eye, the ugly black robes and weird sandals crimes against fashion.*

*Even \*\*\*\*\*'s presence was starting to fade. It was true. Her spiritual powers were vanishing.*

*She ignored the faint buzzing piercing through her mind, the static rendering the name undecipherable. Noticing Orihime standing behind \*\*\*\*\* alongside some familiar humans, the one with glasses reminding her of the thief who stole several spools of Life Fibers from Revocs, Nui couldn't understand what was happening. None of this made sense. She hardly knew any of them, especially the humans. So why did Orihime look so upset?*

*Unaware of the Grand Couturier's growing confusion, the strange yet familiar girl smiled sadly, "This is goodbye, \*\*\*\*\*."*

*Nui returned the shinigami's gentle smile without knowing why, failing to conceal the sadness in her voice, "It looks that way."*

*" Hey, there's no use looking so sad, ok?"*

*\*\*\*\*\* chuckled, a strangely annoying grin stretching across her face as she leaned closer. Slapping her playfully on the stomach, smirking smugly the entire time, \*\*\*\*\* basked in the Grand Couturier's frustration, "Even if you won't be able to see ME anymore, I'll still be keeping a close eye on you."*

*" Now that's just GREAT!"*

*Nui leaned away from \*\*\*\*\*, rolling her eyes at the shinigami's annoying ability to get on her nerves. How could \*\*\*\*\* possibly think joking was a good idea? She didn't know whether to be insulted or relieved! Rubbing a hand through her short hair, which was strange considering she usually had carefully maintained and cute pigtails, Nui narrowed her eyes before angrily countering, "You spying on me! And just so you know, I'm NOT sad, ok?"*

*She gasped in surprise when \*\*\*\*\* started vanishing, the hems of her black robes slowly flickering out of existence one strand at a time. Refusing to meet \*\*\*\*\*'s eyes when the weight of the situation grew too much to bear, Nui cycled through several half-hearted excuses and phrases before settling on something meaningful, "\*\*\*\*\*, say bye to everyone for me."*

*\*\*\*\*\* hesitated, equally unsure how to respond, "... sure."*

*Nui found herself conflicted by the somber admission. How did she get all the way to Karakura Town from Honnouji Academy? There was no way Lady Ragyo would let her leave the school. The last thing she remembered was working on Shinra Koketsu, using her world-famous abilities as the Grand Couturier of Revocs to their fullest. Getting everything prepared for Lady Ragyo's big reveal. Yet she couldn't ignore the sadness in her heart. No matter what, THAT was real. She had willingly used the Final Getsuga Tenshou... Mugetsu... against \*\*\*\*\*, knowing the price of using something so dangerous.*

*But she wasn't, or rather couldn't be, upset about losing her shinigami powers. If becoming a normal human meant protecting her friends and family - and the rest of the world - from \*\*\*\*\*, then she would gladly make the same sacrifice a second time.*

*Ignoring the pressing silence as the final traces of her spiritual powers disappeared, \*\*\*\*\* fading until nothing remained except a whispered farewell on the wind, Nui stared longingly into the afternoon skies.*

" Goodbye... Rukia."

Nui Harime blinked as she regained consciousness, the strange dream already nothing more than faint impression and blotchy shadows.

Picking her head off the table, irregularly-shaped patches of fabric clinging to her skin, the eerie light pervading the Sewing Club painted her favorite dress crimson as a brief flicker of pain coursed through her head. What happened? Dulled eyes staring blankly at the darkened walls, the slightly swaying industrial lights failing to illuminate the entire room, she wracked her mind for answers. The last thing she remembered was sewing some final adjustments on Shinra Koketsu after Lady Ragyo asked about her progress and then... nothing. Plucking a Life Fiber from her hair, the disheveled blonde curls laying against the small of her back, Nui's heart plummeted when she realized what happened.

Lady Ragyo would be *furieux* if she found out she slept on the job!

"I have to finish..."

She stumbled to her feet, stepping over the emaciated corpses of the Sewing Club. The Mentally Refitted members of Satsuki's little club were scattered like discarded pieces of fabric across the ground their bodies drained completely of blood. It was all Satsuki's fault! Her pathetic defiance at Karakura Town somehow disrupted Lady Ragyo's concentration, causing the Life Fibers to briefly rampage out of control. And without the stupid humans sewing patches of Life Fiber clothing until they dropped dead or were devoured by COVERS, weaving the final touches on Shinra Koketsu was taking longer than expected.

The Scissor Blade stabbed into the floor near the table, its coloration once more purple, garnered none of her dwindling focus.

With a flicker of her wrist she grabbed the specialized sewing needle dangling from Shinra Koketsu's expansive sleeve. As her trembling

fingers clasped the metal object, sapphire eyes staring at the unmoving garment looming overhead in the darkness, Nui clenched her sharpened teeth at the intense migraine suddenly tearing through her mind. No! She couldn't forget the proper stitching to finish Shinra Koketsu! Not at a time like this! Grasping her forehead, eyes clenched shut from the blinding agony, she tensed when Shinra Koketsu's dress patterns came back into focus.

It was getting harder to remember. But she had *no choice* . She needed to finish Shinra Koketsu. And Amu... her sister was never coming back.

She was completely alone.

"He's going to pay. I'll make *sure* of that."

The sewing needle quivered against Shinra Koketsu's hem. That *détestable* shinigami needed to suffer for tricking Amu! To scream until he drowned on his own blood! But that wasn't going to happen. Not now... not ever. Nui flinched, a sob wracking her body at her failure to *murder* Kisuke Urahara, before her anger suddenly abated, replaced by an emotionless void bereft of anything resembling happiness. For some reason Orihime was upset with Lady Ragyo, which made her life more difficult. Because knowing her sister was depressed, even if it was over something as illogical as thinking she belonged with the naked pages, slightly affected her ability to finish Shinra Koketsu within Lady Ragyo's expected deadline.

But she couldn't stay mad at Orihime. After all, she was family. And finding out her long-long sister was one of Ichigo's best friends made everything special. Because family coming together... getting along despite good and bad... was how the world worked.

So why did Lady Ragyo abandon Amu?

Her fingers twitched, teeth clenching tightly as unwanted emotions tore through her mind. Why did they leave Amu behind? Rescuing her from that stupid shopkeeper would have been easy! His ugly

Bankai was powerful but it was *nothing* compared to the Original Life Fiber! And the old goat was still weakened from the Bleach Bomb, his Life Fiber strong but unable to resist Lady Ragyo. It should have been impossible for anyone - not those pathetic shinigami or Junketsu's amazing fashion week apparel - to stop them! So why didn't Lady Ragyo even try saving Amu?

Why did she abandon her sister without a second thought?

"No... I can't think about Amu. Not now..."

Emotion bled from her façade, leaving sapphire eyes dulled and listless, as she placed the final touches onto Shinra Koketsu, the *impulse* whispering deep within her soul forcing her to continue despite the worsening migraine. Nothing in the world mattered other than finishing the ultimate Kamui. Not Amu... Ichigo... or even herself. Instinct guided her fingers as she tailored the Life Fibers. She was almost done, blood dripping from her trembling fingers onto Shinra Koketsu's billowing folds. Her *pièce de résistance* would be the last garment made on this miserable planet. Once Lady Ragyo allowed herself to be worn, willingly surrendering her body and soul to Shinra Koketsu, those stupid humans and shinigami were as good as dead.

The Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet would make everything *perfect* .

"E-Everyone's going to be together," Nui's stammering voice carried ominously across the room, emotionless eyes never straying from her work, "We'll be a family again. And Lady Ragyo says you always look out for family..."

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The wind whipped Olivier Mira Armstrong's shoulder-length hair as she leapt from the helicopter, ignoring the half-hearted protest from the pilot.

With the pain from her gouged left eye barely eliciting a grunt she kicked off the side of the aircraft, her scowling visage silhouetted against the full moon. Boots stomping against the dirt upon landing in a crouch, she scoffed in disapproval at the disorganized individuals standing across the burnt landscape of Tsubakidai Park. Life Fiber Hybrids, shinigami, vampires, Quincy and humans. Almost every type of spiritual being was present. But only one person earned her contempt. After years of putting up with Anderson's zealousness, Alex's standard foolishness and Aikuro's exhibitionist tendencies, only Kisuke Urahara managed to *consistently* test her patience.

Scowling at the shopkeeper, his atrocious bucket hat standing out like a beacon in the darkness, Olivier huffed before reaching for the rapier strapped to her belt, gripping the sweeping hilt when an annoying presence attempting to gain her attention.

"I could have handled this."

"What are you implying?"

"We suffered tremendous losses against Revocs. Hundreds of our men fell in the line of duty, countless civilians slaughtered by Esdeath Partas and Ragyo Kiryuin is preparing to enact the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet as we speak," Armstrong's boisterous personality was subdued, causing Olivier to retort with a haughty scoff, "Your presence at headquarters would boost morale, something sorely needed after Xcution's rampage."

"Don't patronize me, Alex."

The jagged scar tracing down the left side of her face, partially hidden beneath an eyepatch, itched at her brother's misplaced concern. Did he think losing an eye against Esdeath Partas prevented her from leading Nudist Beach, instilling respect and admiration into the men fighting Life Fibers? Spending time alongside her nephew undoubtedly softened his mind, "You must have suffered more than bruises to believe something so insane.

That I'm on the front lines after dealing with that arrogant woman is adequate enough to boost morale."

Her gaze hardened, annoyance transforming into contempt, "And you have the *gall* to presume I would leave headquarters without preserving the chain of command?"

Armstrong ignored Olivier's malevolent scowl, years of experience allowing him to bear the brunt of his sister's fury without consequence. Yet he couldn't hide the confusion stemming from her response. If she came all the way to Karakura Town to give the operation's briefing - likely in direct defiance of well-qualified medics - she left someone else in charge, most likely one of his fellow commanders. And there was only one man who immediately came to mind, "Surely you didn't leave..."

"Don't be dense," Olivier snapped, ending his idiotic inquiry with another glare, "I left Batou in command."

Despite his tactical brilliance and mechanical expertise, there was a greater chance she would surrender to Ragyo Kiryuin than *ever* allow Aikuro Mikisugi the privilege of temporarily over command of their Osaka headquarters. And the man *knew* it. Without her constant supervision and Tsumugu's disrespectfully lax behavior, there was a greater than average chance the man was prancing through the hallways of their underground base in a speedo... or worse. Pushing the disturbing mental image to the deepest, darkest corner of her mind, noting to reprimand Tsumugu upon returning to Osaka, Olivier clicked her teeth in frustration.

She should have ordered Batou to lock the man in the mess hall freezer if he so much as unbuttoned his pants.

"Hmm... understandable."

Olivier scoffed at her brother's acquiescence, annoyed by his lack of conviction. But critiquing Alex's lack of a spine - and determining the proper punishment for Aikuro - could wait until Ragyo Kiryuin was

nothing more than a pile of dying Life Fibers. With the sharp crunching of burnt grass beneath her boots she marched forth, expression twisted into an irritated scowl at the overwhelming devastation. To think Bleach Bombs - something Professor Matoi proved incapable of safely developing despite years of expertise - were powerful enough to heavily weaken someone equal to Ragyo Kiryuin.

Knowing that Isshin Kurosaki *purposely* kept the knowledge of producing Bleach Bombs secret, refusing to divulge anything despite her organization suffering thousands of casualties over the years, made her want to beat the annoying man half to death.

Life Fibers and Ragyo Kiryuin be damned.

"Enough chattering!"

Her voice immediately ended every conversation, including the hushed discussion between Satsuki Kiryuin and her Elite Four. Shoulder-length blonde hair rustling as she stared at the former Kiryuin heiress, the teenager's conviction and sense of self-sacrifice earning more than a modicum of respect, Olivier stomped her foot against the ground, "Pay attention because I will *not* repeat myself! This operation will be two-fold! We will be striking multiple targets simultaneously! While the majority of you will be heading to Honnouji Academy, a small contingent will pursue the Original Life Fiber beneath the Kiryuin Manor!"

"Well, I think that's my cue..."

Kisuke Urahara ignored the scathing glare from the illustrious General Armstrong, her well-placed irritation sending cold chills down his spine. The woman was indeed terrifying. But she wasn't *quite* on the same level as the Fourth Division's captain, "I can tell some of you are wondering why we're suddenly prioritizing the Original Life Fiber. You might think that it's nothing more than an animal, capable of instinctively responding to threats yet incapable of independent action. Well... that's incorrect."



The bandages covering his fingers stung, digging into the recently closed self-inflicted surgical sutures as he clasped Benihime's curved handle, "The Original Life Fiber is intelligent to an extent. Under normal circumstances dealing with something powerful - but possessing limited intelligence - would be straightforward, perhaps even simple. But I can say without any doubt that stopping the Original Life Fiber is of equal importance to defeating Ragyo Kiryuin."

"Hold on a second!"

Ryuko frowned as she tried following the shopkeeper's train of thought, "I know the thing's dangerous, but why the hell didn't it do anything before now?"

"Because it was hibernating."

Kisuke observed and mentally noted Ryuko's subdued reaction, her expression failing to conceal the genuine surprise she felt, before continuing, "You already know how the Original Life Fiber arrived on the planet. However, traveling through deep space *and* forcibly accelerating humanity's natural evolution required most of its spiritual energy. It needed to regain its strength. But devouring a single human, even from a family possessing large spiritual reserves, every few decades wasn't sufficient. Something else must have sustained its existence."

The former Student Council President listened intently to Kisuke Urahara's explanation, her mouth pursing into a scowl, "Otherwise, the Original Life Fiber would have died millennia before being discovered by Ragyo Kiryuin's ancestors."

"Life Fibers absorb spiritual energy..."

Uryu's thoughts came to a screeching halt at the realization, "The Original Life Fiber must have done the same thing. But on a greater scale."

"Honshu is pockmarked by hundreds of square kilometers where the atmospheric spiritual density is minimal. It's a phenomenon that doesn't exist anywhere else on the planet," Kisuke lowered his head, the shadows from the resewn bucket hat shading his face from the moonlight, "If the Original Life Fiber has been absorbing spiritual energy over a period of thousands of years, it would have long-term effects on the environment. But a history lesson isn't important at the moment. Because if Aizen's information is correct..."

He raised his head, staring into Olivier Mira Armstrong's sole remaining eye, "... the Original Life Fiber is on the cusp of awakening."

Satsuki frowned at the information, brow creasing while apprehension rippled down her tensed limbs. Her mother had often spoken about the Original Life Fiber, her exaggerated fables influenced by the eldritch creature underneath their manor. But the true extent of their hold over humanity, the information Ragyo Kiryuin refused to divulge even while playing naïve to her rebellion, twisted her expression into a pensive scowl, "And there's no telling what it might do... *can do*... if my mother adorns herself with Shinra Koketsu. Is that correct, Kisuke Urahara?"

"Exactly."

A paper fan emerged from Kisuke's tattered sleeve, hiding the smile stretching across his face, "But thankfully I worked the bugs and kinks out of Kōgō Nuno Shīru. However, there is some bad news. Your mother probably reweave the Life Fiber wards protecting the Original Life Fiber after my unannounced visit, making it impossible for *me* to give sealing that thing a second try. Fortunately, there is someone nearly as smart and handsome as myself who could -"

" *NOW* is not the time, Kisuke!"

Yoruichi didn't hold back when she jabbed her elbow into the former captain's solar plexus. As Kisuke collapsed to the ground with a pitiful groan, one hand clutching his bruised ego and stomach, she

immediately turned towards Sosuke Aizen. The sleeve of her skin-tight sweater tied below her left shoulder, dangling in the space formerly occupied by her arm, she scoffed at his annoying smile, "You already know Kisuke's sealing Kido, don't you?"

"Of course."

There was no uncertainty in the treacherous shinigami's voice, "I already memorized Kisuke Urahara's notes on Kōgō Nuno Shīru. It was quite straightforward despite the complexity of the incantation. I even took the liberty of correcting a few minor mistakes in the spiritual energy fluctuations."

"And after I went through the trouble of writing down detailed, step-by-step instructions."

Kisuke sighed at the lack of respect, brushing dirt off his shoulders as he stood back up. Even with the possibility of the World of the Living - and all spiritual dimensions connected to it - falling to Life Fibers, Aizen still felt it necessary to belittle his achievements, "Well then, I suppose I'll leave the task of sealing the Original Life Fiber to you, Sosuke. But are you certain you can pull it off?"

"A ridiculous question."

Aizen chuckled at the redundancy of Kisuke Urahara's inquiry, "Pull it off? That implies I'm leaving anything to chance. As you said, Ragyo Kiryuin altered the wards protecting the Original Life Fiber, making it impossible for anyone to approach the Kiryuin Manor. However, nothing is truly impenetrable. Even the most well-designed techniques have flaws that can be manipulated. In fact, a few unique beings could, in theory, shatter the Life Fiber wards through careful application of physical strength."

He watched the ephemeral darkness emanating from Seras Victoria's left shoulder with mounting fascination, the crimson shadows visible against the full moon. It appeared quite a lot of interesting events occurred during his brief imprisonment. He knew,

of course, about the creature known as Alucard. A monstrous being working for the Hellsing Organization that even *he* dared not provoke. But he never imagined, even during his most thoughtful moments, the vampire would choose another protégé, "But penetrating the wards without attracting unwanted attention will require finesse."

"Finesse?"

Kinue Kinagase regarded the shinigami with suspicion. Even if Sosuke Aizen's goal was destroying the Original Life Fibers, sacrificing thousands of souls during his tenure as captain of the Soul Society's Fifth Division was disgusting. The man was a monstrous bastard, an opinion she fully shared with Danketsu and Tsumugu, "You fought Ragyo Kiryuin almost to a standstill. Even if you lost, that's still an achievement, something Satsuki Kiryuin only managed after Junketsu transformed into her most powerful configuration. At this point, I don't think Danketsu could scratch Ragyo Kiryuin."

" **WHAT!?**"

The muscles in her back twitched when Danketsu took offense towards her praise of Junketsu, the other Kamui preening at the compliment. Meeting her own Kamui's infuriated glare with cold dispassion, resisting the agitated emotions radiating across their synchronized connection, she added after a moment's deliberation, "I read Kisuke Urahara's report. Anyone can cast the technique providing they have enough spiritual energy. The Original Life Fiber might be dangerous but stopping Ragyo Kiryuin is more important. If she manages to wear Shinra Koketsu it won't *matter* if that creature is sealed."

A hint of annoyance, ephemeral in nature, crept into her voice, "So *why* aren't you going to Honnouji Academy?"

Aizen smirked as he gripped the collar of his jacket, tailor-made by Satsuki Kiryuin's assistant and modeled after the standard Arrancar

attire, and pulled downwards, "Because Ragyo Kiryuin can neutralize the Hogen's power."

**" No wonder I hated this man!"**

Danketsu seethed at the Hogen embedded in the shinigami's chest, her multicolored eyes widening in absolute *hatred* . She could feel the sphere mocking her! *Taunting* her! Giving the Kamui equivalent of a snarl at the man's arrogance and sense of superiority, she bristled at Kinue's unbothered expression, ***"I know you can feel that thing! If you hadn't promised to tear out Ragyo Kiryuin's heart with MY power I would force you to slaughter this man! It's absolutely disgusting! My Life Fibers are wrinkling just LOOKING at that thing in his chest!"***

"Calm down, Danketsu," Kinue chastised, pushing aside her Kamui's raging emotions with practiced ease.

**" There's something strange about that thing, Ryuko,"** Senketsu shuddered around her body at the multicolored light shimmering across the Hogen's surface, ***"I don't like saying it but Danketsu has a point. I can feel this... Hogen... in my threading. It's a really weird sensation."***

"Yeah, I feel it too, Senketsu."

Ryuko scowled when the Hogen's coloration shifted, momentarily changing into a deep crimson before returning to normal. So, this was the thing that helped Junketsu gain enough power to kick her bitch of a mom's ass. And for some reason it was really *pissing* her off! But at least she wasn't the only person disturbed by the Hogen. Ichigo and Mugetsu seemed confused by the stupid sphere but Danketsu was downright thinking about murdering the smug bastard.

"So that's the Hogen, huh?"

She reached for the miniaturized Scissor Blade resting comfortably within Senketsu's pouch, "You mind explaining why it's making me want to beat you senseless?"

***" I see I'm not the only one wishing to slaughter this man,"***

Danketsu glared at Ryuko, some of her anger twisting into sadistic amusement, ***"What are you waiting for? Use the Scissor Blade to cut him in half! Tear the Hogyoku from his chest!"***

"I freaking hate agreeing with Danketsu," Ryuko spat on the ground, "So start talking!"

Aizen paid little attention to Ryuko Matoi's potent threat, choosing instead to listen to the inaudible conversation she was having with Senketsu and Danketsu. The concept of sentient clothing woven from Life Fibers was fascinating. That Kisuke Urahara created a Kamui, something he hadn't known existed until a few hours prior to his interference in Ragyo Kiryuin's plans, piqued his interest, specifically the involvement of his Bankai's unique abilities in the weaving process.

"Your desire for physical violence, Ryuko Matoi, comes from subconscious synchronization between your Life Fibers and the Hogyoku," Aizen smirked as he explained everything to the quick-tempered teenager. It was refreshing to speak so candidly after decades of plotting against the Soul Society, "Since it was created from the Original Life Fiber, the Hogyoku instinctively seeks to synchronize with nearby Kamui and Life Fiber Hybrids, an interesting fact I learned while fighting Ragyo Kiryuin."

Ryuko's eyes widened at the revelation yet it was *Satsuki's* voice that rang sharply through the night, " *When* did you break into my family's manor?"

"Roughly one hundred and fifty years ago. The acquisition was timed with the brief lull in the Original Life Fiber's hibernation cycle. Or to be more specific, the ritual sacrifice of the Kiryuin matriarch," Aizen closed his jacket as Satsuki Kiryuin inhaled deeply, taken off guard

by the information regarding her family's disturbing history, "But that's beside the point."

He turned towards Kinue Kinagase as the last of the Hōgyoku's presence vanished, "Expanding upon my earlier answer, merging with the Hōgyoku has some benefits. But its intrinsic connection with the Original Life Fiber supersedes all other advantages. By taking care not to draw Ragyo Kiryuin's attention, this association should allow me limited manipulation of her wards, disrupting them long enough to reach the Forbidden Room beneath the Kiryuin Manor."

It was a high-risk gamble dependent upon a perfect sequence of events. When accounting for the innate ability of her Life Fibers to evolve in response to threats, which already rendered Kyōka Suigetsu's perfect hypnosis ineffective, Ragyo Kiryuin was one of the most formidable beings on the planet. A lesser individual would view the situation as hopeless, devoid of any chance of victory. Yet in her haste to acquire Orihime Inoue, sacrificing most of her COVERS and pawns in the process, the Kiryuin matriarch made several mistakes.

Such as assuming her final attack killed him. Or at the very least incapacitated him long enough for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet to proceed without interference.

By immediately retreating to Honnouji Academy with her hard-fought prize - the third of her daughters born from the Original Life Fiber - Ragyo Kiryuin ignored any possibility that her eldritch master was endangered. And why would she indulge herself with such a ludicrous notion? The creature was in the final stages of awakening thanks to her actions in Karakura Town and Kisuke Urahara's failure during the Great Culture and Sports Festival. And having already rewoven the wards, stitching them from scratch to prevent the latter from correcting his mistake, she reasonably presumed the Original Life Fiber was protected.

Only a fool wouldn't take advantage of such an opportunity.

"But contrary to your expectations, I'm not capable of single-handedly accomplishing this task."

He motioned towards Seras Victoria, aware of Ichigo Kurosaki's mounting suspicions in regards to his genial behavior, "When Ryuko confronted the vampire Alucard her Life Fibers proved incapable of adapting defenses towards his natural abilities. Unlike Ragyo Kiryuin, who grew increasingly resistant to Kyōka Suigetsu, that never happened against Alucard. It is safe to presume this advantage extends to everything based upon Life Fibers - including the wards surrounding the Kiryuin Manor. As Alucard's newest protégé, Seras Victoria will significantly lessen the difficulty of sealing the Original Life Fiber."

"Hold on," Seras frowned, her blood-red eyes expressing confusion, "Master had someone before me?"

"Aside from minor embellishments, Alucard's exploits are well-documented."

The realization dawning in the vampire's crimson eyes was intriguing yet meaningless at the moment. Focusing on Kinue Kinagase when the blue and purple Kamui accentuating every curve of her body expressed its hatred by narrowing its eyes, he continued in the same friendly tone, "As for Kinue Kinagase... her nature poses an interesting conundrum. A Life Fiber Hybrid stitched into a Kamui? Bound together for the rest of their lives? Their presence will undoubtedly garner the Original Life Fiber's curiosity, minimizing its attempts at countering our efforts."

Kinue glared at the shinigami, taken aback by his blunt admission, "So you want me to be a decoy."

"If you wish to believe that, then by all means do so," Aizen responded, unconcerned by the woman's increasingly turbulent emotional state despite her impressive attempts at burying it underneath a veneer of stoicism, "I am the one person aside from Kisuke Urahara capable of casting Kōgō Nuno Shīru. And given the



urgency of stopping Ragyo Kiryuin, you don't have any choice other than trusting me."

" ***This smug bastard,***" Danketsu growled at the shinigami, provoked by his notion of superiority over herself, ***"I take it back! I don't care about Ragyo Kiryuin any longer! Kill this arrogant man!"***

Several feet away, mutters of annoyance rippling through her Life Fibers at Danketsu's vulgarity, Mugetsu tried to ignore the string of violent threats. While the other Kamui was mildly less insane than she remembered, she still found it hard to imagine they were both woven from Life Fibers, ***"It appears Danketsu hasn't changed. She's still the same obnoxious and vulgar piece of clothing that gives Kamui a bad name."***

"Uh..."

Seras Victoria was confused, something that hadn't changed since leaving London with Sir Integra's blessing. Everything was so... *different*... in Japan. The whole concept of shinigami and the Soul Society was mindboggling. Dead spirits capable of giving Master trouble? Spiritual energy? In hindsight, she missed dealing with ghouls alongside Master while worried about Heinkel Wolfe firing another salvo of blessed silver bullets into her body. Dealing with those things was *simple* compared to saving the world from alien clothing.

Crimson eyes widening when Danketsu threatened Sosuke Aizen once again, earning an annoyed look from Kinue, she glanced at Ryuko, hesitation in her voice, "Is her Kamui always this... rude?"

"Yeah," Ryuko deadpanned, a reaction shared by Senketsu, "You get used to it."

"What the hell is he doing!?"

Olivier Armstrong's voice cut through the tension like a knife, interrupting Kinue's attempt at placating Danketsu. Overlooking

Sosuke Aizen's amused reaction when one of the nudists standing at attention pressed a finger against his ear, leaning into the radio before shaking his head several seconds later, she scowled, sweeping her gaze across the darkened landscape before settling upon Ichigo, "Where is Isshin?"

"I don't know," Ichigo blustered, slightly unnerved by the malevolent yellow light in the woman's remaining eye, "I haven't seen the bastard all day."

"I spoke with Isshin early this afternoon," Armstrong barely grimaced when Olivier transixed the intensity of her frustration upon his broad shoulders, "He seemed distracted, his mind focused on other matters. I tried pressing for information but he remained steadfast as usual, claiming only that he needed to finish something important before leaving."

Olivier stopped listening to her brother halfway through his third sentence, cutting him off with an annoyed scoff. Their operation depended on Isshin keeping Ragyo Kiryuin occupied without falling for any asinine tricks. And the man selfishly refuses to arrive on time? *After* she ordered Alex to pass along her message? Sneering at the former captain's dereliction of duty, she decided to continue without his participation, "Kiryuin!"

"My mother might be arrogant but she is no fool."

There was the familiar sound of heels clacking against hardened dirt, sinking lightly in the packed earth, as Satsuki stepped forth, "Yesterday's events demonstrate that she will not fight Isshin Kurosaki without provocation. If he were to appear at Honnouji Academy, she would assume his actions were a diversion. Yet she *cannot* ignore him! He is one of the only beings capable of ending her tyranny! The moment Ragyo Kiryuin senses Isshin Kurosaki she will *move* to intercept him!"

"And that is when we shall make OUR move!"

Satsuki glared at those gathered in Tsubakidai Park, the stern expression etched across her features radiating unyielding focus and determination, "While Isshin Kurosaki shoulders the burden of my mother's assault, we shall pursue our true objective! The destruction of the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier!"

"If I may explain, Lady Satsuki?"

The collar of Houka Inumuta's upgraded Probe Regalia unzipped when she nodded in affirmation. Lady Satsuki might have developed this plan alongside Kisuke Urahara and Nudist Beach - with some adjustments from Sosuke Aizen - but it *wasn't* foolproof. No amount of data or information could fully guarantee victory against Ragyo Kiryuin. And with a tactical coward like Yuu Akiyama in her employ, even considering victory at this stage was audacious to say the least, "Sanageyama and myself will infiltrate Honnouji Academy once Ichigo's father successfully captures Ragyo Kiryuin's attention. Our new Goku Uniforms should convince the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier we're members of Xcution, allowing us to reach the academy without detection."

"But we're not going to even *think* about activating our Goku Uniforms," Sanageyama interrupted from his perch on the ground. Arms folded tightly across his chest, the golden bandana covering his sewn eyes fluttering in the wind, the former Athletic Committee Chair cursed, "Because we don't want to get Ragyo Kiryuin's attention."

"Yes..."

The former Information and Strategy Committee Chair ignored his friend's outburst with dignity and grace, deigning to acknowledge the 'useful' information by simply erasing it from his mind, "Stealth will be critical if we're going to reach the Underground Server Farm - the only place Lady Satsuki's mother could have installing the Life Fiber generator - without drawing unnecessary attention."

"I've never been to the place myself. Never saw the point. But I'm guessing it's heavily guarded," Sanageyama smirked as he propped his shinai into the ground, using the weapon as a crutch to stand up, "Inumuta might be good but without my Shingantsu the Grand Couturier will spot him before he can even sneak through the back door."

"Don't grow overconfident in your abilities, Sanageyama."

Satsuki closed her eyes, breathing deeply before continuing, "Shingantsu might have opened your mind to the world but don't forget your initial loss to Ryuko. This isn't a match where the stakes are merely loss of honor or Goku Uniform. If Nui Harime catches you within Honnouji Academy's halls, she *will* kill you."

"Don't worry about me, Lady Satsuki."

Sanageyama forced himself to continue smirking, a single bead of sweat trickling down his cheek at Lady Satsuki's disappointment. As if he would ever try to take on someone like the Grand Couturier. He might be cocky, but an insane psychopath was way out of his league, "Thanks to Yoruichi Shihoin's hellish training I'll be able to sense the Grand Couturier from a mile away!"

"Have you forgotten lesson number four!?"

Yoruichi slapped the back of Sanageyama's head faster than his Shingantsu could register her presence, sending him falling face-first into the dirt. As her newest student cursed, rubbing the bruise while Nonon Jakuzure watched with a mischievous grin, she narrowed her eyes, "What did I teach you? If you can sense Nui Harime's spiritual pressure, then she can sense yours! And she *won't* hold back. If you walk into Honnouji Academy with that cocky attitude, she'll stab the Scissor Blade through your throat before you can even *blink*."

The edges of her mouth curled upwards when Sanageyama didn't back down, "Which is why I'm going with you. Nui Harime might be fast but *I'm* the Goddess of Flash! Even with a single arm I'm still

strong enough to deal with her nonsense. Besides, I didn't spend years as commander of the Onmitsukidō to not take part in perhaps the most important stealth mission in history."

Sanageyama grunted half-heartedly at the comment, "Fine... but only if Lady Satsuki -"

"You don't require my input, Sanageyama. Olivier Armstrong has already conceded Yoruichi Shihoin's new role in the operation."

Satsuki didn't need to hear the eldest Armstrong's response. The woman's tense visage expressed her true opinion on the matter concerning Yoruichi Shihoin. Allowing the shinigami to assist Sanageyama and Inumuta in dismantling the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier was tactically advantageous. Her prior experience leading the Onmitsukidō afforded her a level of subterfuge and stealth neither Goku Uniform nor simple intelligence could replicate. And if her assistance substantially increased the odds of Sanageyama and Inumuta walking away from the Grand Couturier with life and limbs intact, then she had no objections.

Noting Ichigo's consternation towards the announcement, the furrowing of his brow signifying the turbulent questions poised on the tip of his tongue, she sighed softly, flicking a bang of hair behind Junketsu's winglets, "The destruction of the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier will infuriate Ragyo Kiryuin, which makes Isshin Kurosaki's ability to keep her preoccupied *critical* for the next phase of the operation."

"Ryuko!"

Her heel *clacked* as Ryuko's expression hardened into a scowl, "Upon the barrier's dissolution you will hunt down and destroy Shinra Koketsu! The only location with the equipment necessary for creating Life Fiber clothing is the Sewing Club. Assuming our mother hasn't changed the security protocols, Inumuta will hand you the codes for opening the blast-proof doors without triggering the silent alerts connected to the Student Council chambers."

Fingers twitched, reaching for a weapon no longer in her possession when Ryuko nodded, slamming a fist into her open palm, "And if I run into Nui Harime?"

"You may do as you please if she interferes with your objective," Satsuki answered without hesitation, "As for rescuing Orihime Inoue, there are several possible methods of extracting her from Honnouji Academy without -"

"I'll rescue Orihime."

Ichigo glanced away, his brow furrowed into a uncertain frown, "I don't know where Ragyo Kiryuin is keeping her... but I have a few good ideas."

The single moment following Ichigo's promise to rescue Orihime Inoue felt like an eternity before she nodded. An inexplicable sense of guilt lifting from her shoulders at the relaxing of Ichigo's posture, Satsuki steadied her breathing, blue eyes snapping towards everyone else gathered in the park, "While Ichigo and Ryuko deal with their respective orders, everyone shall focus on stalling the COVERS! And if Xcution decides to interfere, show them no quarter! Destroy their raiment! Use every underhanded and cowardly trick you can imagine to bring them down!"

"Tch..."

Heinkel clicked her teeth, smoke wafting from the cigarette clenched between her lips. She heard rumors of Satsuki Kiryuin's charisma through the Vatican grapevine. Stories of Ragyo Kiryuin's only daughter that defied common sense. But hearing the confidence in the girl's voice as she authorized deadly force against their enemies numbed the residual burns covering her arm. Xcution wasn't Ragyo Kiryuin but she was more than content with *personally* sending them to the deepest bowels of hell. Anyone who surrendered their humanity for naught but power, a thought that provoked a single flinch of shame, deserved neither sympathy nor mercy.

The makings of a smirk pulled on the corners of her mouth upon remembering only two members of Xcution remain unpunished - Rei Hououmaru and Yuu. Despite warning Satsuki Kiryuin about the latter - something Ragyo Kiryuin's daughter not only *knew* but assumed to be an underestimation of his tactical cowardice - she was looking forward to confronting the bastard herself.

Because even if he placed countless traps in her path - created in a cowardly way to limit the chances of being forced into a straightforward fight - she wouldn't rest until he *paid* . Not simply for his monstrous actions after selling his soul to Ragyo Kiryuin but for betraying *everyone* at Harobaro House.

"The operation begins in fifteen minutes!"

Olivier finished the briefing with a wide sweep of her arm, the scar beneath her eyepatch itching as she stalked towards the waiting helicopters. Acknowledging the nudists surrounding the aircraft with a firm nod, she stopped midstride at the paladin's nearly inaudible declaration of frustration. The corner of her mouth twisted downwards as she glared at her younger brother, she pointed a finger over her shoulder, "Alex... provide our guest from Iscariot with appropriate weaponry. I don't want the trouble of explaining to the Vatican why their best agent died under my watch."

"Of course," Armstrong nodded, motioning towards the same nudists before politely adding, "But what about our other guest - Miss Victoria? Do you wish for me to -"

"She brought a single-shot, breach loader anti-tank cannon capable of firing depleted uranium shells from London," Olivier interrupted her brother with a derisive scoff, smirking faintly at the memory of Aikuro carrying the Harkonnen, struggling to hold the weapon without tripping over his own feet.

He still *owed* Nudist Beach for destroying one of their DTR Model Rays.

"So this is it, huh?"

Ryuko kicked the ground, sending a rock bouncing away into the darkness while a nudist handed Heinkel a large silver case. Damn it! Why the hell was she so freaking nervous? They were going to win! After all, what were the chances Ichigo's dad fell for Ragyo Kiryuin's tricks a second time? Her muttering devolving into a string of curses at the answer, she scoffed before grabbing Ichigo's wrist, "Make sure to save Orihime, got it? I don't want anything getting in the way of kicking my bitch of a mom's ass!"

"Ragyo went through a lot of trouble kidnapping Orihime," Ichigo ignored Mugetsu's grumbling as the Kamui complained about wrinkles in her Life Fibers, "But don't worry. I'll save Orihime, Ryuko. I promise."

"I know... but..."

She trailed off, words failing on the tip of her tongue, before angrily punching Ichigo in the shoulder, "Just don't go dying on me! Save Orihime and get the hell out of there, got it!?"

"I couldn't agree more, Ryuko!"

"What the hell!?"

Ryuko nearly leapt out of her skin when Isshin Kurosaki appeared out of nowhere. Damn it, where had the bastard been hiding all this time!? He couldn't *still* be this much faster than her and Senketsu! Her feet moving on their own, fingers removing the miniaturized Scissor Blade from her Kamui's pouch, she pirouetted on the hardened dirt as the weapon expanded to its full size in a screech of clashing metal. Pointing the hardened Life Fiber weapon at the old goat's face, her eyes drifting towards the long object in his left hand, moonlight reflected off the blade's polished crimson edge as she sneered, "You asshole! What's the big idea sneaking up on us like that?"



"Well, I couldn't just -"

Ichigo's eyebrow twitched as he interrupted his old man's attempt at rationalizing his behavior by punching him in the face. As his old man crashed to the ground, limbs twitching and a single moan escaping his lips, he clicked his teeth together in annoyance, "Where the hell have you been all day?"

"Your reflexes are as sharp as ever, my son!"

Isshin *vanished* . That was the best word to accurately describe how fast he moved. Reappearing behind his unaware son just as Ryuko's eyes widened while mindful of Aizen's growing smirk, he wrapped an arm around Ichigo's neck, the surprised gasp bringing an immense amount of satisfaction. After weeks of failure... of practicing his technique... he finally shattered his son's defenses! Grunting when Ichigo somehow broke free, jabbing an elbow against the underside of his chin, he effortlessly avoided the subsequent knee to the crotch, stepping sideways faster than most of those gathered could follow, "I'm surprised you didn't slack off during your vacation!"

"Vacation!?"

Ichigo grabbed his dad's tacky dress shirt yet he stopped short of berating his old man. The look in his eyes... it was something he remembered, back when they were fighting Aizen in the fake version of Karakura Town. Releasing his hold with a heavy sigh, Mugetsu looking at his old man before swiveling upwards in concern, he didn't say anything, choose to remain silent when Isshin grimaced somberly, "Ichigo... I know you and Ryuko went through hell in London. I don't think anything could have prepared you for Alucard... or what the Quincy did. If you want to talk about it..."

"No, it's... fine," he hesitated, looking away with a frown, "Right now we need to focus on stopping Ragyo Kiryuin. Until then... I don't want to think about what happened."

Isshin sighed, running a hand through his silver hair. Ichigo was taking what happened in London better than expected. And Ryuko seemed a little on edge but otherwise stable. He had expected their depression to be worse. Losing a single battle against Ragyo was different than failing to stop Alucard from devouring millions of souls. Stepping away from his son when he became the center of attention, Olivier's disdain towards his existence palpable across the park, he stiffened and looked over his shoulder when an astonished voice called out in the darkness.

"Where did you get that?"

The question was accompanied by rhythmic *clacking* of Junketsu's heels as Satsuki beheld the thin object clasped in Isshin Kurosaki's left hand, her schooled features briefly cracking at its familiarity. She recognized the shallow curvature of the white scabbard, the grey tassels dangling softly in the wind unmistakable. But how was this possible? Eyes widening when Ichigo's father tossed her the weapon, she adjusting her footing before reaching out, clasping the sheathed katana midflight with nary a sound. A shuddering breath rippling through her lungs as she wrapped shaking fingers around the silk-covered hilt and unsheathed the blade several inches, her heart nearly stopped at the recognizable black metal.

Bakuzan...

Satsuki stared at the razor-sharp edge, the pale moonlight reflecting brilliantly off Bakuzan's polished surface. She could hear the disbelief coming from her Elite Four, their surprise at the weapon equal to her own. Years before founding Honnouji Academy... before defeating Sanageyama and the majority of the Northern Kanto Gang with nothing more than fighting spirit and two precise non-lethal attacks... Ragyo Kiryuin had given her the unique hardened Life Fiber weapon. A gift, her mother had claimed at the time, for exemplary performance and service to Life Fibers. Yet the weapon should no longer exist. It had been shattered by her mother, reduced to shards scattered across the halls of her former kingdom.

Yet it now rested - completely restored - in her hand, the white silk braid around the hilt shimmering with the same pale light as the full moon.

The former heiress stared at Isshin Kurosaki, unperturbed by the slight crackle of her voice, "How did you refashion Bakuzan?"

"Anderson collected the pieces after Aikuro knocked Ryuko unconscious," Isshin paused on the man's name, grimacing at his past interactions with the former paladin. Noticing Heinkel Wolfe's expected reaction out of the corner of his eye - the paladin still conflicted between Anderson's history and what she assumed actually happened thirteen years ago - he rubbed the back of his neck, "It took longer than expected putting all the pieces back together. I wanted to wait a little longer, make sure it was perfect, but Ragyo forced my hand."

Junketsu's interest in the restored weapon was overshadowed when Satsuki promptly bowed the upper half of her body, eyes closed in respect, "Thank you for returning Bakuzan, Isshin Kurosaki."

"Don't mention it!"

Isshin felt his guilt diminish at the gratitude. It warmed his heart hearing Satsuki express herself without worrying about appearances. She'd come a *long* way since threatening his life with Bakuzan, her stern theatrics when he visited Honnouji Academy for Parent Student Day still fresh in his mind. Stroking his stubble-free chin while turning away from Satsuki, he chuckled under his breath, "Besides, I couldn't have my son's future girlfriend fighting her mother without a weapon. As for the method of payment... I made a list of Ichigo's favorite topics for you to -"

The blow to his cheek, courtesy of Ichigo's fist, masked Ryuko slamming the blunt side of the Scissor Blade into his stomach. Collapsing face-first onto the ground with an unceremonious *thump*, Isshin barely regained his bearings before a sneaked smashed violently into the back of his head.

"Keep your stupid shit to yourself, you damn bastard!"

Giving one more stomp for good measure before stalking away, Ryuko left Isshin to pick both himself out of the dirt while reflexively avoiding Mako's shoulder tackle. But there was no hiding the faint blush on her cheeks, the way she *vigorously* attacked the man. Something Mugetsu's didn't miss while Ichigo watched Satsuki fully unsheathe Bakuzan before giving the midnight black weapon several experimental swings.

"You ready for this, Mugetsu?"

The Kamui's lapels twitched proudly as her eyes swiveled upwards, ***"It's what I was made for, Ichigo. We'll show everyone why I'm the fastest Kamui!"***

Ichigo scowled at his old man's childish groans, the pain as fake as the blood flowing from his nose, "I don't think that means much against Ragyo Kiryuin."

**" What?"**

Mugetsu returned Ichigo's scowl, tightening around his body in frustrated displeasure. How could he say something so cruel and insulting? An annoyed humph rippled through her Life Fibers. Her speed surpassed any other Kamui's! She proved that against Junketsu and fighting those Quincy! Even if Junketsu unlocked her fashion week apparel and managed to fight Ragyo Kiryuin to a standstill, she was certain Zangetsu was still faster than Junketsu Shinzui! Ignoring Ichigo's half-hearted attempts to apologize, her determination weakening slightly when he promised to iron her when they got back, the Kamui barely missed Armstrong marching towards the Elite Four.

"Maxwell..."

Calloused fingers clasped his son's broad shoulder, *gripping* the newly improved Goku Uniform's blue threading with gentleness

befitting an Armstrong, "Your performance yesterday was exemplary. But don't let that cloud your judgment. Stay focused. Always assume the enemy has one last trick up their sleeve. If anything were to happen to you, your mother would have my head."

Gamagori's dour expression, already tested by Jakuzure's snarky attitude, deepened as he squared his shoulders, "Understood... but this doesn't change anything!"

He placed a hand over his heart, aware of Lady Satsuki's unshifting gaze and his aunt stalking angrily towards Ichigo Kurosaki's father, "Make no mistake. I appreciate your assistance against Riruka Dokugamine. I doubt my Shackle Regalia could have effectively countered her Duveteux Raiment without following your strategies and tactics. But our relationship has not changed! I vowed to carve my own path in this world! A path separate from the Armstrong name! And nothing you - nor Aunt Olivier - do will change my mind!"

"How commendable!"

Pink sparkles accentuated Armstrong's chiseled features at his son's indomitable sense of self-determination. Such unyielding stubbornness was something he had in common with his mother, a remarkable woman he missed every second of the day. Which was why he had no right chastising his son. For a name was nothing more than a sequence of letters. It was the actions of an individual, their decisions that determined whether others treated them with dignity or disdain. Compared to such things, what one chose as a surname was inconsequential.

"But you're correct..."

Armstrong's boisterous personality, the gentile decorum which earned the undying respect of every nudist in Professor Matoi's organization, was on full display as he proudly saluted his son, "Good luck out there, Ira."

"Is the toad *seriously* having a father-son bonding moment?"

Nonon Jakuzure grumbled under her breath, the annoyance mimicked by the skull embedded on her Goku Uniform's majorette hat. Jeez... was the toad really on the verge of tears after something so stupid? Not to mention his dad was nearly as demented as Strawberry's. Only someone with brain damage would constantly strip off their clothing and pose like a complete moron. Scoffing at the display she turned towards Uryu Ishida, the four-eyed Quincy's morbid horror making her feel somewhat better. Ugh! She was still pissed at Gamagori for taking down Dokugamine. *She* had practiced for days - following Satsuki's training and directions to the letter - to send that near-sighted bitch back to Italy!

"You're staring at Uryu Ishida more than usual, Jakuzure," Inumuta flicked the side of his glasses, unbothered by the sudden burst of venomous loathing, "Perhaps you wish to tell him something?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean!?"

Inumuta remained unfazed by the diminutive teenager's subtle threat, "There's no need for threats, Jakuzure. I was simply suggesting that -"

The former Information and Strategy Committee Chair stopped midsentence, his attention drifting towards the stomping growing increasingly louder by the second. Casually stepping backwards when Olivier Armstrong marched across his field of vision, he activated several features of his Probe Regalia as a sharp *crack* - the sound of the woman's fist smashing into Isshin Kurosaki's jaw - shattered the tepid tranquility.

"You're *late*, Isshin."

Olivier sneered at the blood coating her glove when Isshin's body corkscrewed through the air, sailing over his son's head before crashing into the ground. Removing the stained glove with a disdainful scoff, tossing the accessory over her shoulder even as the offending material dissolved into Life Fibers, she didn't bother waiting

for the man's excuse. His performance in the upcoming operation would be enough.

"We're moving out!"

She swept an arm outwards, ignoring the former shinigami's false groans of pain, "It's time to show Ragyo Kiryuin you don't *fuck* with humanity!"

# Burning Love

*There was a lot that went into this chapter. I think it's the first time I seriously addressed the OVA episode. Of course, Hououmaru's origins are entirely different, mostly due to having already given her a background prior to the OVA. Here, she's not a war orphan found by Ragyo. Instead, she was hired out of college by Ragyo as her secretary prior to encountering the Original Life Fiber. There are other differences. But on the other hand, there's one major addition from the OVA that I'm proud to include. Take from that what you will.*

*So, I hope you enjoy the chapter. Leave a review and, as always, if you have any questions feel free to send me a PM. I'll be happy to answer anything you might ask. Apart from spoilers and such.*

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## Chapter 59 - Burning Love

A deep breath disrupted the silence when Rei Hououmaru entered the private chambers formerly occupied by the Student Council Vice President of Honnouji Academy. Smoothing an errant wrinkle on her raiment as moonlight shone through the full-length windows, tinted crimson by the barrier enveloping Honnou City, she sighed before stepping forward, carefully avoiding the Life Fibers covering the imported marble tiles.

"Why did you destroy the COVERS?"

The question possessed neither frustration nor impatience as she walked around the shredded remains of the COVERS. Aware of the golden-orange light shimmering around Orihime's hairpins, Hououmaru brushed aside the burning pain radiating down her arms with an exasperated sigh, "Their only purpose was ensuring your



protection, Orihime. Nothing more and nothing less. Lady Ragyo even ordered empty COVERS to your chambers - severely limiting their capabilities - as proof she cares about your well-being."

"She's *not* my mom."

The harsh retort elicited little more than a slight clenching of her jaw, "Your feeling towards Lady Ragyo are irrelevant."

Her sunglasses partially slid down the bridge of her nose at Orihime's silence. Withdrawing the PDA from her raiment's breast pocket, flicking the device with her finger as information scrolled down the screen, she waited several seconds before addressing the primary reason for her visit, "All children eventually harbor feelings of rebelling against their parents. Even the Grand Couturier once considered such thoughts, although her disobedience was limited to leaving Revocs without permission."

Emotion drained from her voice as the Grand Couturier's last unauthorized excursion - to Karakura Town - came to mind, "Which is why I suggest forgetting any fantasies of leaving Honnouji Academy."

"Ichigo will stop you."

Orihime ignored the nervousness fluttering in her heart, anger at Ragyo Kiryuin keeping her voice steady, "I *know* he will!"

"Lady Ragyo has anticipated Ichigo and Ryuko lending their assistance to Nudist Beach."

Hououmaru continued scrolling through the information on her PDA while Orihime's bluster deflated, surprise replacing whatever confidence she'd mustered in the interim. Even with Lady Ragyo preoccupied at the moment, the Kiryuin Conglomerate never ceased operations. Thanks to their contacts in the French government, they already knew about the unregistered military aircraft leaving London. Irrelevant under most circumstances. Relegated to Revocs'

Information and Espionage Division for future countermeasures. But its flight pattern and timing had warranted Lady Ragyo's personal attention.

"Olivier Armstrong will undoubtedly launch a full-scale, yet futile, operation with the sole objective being the destruction of Shinra Koketsu," she stowed the PDA back in her pocket, unaware of Orihime's quickening pulse, "And with someone like Kisuke Urahara lending his expertise on Life Fibers, the probability her organization penetrates the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier is greater than zero."

Life Fibers curled around her heels as she strutted towards Orihime, "However, they will fail to remove you from Lady Ragyo's custody. But you needn't worry. I've spoken with Lady Ragyo on the matter, imploring leniency towards your friends. She's agreed that Ichigo and Ryuko won't be punished for their transgressions against Revocs and Life Fibers. She's also promised to unequivocally spare anyone - nudists included - who surrenders if you agree to cooperate."

"You're lying."

Orihime's hands trembled, the viciousness of the secretary's answer causing her blood to run cold, "I know what you're trying to do. If you hurt Ichigo, Ryuko or any of my friends... if you try to force me to help you... I'll destroy Shinra Koketsu!"

A presence fluttered against Hououmaru's consciousness, its amusement undoubtedly focused upon her discontent. Why was Orihime determined to make her job difficult? Despite its impossibility, she was required to report the threat to Lady Ragyo, increasing her already overbearing workload hours before Nudist Beach's assault, "Your threat against Shinra Koketsu carries no weight. While your Shun Shun Rikka possesses unparalleled power - enough to render even Kamui nothing more than scraps of clothing - you lack the physical prowess of your sisters. If the Grand Couturier decided to make such a threat, she would have already unraveled my Écusson Raiment."

"Lady Ragyo's generous offer is simply a choice between two methods of execution," she watched impassively as Orihime's determination wavered before pressing on, "Regardless of your intentions, humanity *will* be devoured by Life Fibers."

"Why are you helping her?"

"Ragyo only cares about herself," Orihime's voice cracked, nervousness preventing her from staring into the secretary's cold eyes, "So why are you helping her? Why are you trying to kill everyone!?"

"Because Lady Ragyo's orders are sacrosanct."

There was no hesitation as Hououmaru removed her sunglasses, sweeping away the accessory without expressing her inner frustration. Did Orihime expect her to address something so complicated in the span of a few seconds? To condense her loyalty and devotion to Lady Ragyo, why she would gladly sacrifice her existence to the Original Life Fiber if it ensured the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet's success, within a single breath? The notion was insulting. That Orihime even considered the ridiculous question only served to deepen her hatred of Sora Inoue.

She tucked away her sunglasses as Orihime attempted to rationalize her answer, turning around with a soft *clack* of her heel, "The Grand Couturier will retrieve you once Shinra Koketsu is finished."

Her voice echoed slightly as she marched towards the door, beams of pale moonlight casting shadows upon the opposite wall, "So please try to relax. Denying Lady Ragyo's countless sacrifices with futile acts of defiance and hollow threats is tantamount to insulting the Original Life Fiber."

An overwhelming silence filled the room before the door closed, reinforced Life Fiber locks instantly sealing the chamber. Shoulders stiffen as she stood in the corridor, several COVERS floating past her field of view without acknowledging her presence, Hououmaru

sighed, the sound containing more than twenty-four hours of exhaustion. Sora Inoue deserved to suffer in the deepest pits of Hell. Orihime's refusal to assist Lady Ragyo was bolstered by years of his indoctrination and malicious slander. Nothing unsurmountable given Lady Ragyo's vast resources and abilities, but her immunity to Mental Refitting necessitated alternate methods of gaining compliance.

"Your purpose has not changed."

She closed her eyes when the nearby shadows moved, sunglasses resting once more upon the bridge of her nose, "Continue guarding Orihime. Do not let anyone other than Lady Ragyo or the Grand Couturier through this door."

"Concerned, Hououmaru?"

The question carried a hint of arrogance, possessing confidence tempered through mental training, as a figure emerged from the darkness, long golden hair falling across their shoulders in flat waves, "Did speaking with Orihime Inoue rattle your nerves?"

"Please refrain from using that name."

Hououmaru focused on the satellite transmitter looming over Honnouji Academy, ignoring the figure's annoying attempt at getting underneath skin. Such behavior was unbecoming of a loyal servant of Life Fibers, "Our sources have detected large-scale mobilization of Anti-Life Fiber assets in Karakura Town. We expect Nudist Beach to attack within the next several hours, possibly sooner. It's also anticipated that Isshin Kurosaki will lead the assault, using the single defect in the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier to confront Lady Ragyo."

"Interesting..."

" *Don't* underestimate Isshin Kurosaki."

Her voice hardened at the figure's fascination with the man, "It required years of planning for Lady Ragyo to successfully pull off Operation Laissez Faire. If I hadn't convinced Isshin that I betrayed Revocs and the Original Life Fiber, the operation would have likely failed. His naïve trust in my loyalty - built over twenty years and upon countless assets sacrificed to the nudists - is why the last prerequisite for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet's success rests within Lady Ragyo's grasp."

"Whatever method Isshin chooses to obtain Lady Ragyo's attention, it would be prudent to assume his actions are covering another nudist operation," pain radiated throughout her hand as the wounds obtained battling Kugo Ginjo flared, "If the nudists breach the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier despite Lady Ragyo's preemptive measures, your *only* purpose is ensuring Orihime does not leave Honnouji Academy."

"Nui Harime described Ichigo Kurosaki's synchronization with Mugetsu in vivid detail."

The non-sequitur comment was accompanied by a sinister chuckle which echoed viciously in the darkness. Smirking as the moon flickered in the overcast skies, highlighting the black armor accentuating their sculpted physique, the figure breathed in sharply, malevolent exuberance permeating every word, "Fighting such a magnificent Kamui will require considerable effort. But anyone that rebels against Lady Ragyo deserves nothing less than complete humiliation."

"Ichigo is *still* Lady Ragyo's godson. She would be *mécontent* hearing you speak about him with such callous disrespect."

The smile on the figure's ashen grey face tightened, hints of apprehension in their brilliant green eyes, before Hououmaru continued, "However, you have her permission to fight Ichigo and Ryuko to your heart's content. But safeguarding Orihime takes priority over *everything* . Only use as much power as necessary to incapacitate them. Nothing more. Understood?"

A single, exuberant chuckle filled the hallway as the figure stepped closer to Hououmaru, "Am I ordered to also hold back against Satsuki Kiryuin?"

"Lady Ragyo only cares about Ichigo and Ryuko. Anyone else attempting to reach Orihime is to be killed with extreme prejudice."

Hououmaru pressed a finger against her ear, head tilted slightly when the voice over the secure network drew her attention. It appeared her conversation with Orihime took longer than expected. Pivoting softly once Lady Ragyo finished speaking, she quickly moved to leave, but not before imparting one final comment.

"If you encounter Satsuki, please remember to recover Junketsu."

A sharp exhale left the figure's parted lips, the pitch black yet revealing armor adorning her ashen grey flesh shimmering in the moonlight. Testing her capabilities against Mugetsu and Senketsu would be *exhilarating*. To push her Life Fibers to their limits, straining them until they threatened to fray underneath clashing blades, filled her soul with excitement. This was the reason behind her creation! Why the Grand Couturiers sacrificed their valuable time extracting memories and impressions of Satsuki Kiryuin from the captured humans. Why they weaved them into her Life Fibers alongside Lady Ragyo's own recollections!

Every moment from Satsuki Kiryuin's childhood to the Karakura Town Raid Trip was stitched into her soul.

For all intents and purposes she was Satsuki Kiryuin!

"I'm looking forward to our battle, Ichigo Kurosaki," she smirked as the inverted multicolored eyes on her pauldrons didn't move, "Defeating your Kamui would prove my superiority over you once and for all."

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Ragyo Kiryuin drank in the reticent darkness, her divine flesh unencumbered by the biting cold of the autumn night. Manicured fingers strummed against the crooks of her arms as she stared westward, the amused contentment adorning her regal façade momentarily cracking, more out of disappointment than honest anger.

"Oh Isshin, just *what* are you planning?"

An excited shudder rippled throughout her Life Fibers. Despite his stubborn refusal to concede that the Original Life Fiber's divine goal was correct - a notion that seemed impossible to beat into his thick skull - she still adored Isshin, from his childish boisterousness to his failing attempts at humor. After all, he was the only man she would ever love. And it was for that single reason she found his decision to ally with the naked apes, humans unworthy of anything other than serving as nourishment for Life Fibers, *frustrant*. Someone of his stature, endowed with the Original Life Fiber's blessed gift, shouldn't degrade himself by associating with lesser beings, least of all the group founded by her former husband.

"You wished to see me, Lady Ragyo?"

Engrossed in her thoughts, Ragyo craned her neck backwards, the flaunting dress accentuating her womanly figure fluttering softly, "Yes..."

The word left slightly parted lips alongside a breathless sigh. Folding her arms as Hououmaru marched across the pinnacle of Honnouji Academy's central tower, she sighed in response to the faint glimmer on the horizon, "I'm afraid we've run out of time. Isshin will be on our doorstep in just over five minutes."

Hououmaru's breath hitched. Revocs hadn't detected any nudist deployment from Karakura Town during her conversation with Orihime. If Isshin intended to interfere with the Celestial Cocoon

Seed Planet so quickly, she didn't want to be present upon his arrival, "Understood."

" *Merde* ."

A weary sigh accompanied the curse as Ragyo lamented the necessity of the approaching confrontation, "Even after twenty-two years Isshin still found a way to surprise me. I assumed he'd attempt to rescue yesterday afternoon. But, of course, he didn't show."

Annoyance masked by wistful nostalgia passed underneath Hououmaru's limited awareness as she stared at the moon hanging lazily in the night sky. Some things simply never worked as intended. She had waited patiently for Isshin's arrival after returning from Karakura Town, finishing the last preparations while dearest Nui reacquainted herself with Orihime. Mild apprehension had tainted her thoughts at fighting *so soon* after dealing with Satsuki and that blasphemous shinigami. But the wounds sustained *beating* common sense into her daughter were nothing compared to Isshin's.

Their rematch would have ended in *her* favor.

Perhaps she wasn't giving Isshin enough credit. While he publicly behaved like a childish idiot lacking common sense - one of his more endearing qualities - it was nothing more than a whimsical performance. Underneath his atrocious disguise lay the heart of a shrewd and calculated man, someone capable of setting back the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet for years by the most trivial of actions. It wasn't surprising. Only Isshin could have kept her traitorous former husband safe for thirteen years, prevented her employees from fully eradicating the naked apes and conceal the existences of Amu and Orihime, both of whom she didn't even know *survived* until Ichigo transferred to Honnouji Academy.

Sometimes she didn't understand why she tolerated his rebellious behavior.



Caressing the Needle Blades stabbed into the platform on either side of her body, fingers running circular patterns upon the multicolored metal, she smirked when something else came to mind.

"How is Orihime, Hououmaru?"

"She's behaving quite stubbornly," Hououmaru closed her eyes, the only indication of the fatigue plaguing her body, "Not only has she destroyed the COVERS assigned to protect her from the naked apes, she's vowed to destroy Shinra Koketsu with her Shun Shun Rikka."

"I suppose irrational stubbornness runs in the family..."

Amusement seeped into the Kiryuin matriarch's tone. Did Orihime honestly believe she would allow the only one of her daughters capable of destroying Shinra Koketsu without using hardened Life Fibers weapons anywhere near dearest Nui's *œuvre maîtresse* ? It was absurd. But if Orihime somehow took advantage of her permissive behavior to escape, her little pet project - something the Grand Couturiers stitched together in their spare time - made accomplishing the feat virtually impossible, "Perhaps I've been too lenient with Orihime. Inform our pet project to rebuke my daughter if she attempts anything during Isshin's upcoming performance."

"As you wish, Ma'am."

The subtle inflections in Hououmaru's response piqued the matriarch's interest. A heel clacking sharply as she turned around, placing her back against Isshin's growing presence, Ragyo focused on her servant's elevated breathing, "That reminds me. How is dearest Nui's progress?"

Hououmaru flicked her aviator sunglasses, the subconscious behavior concealing her nervousness, "The Grand Couturier should finish Shinra Koketsu within fifteen minutes, possibly sooner. However, she's growing increasingly unstable. Losing Amu to Kisuke Urahara's underhanded tactics affected her mind worse than the

temporary loss of her eye. When I attempted to inquire about Shinra Koketsu's progress this morning, she threatened to tear my heart out after cutting off my arms."

" *C'est la vie*. I'm afraid dearest Nui's mind couldn't handle the strain of losing Amu," Ragyo shook her head, a breathless sigh escaping her lips. Nui's connection with Amu was deeper than mere synchronization. It was hardly surprising that the backlash from Twin Life Fiber Entanglement would damage her precious daughter's soul. The outcome was tragic yet she wasn't concerned in the slightest. As long as Nui finished weaving Shinra Koketsu her stability was irrelevant.

The Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet took priority over *everything* .

Her chest rose, breasts straining against silk-like fabric as she stared beyond the dilapidated streets of Honnou City into Tokyo Bay, the reflection from the full moon shimmering upon the stilled waters. Nui's purpose was weaving Shinra Koketsu alongside Amu. Nothing more and nothing less. Everything she's achieved as Grand Couturier - such as slaughtering the naked apes - was nothing more than a *bonus*, "From your response I presume she's still working on Shinra Koketsu?"

"Yes," Hououmaru pressed a finger against the bridge of her sunglasses, "The Grand Couturier hasn't stopped working since returning from Karakura Town."

"Then I don't see a problem," Ragyo watched hundreds of COVERS float through the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier, the mass-produced suits heading westward to intercept Olivier's naked apes, "However, I *am* curious about our pet project. It's been so hectic preparing for Isshin's arrival that I haven't had time to properly examine its threading."

She tilted her head backwards, lips curled into a psychotic smirk as Hououmaru's voice faded into the background. Her pet project, something conceived in the immediate aftermath of the Great

Culture and Sports Festival, went beyond the secondhand clone used to trick Isshin. The Life Fiber creation guarding Orihime was original. *Unique* . It was something standing upon the cusp of hybridization yet lacking certain basic characteristics and qualities, giving it an existence less than Ichigo or Ryuko but greater than mere Kamui. Some would consider that a failure.

But the clone created from her Life Fibers and woven into existence by Nui and Amu was anything but *un échec* .

A normal Life Fiber clone could mimic the personality and mannerisms of the original but the results were always inferior. If not for Hououmaru's stupendous performance as a double-agent, allowing the naked apes to have sensitive Revocs information with her express permission, Isshin would have *easily* noticed the difference. It wasn't difficult. But the duplicate of her eldest daughter was different. *Purposely so* . The Grand Couturiers sacrificed the scant hours not weaving Shinra Koketsu stitching memories of Satsuki - taken from the captured students and her own mind - into its Life Fibers, granting her creation the same personality and temperament as Satsuki while remaining loyal to the Original Life Fiber.

It was a magnificent *oeuvre d'art*, made more beautiful by the insentient replica of Junketsu - lacking the original's complete strength due to Isshin's absence - sewn into its skin.

"I'm more than certain Kisuke Urahara and Satsuki believe I played my entire hand yesterday," Ragyo laughed at the concept, the backdrop of multicolored light announcing her stature growing alongside her madness, "Losing most of Xcution was surprising. And I certainly didn't expect Junketsu to ascend into her fashion week apparel. But as Isshin pointed out years ago - you *always* hold something back for emergencies. Which brings up one final matter..."

She grinned, faced framed in darkness, "Have you finished dealing with the *other* loose ends?"

"Of course."

Hououmaru brushed dust from her raiment, a subtle yet noticeable cruel edge to her voice, "Kuroido sacrificed himself alongside your remaining staff to the Original Life Fiber twelve hours ago."

An overwhelming sense of amusement pulsed through her Life Fibers at the expected affirmation. She had nearly *forgotten* about Kuroido, the head butler relegated to the depths of her mind after the Great Culture and Sports Festival. After failing to prevent Kisuke Urahara and Satsuki's Sewing Club from breaching the Original Life Fiber's sanctum, locked within a broom closet by the former, she had contemplated ending the man's existence. He certainly deserved a disgraceful death, devoid of any worth despite years of fervent loyalty. Yet she'd purposely ignored his nervous rapport after leaving Orihime at Honnouji Academy, brushing aside his stammering excuses without so much as a cursory glance.

Kuroido might have failed the most trivial tasks - starting with assassinating Souichiro - but the Original Life Fiber *wasn't* picky.

That only left one final loose thread.

A loud *clack* interrupted Hououmaru's somber thoughts as she strutted towards the edge of Honnouji Academy's tower, silver hair rustling in the gentle wind. Isshin's plan was obvious almost to the point of embarrassment. The lack of *tact*, his inability to conceal his true objective beneath several layers of fabric, was disappointing. Did he not expect her to realize his plans? She could *sense* their Life Fibers, matured from slaughtering those disgusting Quincy, despite Isshin's presence. Ichigo and Ryuko were coming, determined to end the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. Even Junketsu was partaking in their foolish endeavor.

The Kamui's participation turning her smirk malevolent. She knew her daughter *far* too well.

"Satsuki's persistence would be amusing if it wasn't so pathetic. Oh well, I suppose that leaves me with little choice..."

The comment rolled off her tongue without warning, carrying a heavy weight that immediately gained Hououmaru's undivided attention. Her multicolored radiance brightening as she chuckled alongside a sharp intake of air, masking her excitement as anticipation, Ragyo's eyes widened sadistically, "Prepare EXCELSUS."

"Are you certain, Ma'am?"

Hououmaru stared at the ground when Lady Ragyo quirked an eyebrow, clearing her throat with a small cough, "EXCELSUS was designed by your daughter as a final deterrent against the Original Life Fiber, to be used only when all other options had failed. Its activation will destroy Honnouji Academy, tearing apart both the Sewing Club where the Grand Couturier is weaving Shinra Koketsu and the Student Council Chambers where Orihime is resting."

"I *am* aware of that, Hououmaru."

Ragyo found the criticism both refreshing *and* disappointing. She still remembered Satsuki's passionate declaration regarding her plans for an institution, an experimental testing ground for humans to wear Life Fiber clothing. It was a bold and ingenious idea. But she wasn't born yesterday. Her daughter might have designed Honnouji Academy, personally overseeing its construction. However, *she* funded the multibillion dollar project, *including* the Anti-Life Fiber technology Satsuki concealed with her hacker associate's assistance, "Which is why you won't activate EXCELSUS until I have adorned myself with Shinra Koketsu. As much as I would *love* to witness Satsuki's expression when her 'secret weapon' is turned upon the naked apes, the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet takes priority over everything."

"Very well," Hououmaru bowed, all doubt driven from her mind, "Will there be anything else?"

"Yes. Inform me once the Grand Couturier is finished," Ragyo smirked as her attention drifted to the west, "Now if you'll excuse me..."

Manicured fingers curled through the smooth handles of the Needle Blades as she extracted the twin weapons from the platform, "... I need to go speak with Isshin."

She floated silently above the platform, basking in the familiar presence permeating her Life Fibers and Hououmaru's deference, before vanishing with enough force to crack the metallic plating beneath her heels. With streaks of kaleidoscopic spiritual energy trailing from her body, thousands of COVERS instinctively floating out of her path, she passed through the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier, shredded high-velocity Life Fibers clinging to her skin as the ephemeral surface *rippled*. It would be foolish to confront Isshin at Honnouji Academy, not when dearest Nui was still working on Shinra Koketsu.

All it would take was an errant attack. Something Isshin would attempt given half a chance.

Her lips quirked playfully as she *stopped* thousands of feet above Honnouji Academy, the multicolored radiance from her hair shimmering like a jewel in the darkness. Fingers caressing the Needles Blades, trailing patterns in their Life Fibers as the seconds slowly changed into minutes, Ragyo smiled, amused yet slightly annoyed by the familiar presence doing his best to avoid her attention.

"It's rude to keep a woman waiting."

She laughed - the melodious sound mixing sadistic amusement and arrogant mirth. Turning around, prepared to properly greet Isshin, Ragyo's breath immediately hitched, maroon eyes widening. *Incroyable* ! She didn't think it was possible! The probability of witnessing something *this* amazing was lower than Satsuki's chances of defeating the Original Life Fiber! It took every ounce of

self-composure she possessed, which grew more difficult by the second, to keep her voice steady, "Oh? What's this? Did you finally develop a sense of fashion?"

At some point over the last twenty-four hours Isshin had *finally* discarded his gaudy and incredibly tacky dress clothes, changing into something more antiquated. The refreshing garment now adorning his body had a certain quaintness, archaic culture visible in the threading that clashed with Isshin's normal fashion. Upon first glance the shihakusho and accompanying tattered haori wrapped around his shoulder appeared subpar, perhaps created by Kisuke Urahara, but the perfectly stitched thread patterns quickly proved her wrong. Only someone like Isshin could wave such magnificent clothing.

And only *Isshin* would choose *black* of all colors.

"I'm not here to talk, Ragyo."

Isshin rested his wrist against the blade strapped within his shihakusho, fingers positioned to draw the weapon if Ragyo decided to take the initiative, "But I will give you one chance to surrender."

"Oh Isshin, your *naïveté* is simply endearing."

Her voice stabbed through the darkness like a knife, carrying a hint of madness that caused Isshin's posture to stiffen. She was insulted - furious beyond comprehension - that he would consider such a ludicrous notion, "That you believe I would be swayed by such nonsensical *connerie*... is infuriating!"

She crossed the chasm separating them in the blink of an eye, muscles pulling taut as she thrust the Needle Blades towards Isshin's exposed lungs. Undeterred in the slightest when he moved at the last second, the faint rustling of his shihakusho drawing her undivided attention, Ragyo pirouetted upon platforms of solidified air, heels *clacking* loudly as she decided to try *harder* . Her body blurred out of existence, flickers of multicolored spiritual energy the only

evidence of her presence in the darkness, as she danced with Isshin. Over and over their blades clashed, each choreographed movement creating bursts of spiritual pressure that could be sensed for kilometers.

"Come now, Isshin, do you intend to keep holding back?"

Pivoting gracefully around the telegraphed swing, eyes half-lidded as Isshin's blade passed inches from her face, Ragyo waited until he extended himself before countering with a sharp kick, frowning when her foot instead slammed into his forearm.

"You're not exactly giving one hundred percent yourself, Ragyo."

A mischievous grin threatened to give away the game as he curled a finger against the thumb of his free hand. Resting one forearm upon the other, amusement curling the corners of his mouth at the annoyed twitching of Ragyo's right eyebrow, he flicked his finger without any witty remarks, releasing the Oni Dekopin point-blank against her stomach.

With a resounding *crack* of displaced air Ragyo was thrown away from Isshin, her flesh rippling around the pulse of spiritual energy. Spittle flying from disbelieving lips, teeth clenched as her patience rapidly dwindled, she arrested her momentum with one sharp *clack* of a heel, the sudden application of physical force releasing a miniature explosion of smoke. Breathing lightly as the faint bruises on her stomach vanished, leaving behind nothing but flawless skin, she stiffened when Isshin grumbled incoherently, "I know you're still upset but what did you expect me to do?"

Switching zanjutsu stances, Isshin rolled his shoulders, "Maybe helping the Original Life Fiber dulled your mind. Or perhaps you're simply tired. But you should *really* consider giving up trying to change my mind. It won't work. You'll have better luck making Ichigo wear Senketsu than convincing me to help the Original Life Fiber."

"That's *quite* the comparison..."



Ragyo darted forward with a frustrated snarl, the hem of her dress fluttering as the Needle Blades arced trails of light through the darkness. Undaunted when the sword in her left hand was parried - pushed away from Isshin's shoulder in a flurry of multihued sparks, she flicked the wrist of her other hand clockwise, dragging the Needle Blade against the hastily shifted tachi. Alongside an ear-wrenching screech of metal she thrust the blade around Isshin's guard, piercing his clavicle in a spray of blood.

The gurgle - a mixture of surprise and blood welling in his throat, tempered her frustration. Seeing Isshin's reaction made wasting her time almost worthwhile. Callously discarding the Needle Blade in her left hand, Life Fibers thread around the weapon before it could fall more than a few inches, she grabbed his throat, gently squeezing the blood-soaked flesh.

"I had hoped you would see reason, Isshin..."

Her arm was severed midsentence at the elbow, iron-like flesh momentarily resisting the hardened Life Fiber weapon before torrents of thick blood gushed from the wound. Cursing at Isshin's rudeness, twitching eyes tracking his retreat while flesh and clothing knitted seamlessly back together, Ragyo rushed back into his embrace with a snarl, spiritual energy trailing from the Needle Blades.

"Humanity's only purpose... the single reason they've been allowed to *thrive* on this miserable planet..."

They were little more than blurs, bursts of light illuminating her scowling visage with each countered or parried attack, as she attempted to beat common sense into Isshin's skull, a task made difficult by his inhuman stubbornness. Seething when she was thrown backwards after a particularly vicious confrontation, blood pouring from the rapidly regenerating wound on her chest, Ragyo stomped her heels against the air for purchase, flipping the Needle Blades into a reverse grip as Isshin attempted to take advantage of her perceived weakness.

"... is to become nourishment for Life Fibers!"

A sharp *crash* of metal upon metal echoed in her bones when she parried Isshin's attack, forcing the curving blade away from her throat. It appeared from the *depth* and *viciousness* of his assault Isshin had finally stopped holding back. And that simply would not *do*. Twisting sideways as Isshin avoided her counterattack, the appreciate tear on his shihakusho already stitching back together, she snapped an arm upwards, kaleidoscopic spiritual energy hovering above a polished fingernail.

"Whoa!"

Isshin didn't think. There wasn't enough *time* for that. Acting purely on instinct he gripped his sword with both hands and swung downwards.

"Getsuga Tenshou!"

The sleeves of his shihakusho *burned*, dissolving as the crescent-shaped spiritual energy sliced through Ragyo's technique, her widening eyes the last thing he saw before an explosion of light briefly transformed night into day. As he stood in the middle of the multifaceted conflagration, mouth pursed into a grimace and regenerating burns covering his forearms, Isshin grumbled. Perhaps using Getsuga Tenshou was over-excessive. He had hoped to keep the technique hidden up his sleeves, unleashing it only in an emergency. But then again, he hadn't expected Ragyo to fire something that strong at point-blank range.

"Getsuga Tenshou? Can't you think of *anything* original, Isshin?"

His heart nearly stopped at the seductive voice whispering into his ear. Ragyo's tranquil fury *readily* apparent as he danced around the Needle Blades, blocking the twin swords cleaving towards his neck. Instinctively leaning backwards when she twisted her arms clockwise, prepared for the pirouette and subsequent kick to the chin, Isshin grunted when her fist *angrily* brushed the side of his

face, the accompanying explosion of spiritual energy sending shockwaves rippling into the night.

"That was some fancy blade work," Isshin leapt away from Ragyo, rubbing his already healed jaw, "Were you trying to kill me?"

"Hardly..."

Ragyo smirked - frustration and annoyance lifting from her shoulders - as she permitted Isshin time to recover. Every moment he wasted complaining about trivial matters was another second Nui had to weave the finishing touches upon Shinra Koketsu, "I'll admit the thought *has* crossed my mind. After all, *you* betrayed me... betrayed the Original Life Fiber for the pigs in human clothing. Killing you would be the appropriate course of action."

She shook her head when Isshin's attention snapped toward the innumerable COVERS marching through the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier, "But I'm afraid your little *diversion* has failed. Despite your best efforts to draw my attention, the naked apes will perish down to the last man and woman. Even Satsuki's pathetic *avant-garde* won't survive more than a few minutes. And before you ask..."

Kaleidoscopic light tore through the landscape in nearly perfect synchronization with Ragyo's rebuttal, the twinkling explosions accentuating her sadistic smile, "Why on earth would you think an army of COVERS was the *only* trick left up my sleeves?"

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"Can you *please* stop fidgeting?"

"Sorry," Sanageyama stopped pacing back and forth, sewn eyes momentarily staring *through* the ceiling when another burst of spiritual pressure slammed against his awareness, "But Ragyo

Kiryuin and Isshin Kurosaki are throwing around some serious firepower. It's got my nerves on edge."

"Understandable. However, placing that reason aside for the moment, your pacing is still highly distracting."

Houka Inumuta ignored the tattered remains of the COVERS - and their deceased victims - littering the subbasement corridor, returning to the task at hand with renewed vigor. Sitting on the ground, attention focused on the commands scrolling down his laptop's screen, the rehabilitated professional hacker sarcastically added, "The last thing we need is your discomfort triggering Honnouji Academy's anti-intruder defenses, ruining Lady Satsuki's plan and simultaneously dooming humanity to a pain-filled and torturous existence as nothing more than nourishment for Life Fibers."

Yoruichi half-listened to Sanageyama's begrudging second apology, the pain from her shoulder and Isshin's overwhelming presence suppressed as she scanned the area for any changes in the ambient spiritual pressure. Yet her thoughts kept returning to Kisuke's frustrating smile before they left Karakura Town. After he handed her an outfit identical to the one she was wearing - and before she backhanded him squarely in the nose- he bragged how 'lucky' she was to be wearing one of his special Gigai before explaining the assemble contained enough Life Fibers from Riruka Dokugamine's raiment to trick Ragyo Kiryuin's barrier.

How the hell did the bastard *know* she planned on changing her mind?

"How much longer do you need?"

"Less than a minute," Inumuta was unfazed by Yoruichi's bluntness, years of dealing with Jakuzure's snarky comments and Gamagori's strict adherence to rules and regulations granting him a significant measure of social immunity.

Sanageyama cursed under his breath, drawing a disgruntled glare from Inumuta. Nudist Beach and Lady Satsuki anticipated thousands of COVERS standing in their way, not freaking clones of Xcution! Beating Yukio's imaginary creatures and that stupid fire-breathing dragon had strained his Blade Regalia to its limit. And fighting Esdeath during the Great Culture and Sports Festival had been the most difficult battle of his life. Sure, his Goku Uniform received a small boost in power thanks to Iori's handiwork but nobody expected Ragyo Kiryuin to pull *this* kind of sneak attack.

She was literally throwing the rulebook out the window!

"And... Honnouji Academy's state-of-the-art security systems are now offline."

Lacking any dramatic flourish aside from his deadpan announcement the doors leading into the Underground Server Farm opened, the klaxons muted by the virus spreading through the security systems. As the chilled atmosphere of the chamber spilled into the corridor, fogging his glasses while blowing away errant strands of Life Fibers, Inumuta shut his laptop before turning to Yoruichi, "My little 'surprise' is currently feeding junk data to the auditory and visual sensors. We should have more than enough time to disable the Life Fiber generator and leave before Ragyo Kiryuin or her associates realize what happened."

Yoruichi pushed off the wall, grabbing Sanageyama's shoulder before he stepped through the open doors, "Hold on a second, Sanageyama."

"What? Is it the goddamn Grand Couturier?"

"Something's not right," she ignored the teenager's well-deserved apprehension, the words emerging with some reluctance as she stepped through the opened gateway into the massive chamber. Someone like Ragyo Kiryuin, who patiently waited more than a decade without tipping her hand to take down Isshin, wouldn't leave a few COVERS guarding the generator for the Life Fiber Infinite

Woven Barrier. There had to be something else. *Years* of commanding the Onmitsukido sharpened her instincts. Every nerve was on edge, muscles tensing in preparation for *anything*, "It shouldn't have been this easy."

"You have a point," Sanageyama grumbled, relieved at *not* having to worry about the Grand Couturier pulling a sneak attack, "Those COVERS barely put up a fight. But holy crap this place is big!"

The sudden change in topic threw both Yoruichi and Inumuta through a loop, the latter rolling his eyes at the former Athletic Committee Chair's childish idiocy. Ignorant of the reaction he glanced to the left, sewn eyes focusing on the servers stretching nearly two hundred feet into the darkness, which was roughly twice the height of the room if the reverberations from his footsteps painted an accurate picture. Rubbing his hands together, goosebumps forming and breath visible from the biting cold, he grimaced at the barely audible ringing on the edge of his senses, "Why did Lady Satsuki even need all this fancy equipment?"

"The Underground Server Farm's original purpose was simulating battlefield scenarios between Honnouji Academy and other high schools. Determining the best courses of action for Lady Satsuki to achieve victory while factoring in external variables - such as Matoi and Ichigo's unexpected enrollment - required immense computational power."

Inumuta disregarded Sanageyama's subsequent response, filing away his grumbling for future reference, before deciding to finally acknowledge the eldritch elephant in the room, "I'm guessing *that's* the Life Fiber generator."

His sarcasm fell upon deaf ears as he stared at the structure suspended near the back of the Underground Server Farm, thick strands of Life Fibers leaving the generator before vanishing into the ceiling, "Interesting. It appears Ragyo Kiryuin modified Isshin Kurosaki's original design."

Yoruichi glowered at the unexpected development, "Will this change anything?"

"Not at all."

Inumuta turned away from the generator suspended precariously above the Underground Server Farm's central platform, the elevated terrace serving as the hub for Honnouji Academy's systems, "I simply need to connect into the central terminal, bypass the customized security protocols designed to prevent foreign espionage and shut down the automated defenses. All fairly straightforward. If all goes well, the generator should be disabled in a matter of -"

"Hold on, Inumuta!"

The tension was audible in Sanageyama's voice, drowning out Inumuta's explanation as he sprinted around Yoruichi. Sneakers skidding against the metal floor as he stomped to a halt halfway to the central platform, he clenched his fists, listening to the nuances and shifting pitch of the mechanical whining on the edges of his senses. Brow creased in frustration, mouth pursed into a grimace, he *slammed* a foot against the ground. Ears straining as the accompanying echo reverberated throughout the chamber, he stiffened at the almost perceptible sound of metal creaking beneath rubber-soled boots.

"We're not alone!"

He unsheathed his shinai in one fluid motion, the wooden weapon sporting several cracks and dents, before aggressively pointing to his right, "Yoruichi! Twenty-seven feet to the right of the generator! Behind the fifth server row from the front!"

"Shakkahō!"

An orb of crimson red energy coalesced above Yoruichi's palm before Sanageyama finished giving directions. As bulges of superheated flames licked her curled fingers, the sphere of spiritual

energy growing larger by the second, she ignored Inumuta's apprehensive warning about hitting the generator, acknowledging the prediction by shouting the technique's name at the top of her lungs. She already knew thanks to Isshin's verbal charades and Kisuke's explanation what would happen if the containment shield of a Life Fiber generator was damaged beyond repair.

Yet as the spiritual flames erupted from her palm, carving a path of destruction through the chamber, Yoruichi stiffened when the Hado spontaneously dissipated into crimson embers.

"What!?"

Her eyes widened, shock momentarily overwhelming rational thought. Damn it, she was an idiot! Cursing her stupidity as Kisuke's warning about Life Fibers returned to the forefront of her mind, she all but flinched when an overconfident voice echoed through the darkness.

"You *really* shouldn't use dangerous techniques around strange machinery."

Yuu Akiyama kept his pace purposely slow and methodical - purely to build suspense and increase tension - as he marched towards the front of the platform, an amiable smirk plastered across his face. Flicking the olive-green burglar's cap of his Lâche Raiment, one arm resting lazily upon his knee as he propped a boot on the metal railing preventing an ignoble end at the hand of Yoruichi Shihoin, the self-proclaimed coward tapped a finger against the air-filtration mask covering the lower half of his face, "Now *this* is a surprise..."

Despite *extensive* precautionary measures ranging from modifications to his Lâche Raiment based upon Houka Inumuta's acoustic cancelling software, subsonic and supersonic white noise generators and concealing his scent - under the assumption Sanageyama *might* infiltrate Honnouji Academy in Ragyo's absence - he was still detected. It was a black mark upon his nearly impeccable record, which is why he clapped enthusiastically at the



blind teenager, "Your Shingantsu is impressive, Uzu Sanageyama. It pinpointed my location before I had the opportunity to activate the anti-intruder defenses."

"You!"

His amiable smirk widened at Yoruichi Shihoin's animosity, her anger tempered by knowledge of their last encounter. Raising two fingers to his forehead as he saluted the woman who relentlessly hunted him halfway across Japan without resting, Yuu chuckled in a friendly manner, his eyes falling upon her missing arm, "And a fine evening to you, Yoruichi. You're looking well for someone who survived against Lady Ragyo."

Yoruichi's mouth twitched, "Addressing me so informally? I should beat some respect into you."

"But we both know you *won't* ."

Yuu paced alongside the railing, grinning beneath his air-filtration mask, "Because right now you're thinking - what has he planned? He almost took down Kinue Kinagase with barely any preparation. What could he accomplish after ten hours of uninterrupted work. And how did he know Houka Inumuta would sneak into Honnouji Academy to disable the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier while Lady Ragyo was preoccupied with other matters?"

The *smack* of leather slapping against itself- courtesy of his flame-retardant gloves - snapped his guests from their shock. Threading his fingers together, the unmistakable glint of wires immediately drawing Yoruichi's attention, Yuu chuckled, "Don't look surprised. After all, it's just common sense. Aside from Kisuke Urahara, he's... wait, I changed my mind."

Something overcame the member of Xcution as he stopped walking, his grin widening, "On second thought, there's no reason to explain anything to you. Why, you might ask? Because Hououmaru spent quite a while this morning emphasizing the importance of this

generator. She insisted the barrier was the only thing preventing Nudist Beach from -"

"Heh... pulling this trick again?"

Yoruichi caught the Life Fibers wires, the razor-sharp threads wrapping harmlessly around the Tailoring Glove attached to her hand. Rotating her arm with an angry grunt, snagging the wires underneath her elbow, she grinned maliciously before *pulling*, dragging Yuu forward with enough force that he *slammed* against the metal railing. Her muscles twitching seconds later when hundreds of volts traveled down the Life Fibers, little more than a tickle compared to Shunko, she tightened her hold on the taut wires, "Now, Sanageyama!"

"You're finished!"

The teenager sprinted around the shinigami his Blade Regalia transforming in a vivid burst of green and gold stars. Screw being careful! There wasn't any reason to hold back if Ragyo Kiryuin's psychopathic employees already knew they were coming. Leaping straight into the air, armored gauntlets slamming together as power coursed through his regalia, Sanageyama had only a moment for his Shingantsu to analyze Yuu's relaxed posture before dozens of Anti-Life Fiber needles pierced his Goku Uniform from every direction.

"What the fuck!?"

His Blade Regalia untransformed in a flash of muted crimson as he slammed into the ground, spittle flying from his mouth, "I-Impossible!"

"I guess I was lying about the anti-intruder defenses," Yuu released the razor-sharp wires twisted around Yoruichi's fingers while Sanageyama stumbled onto his feet, splotches of blood coating his Goku Uniform. The turrets throughout the room were designed to disable any clothing with active Life Fibers, modified over the last few hours to target anything other than *his* raiment. Of course, the

Anti-Life Fiber needles weren't powerful enough to work on Kamui. But he didn't need to worry about Ichigo Kurosaki or Ryuko. After all, only a heartless monster would alter their Kamui to bypass Ragyo Kiryuin's barrier.

But Satsuki Kiryuin's Elite Four were fair game.

"Don't fall for his tricks, Yoruichi."

Inumuta carefully slid his laptop underneath the nearest server, protecting the cherished possession from Yuu Akiyama's machinations. Aware that said member of Xcution was watching the entire time, which negated the purpose of hiding his laptop, he cleared his throat, "Anti-Life Fiber technology is only effective against Goku Uniforms and, if the circumstances are perfect, Kamui. *Your* abilities, on the other hand, are spiritually-based. There is no correlation between shinigami and Life Fibers, meaning none of Lady Satsuki's countermeasures will affect your performance. However, you've already experienced Yuu Akiyama's tactical brilliance first-hand, not to mention his efforts in Seattle and London."

His voice lowered into a tense whisper, "Which is why I'm quite certain you're about to walk into a trap."

"I know."

White lightning crackled between her clenched fingers, pulsing alongside her heartbeat before traveling towards her shoulder in vicious waves of spiritual energy. Her expression frozen in tranquil fury when the technique *vaporized* her sweater, leaving only a skintight sleeveless black shirt protecting her modesty, she released a single, steadying breath, "Sanageyama, stay back."

Her voice stopped Sanageyama's protests before the thought even crossed the teenager's mind, "Don't let anything happen to Inumuta. *I'll* deal with this coward."

"Got it! Kick his ass, Yoruichi!"

Yuu observed the dangerous aura surrounding Yoruichi Shihoin while Uzu Sanageyama retreated to a reasonably safe distance. Jumping onto the metal railing with a small skip in his step, balanced perfectly despite the precariousness of the situation and his opponent's ability cover hundreds of feet faster than the Grand Couturier, he clapped his hands together, the muffled sound echoing loudly, "Well, if you're bringing out something like *Shunko*, it's only fair to stop holding back myself."

Wires flashed between his gloved fingers as he gave a curt bow, "Now the, Yoruichi, let's fight in a fair, cowardly way."

Yoruichi *spat* at the mocking gesture, "Fair and cowardly, huh? You've got some nerve saying *that* after your little stunt in Osaka."

"... you're absolutely right. So, why don't we make things a bit more interesting?"

The razor-sharp threads vanished into his sleeves as he pointed downwards, smirking at Yoruichi's rampant paranoia, "You have my word that I won't move from this spot. Nothing is attached to my body or raiment. No wires or harnesses are hidden out of view, ready to pull me away at the last second. And the Grand Couturier is currently finishing Shinra Koketsu on the other side of Honnouji Academy, so you don't have to worry about any unexpected guests. So please, take your time. Breathe deeply and calm your nerves. You shouldn't waste this golden opportunity."

"Take him down, Yoruichi!"

Inumuta shouted at the top of his lungs when the when the significance of Yuu Akiyama's air-filtration mask became apparent, "He's filled the room with -"

He stumbled, darkness tainting the edges of his vision as the world suddenly grew out of focus. Collapsing to his knees, numbed fingers grasping the floor for support, Inumuta struggled to understand the

situation, "That air-filtration mask you're wearing... you filled this room with gas, didn't you?"

"You damn coward," Sanageyama snarled, slamming his shinai against the ground as his limbs grew increasingly unresponsive.

"Thank you, that's the highest praise for me."

Yuu whistled jauntily while leaping off the railing, hands folded within his raiment's pockets when Yoruichi staggered, Shunko flickering alongside her wavering consciousness, "I'll act as cowardly as possible - using underhanded tactics and disrespectful methods - to win, no matter the cost. The gas you're breathing? It's a powerful and fast-acting anesthetic that's odorless, colorless and tasteless. Designed specifically to counter *your* Shingantsu."

"But when dealing with someone connected to Kisuke Urahara, one cannot be too careful."

He propped a foot against the handrail as Sanageyama collapsed with a breathless curse, hands folded underneath his chin when Inumuta followed suit moments later. Domino-masked eyes locked upon Yoruichi when she remained standing, wobbling slightly but still possessing most of her faculties, Yuu raised two fingers while shaking his head, "Do you remember the COVERS you destroyed outside this room? I coated them with another anesthetic, one that evaporates when struck with enough physical force."

The woman's ability to conceal her disbelief was laudable. But then again, Yoruichi was intimately connected to Kisuke Urahara, "It's a little overkill, sure, but you're not an ordinary woman. Even with your reflexes numbed by the anesthetics, I'm almost afraid to leave this platform. After all, who knows what someone of your caliber, who fought Lady Ragyo, could accomplish with the slightest opening?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere. But I'll give you credit for one thing..."

Yoruichi laughed at the teenager, mocking his boastful taunt with a predatory smirk. Yuu Akiyama was a cowardly genius but she fought opponents both smarter *and* stronger. Dealing with countless traps and contingencies meant nothing when Kisuke did the exact same thing on a daily basis, "Filling this room with anesthetic gas was ingenious. But it won't stop me from kicking your ass."

"That's quite the interesting threat, Yoruichi. But I think you're forgetting one crucial detail."

She scowled at the mocking tone, "Oh?"

" *This* time I actually have hostages."

A sharp gasp escaped disbelieving lips when Yuu twisted his wrist, exposing the detonator clasped between his fingers, "You *do* remember! But allow me to explain - right before you arrived I planted high-grade plastic explosives around the entrance to this room. You might be fast enough to escape the blast radius but what about Satsuki Kiryuin's friends? Once my finger leaves this trigger, you'll have less than a quarter of a second to react, which in your condition isn't enough time to save *either* Inumuta or Sanageyama."

Her knuckles cracked at the ultimatum, teeth clenched as she resisted the desire to throw caution to the wind. Yuu Akiyama *wasn't* bluffing. The anesthetics clouding her thoughts *was* powerful. Sparing a quick glance over her shoulder at Inumuta and Sanageyama's prone forms, Yoruichi bit the inside of her cheek before grinning, "Heh... that's *cute* . I'm the Goddess of Flash, remember? Go ahead, press that trigger. I guarantee you'll be dead before your thumb stops moving."

"You know, you might have a point. I mean, you ran circles around the Grand Couturier," Yuu leaned over the railing, meeting her smile with one of his own, "Here, catch!"

The detonator left his fingers without fanfare, spinning through the darkness over the edge of the platform. As Yoruichi tracked the

blinking device, her attention momentarily drawn to the well-crafted yet *fake* detonator, Yuu reached around to the small of his back. Removing the Carnifex taped to the inside of his Lâche Raiment, the Anti-Life Fiber weapon something he borrowed from Tsumugu Kinagase, he rapidly depressed the trigger just as Yoruichi realized his admission of a bluff was actually a bluff.

With a sharp *bang* the first needle left the weapon faster than the speed of sound, piercing Yoruichi's right thigh in a spray of blood. Firing five more times, muscles straining from the recoil, he waited until the Carnifex was empty before continuing in the same pleasant tone.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies."

Yuu wasn't surprised by Yoruichi's ability to withstand six Anti-Life Fiber needles piercing the muscles and ligaments in her legs. Tossing the Carnifex aside, the weapon clattering to the ground before sliding away into the darkness, he smirked at her unyielding perseverance despite the copious amount of blood pooling beneath her feet, "But you're far too dangerous of an opponent to fight."

An awkward silence passed between them before Yoruichi fell forward, collapsing onto the floor with a dull *thud*, "Those needles are coated with a powerful tranquilizer. You should pass out in a few moments. But your stubbornness is concerning. You see, by this point I would usually leave. Yet if I don't stick around and watch you fall unconscious myself, I won't be able to inform Hououmaru everything's secure."

"... bastard..."

The look in Yoruichi Shihoin's eyes as she slipped into unconsciousness - the hate-filled *glare* promising endless pain and agony - was relieving. Such honesty implied the combination of anesthetics and muscle relaxant were too much, even for someone of her prowess. Yet he paused at the top of the stairs leading from the platform, one foot hovering inches above the first step. Humming

softly as he stepped backwards, domino-masked eyes carefully observing woman's breathing and posture, Yuu tapped a finger against his chin, mouth pursed into a contemplative frown.

"You know, I'm *still* not convinced you're unconscious."

A heavily threaded and spiked whip uncoiled from his raiment in a flash of multicolored light, "Even with your legs damaged beyond repair, one of your arms torn off by Lady Ragyo and rendered unconscious, I can't shake the feeling you're planning something. Perhaps you're waiting until I enter your range before leaping off the ground, hoping to take me out with a single punch."

He snapped the whip against the ground while cautiously approaching the edge of the platform, "So, if you don't mind, I'm going to use this torture whip to tear apart your body from the safety of this -"

The boot smashing into his ribs ended the taunt alongside an explosion of white lightning.

Yuu *gagged* from the physical force, abdominal muscles reinforced by his Lâche Raiment caving beneath the shinigami's attack, as he flew backwards, crashing through multiple rows of servers before slamming into the far wall of the Underground Server Farm. Recovering his bearings, vision slightly swimming, in time to witness Yoruichi close the distance, flashing across the room with tendrils of lightning coating her fist, he pushed himself out of the wall, barely avoiding the life-ending punch by the skin of his teeth. As the wall *shattered* in the wake of his retreat, warping around the woman's hand before exploding in an eruption of lightning and turning his graceful landing into a painful roll, he snapped his fingers, detonating the starch grenades left behind by his raiment.

"Tch... damn."

He grimaced when Yoruichi landed in a cat-like crouch, steam wafting from her mildly injured body. How the hell was she still



standing after several point-blank starch grenades to the face? They were strong enough to knock Esdeath down a few pegs. And the last time he checked - and he *did* - Yoruichi Shihoin wasn't a Life Fiber Hybrid. Yet she was perfectly fine despite the blood oozing down her face, burns covering her arms and needles still lodged in her legs.

"You are stubborn. You know that, Yoruichi?"

Sweat dripped down his cheek, following the contours of the air-filtration mask when the electricity enveloping the woman intensified. Yoruichi's last attack managed to crack three of his ribs, leaving him at a significant disadvantage even with the anesthetics and tranquilizer coursing through her bloodstream. But his nervousness instantly transformed into confidence when Yoruichi stumbled, limbs trembling and breath hitching.

"But it looks like Shunko was a one-shot deal."

He casually played off his previous nervousness, smirking at Yoruichi's defiance before adding in a more reserved tone, "At this point it should be straightforward - even for a coward such as myself - to finish you off."

"You think I'm going to let a punk like you take *me* down!? Don't make -"

Yuu swung his arm forward, sending the spiked whip cracking through the air before she finished speaking. As blood oozed onto the ground, dripping from the jagged gash on Yoruichi's stomach, he raised a finger, "That's one. The longest anyone's lasted against my torture whip without losing consciousness is eighteen lashes. And thanks to the anesthetic and needles in your legs, it's taking everything you have left to not pass out. Which means I can continue doing this!"

The whip *cracked* four more times, cutting deeply into Yoruichi's body. Now thoroughly convinced she wasted most of her remaining energy kicking him in the stomach, Yuu stopped on the cusp of a

sixth lash, domino-masked eyes narrowed. It looked like the woman was teetering on the verge of unconsciousness, the intensity of his combo mixed with the chemicals in her bloodstream finally taking their toll. Smirking at the rapidity in which the battle shifted in his favor, *chuckling* at how well his cowardice paid off, he coiled the whip around his arm before casually inquiring.

"How well do you know Ryuko?"

"... what?"

The inanity of the question tore Yoruichi from her semiconscious state, leading him to shrug his shoulders, "Oh, nothing. Now, I believe we were on number -"

A mechanical whine screeching with a deepening electronic backdrop interrupted his threatening taunt. Quickly turning around, missing the half-grin on Yoruichi's bloody lips, Yuu's eyes widened at the unexpected sight. Standing in front of the Underground Server Farm's central terminal, his fingers typing commands into the laptop connected directly into Honnouji

Academy's systems, was Houka Inumuta.

"From your uncharacteristic silence, I suppose you're curious how I'm still conscious."

Inumuta raised his left arm, exposing the off-colored patch concealed underneath his Probe Regalia's extended sleeves, "You can thank Kiskeya Urahara. Right before leaving Karakura Town he gave me something rather special. An invention with the singular purpose of filtering chemicals and toxins from the bloodstream."

Yuu found himself momentarily speechless by the admission. It was one thing preparing plans and contingencies against one's opponents - such as the trapdoor concealed on the other side of the chamber - but predicting his countermeasures down to the exact method of delivery? No wonder Ragyo hated Kiskeya Urahara with

unadulterated passion previously reserved for Isshin Kurosaki's life choices, "Kisuke Urahara, huh? This complicates things. But at least Hououmaru will be busy dealing with Nudist Beach. She's always had a knack for creating unusual punishments for those who fail Lady Ragyo. So, you faked unconscious until Yoruichi kicked me away from the generator?"

"On the contrary, I merely waited for a *golden opportunity* to fulfill our part in Lady Satsuki's plan."

The Life Fiber generator finished shutting down as Inumuta calmly flicked his glasses, "Of course, one errant twitch would have jeopardized everything. It's quite difficult to suppress basic bodily functions. But your focus on Yoruichi - and whether she was faking the effects of the anesthetic - made waiting until you were preoccupied easier than expected."

He shut his laptop with a soft *click*, ignoring the sudden increase in Ragyo Kiryuin's monstrous spiritual pressure, "But I'm sure acting cowardly to achieve your objectives is something you understand quite well."

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"Gottverdammt!"

The blood-soaked needles clattered onto the asphalt as Heinkel tore them from her shoulder. How could she be so goddamn stupid? Only a rank amateur would fall for such an obvious trap! Grunting more from frustration than actual pain as her regeneration kicked into overdrive, sealing the ragged wounds while flesh and ligaments shifted back together, her annoyance transformed into venomous hatred upon noticing the irreparable damage to her cassock.

*Verdammt* ! She was going to put another bullet... *nadel*... right between the blasphemous abomination's eyes!

Her glasses shimmered in the moonlight as she grasped the remnants of her cassock's right sleeve, removing the tattered fabric with a single, sharp *pull* . Unflinching when the scraps of clothing blew away, disappearing over the side of the highway into the darkened waters of Tokyo Bay, Heinkel clenched her fingers until her knuckles bled white. Did this abomination have any idea how *difficult* it was fitting into a cassock with her height and physical proportions? Exhaling sharply, goosebumps racing down her well-toned arm, she vented her anger through a string of colorful curses in her native tongue, earning a disapproving frown from the shinigami down the road.

How the hell did he know *German* ?

An Anti-Life Fiber pistol slid from her remaining sleeve as she spat onto the ground, removing the coppery taste of blood and pushing the thought from her mind, "Playing dead won't work."

Even with the creature's arms painfully contorted from their sockets, thick straps of black fabric pinning it face-first against the asphalt, she stopped walking just beyond its reach. She had experience dealing with monsters feigning defeat. She could see the monster's eyes flickering towards the katana to her left, as if testing its chances of escaping. Stepping forward once she was certain it could not break free, carefully avoiding the spiritual fabric bolted into the pavement, she scoffed when it looked upwards, confusion buried beneath the sociopathic apathy.

"Confused how I overcame your unholy ability, monster? Is your soulless mind even capable of such introspection?"

She was *lucky*, something unnecessary to mention given present company. It was only thanks to the revolutionary experiments which transformed her into Iscariot's most effective asset against enemies of God that her body resisted the Life Fibers implanted into her shoulder long enough to make the pragmatic decision. But emptying a full clip of high-velocity, armor-penetrating needles into the festering wound at point-blank range had still hurt like a *hündin* . If

the shinigami hadn't arrived when he did - surprising the foul creature during its moment of triumph - Heinkel had the unnerving suspicion she might not have walked away with her mind and sanity intact.

"My apologies, Miss Wolfe."

Tessai Tsukabishi brushed aside the Life Fiber creature's underwhelming reaction towards the Bakudo. Its struggles had ceased almost immediately upon falling to the ground, something warranting suspicion given the circumstances. Dusting some errant Life Fibers from his apron and shoulders, the messy result of tearing apart dozens of COVERS upon his retreat from the greater Tokyo Metropolitan Area, he adjusted his glasses, the frames slightly askew, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

Heinkel raised her arm as a concussive shockwave of spiritual energy burst against the highway. Staring at the incapacitated creature while the accompanying explosion of multicolored light overwhelmed *everything*, shining like the sun thousands of feet above the ground, she waited until the chaotic wind died down and darkness returned before inquiring, her voice a decibel lower than normal, "This spiritual technique is impressive. What did you call it again?"

"Bakudo."

" *Bakudo*," she emphasized the foreign word, pronouncing it perfectly despite her accent, while aiming the empty weapon between the creature's eyes. It was *mocking* her. Even bound by spiritual fabrics beyond humanity's capabilities, its weapon out of reach and raiment neutralized, the abomination took amusement from her guilt. Hissing at the sadistic glint visible in its eyes, snarling at the burning wreckage reflected off her glasses, the tension was shattered when the shinigami loudly cleared his throat.

"Please forgive any insolence, but your regenerative capabilities are extraordinary. If you don't mind, how did -"

"Sorry."

The half-hearted apology was muffled by her hand as she placed a cigarette between her lips. She was thankful for the change in subject, even though the question involved secrets the Vatican had killed *dozens* of humans to protect. As the taste of nicotine filled her lungs, she slowly lowered her arm, considering how to answer the question. Maxwell might have died an ignoble death due to Ragyo Kiryuin's heinous mind control, leaving her temporarily in command of Iscariot until the demon was destroyed, but there were some things she couldn't share, not even with shinigami, "I cannot divulge that information."

Smoke curled around her face as she pulled a fresh magazine for the Carnifex from her cassock, the ammunition spontaneously appearing in her waiting fingers. That reminded her. She needed to properly thank Kisuke Urahara once Ragyo Kiryuin's blackened soul was burning in the pits of Hell. Having *hundreds* of magazines without worrying about excessive weight slowing her movements was a *verdammt* miracle.

"But your assistance was helpful."

She replaced the empty magazine in a fraction of a second, briefly examining the weapon for problems, before firing all six needles into the bound abomination's head. Sneering at the Life Fibers shimmering within the new corpse, the thick blood oozing upon the asphalt lacking the consistency and coloration of anything created by god, she waited until smoke stopped rising from the Carnifex's barrel before breaking the awkward silence, "I didn't expect that demon to have these creatures at her beck and call."

"I appreciate your gratitude, Miss Wolfe, but you should withhold such pleasantries until the battle is concluded."

Heinkel frowned at the shinigami's candor demeanor, an eyebrow quirking above her glasses when the spiritual fabric pinning the corpse onto the road dissipated. She should be pleased with this conclusion. Yet her righteous fury at the abomination would not... *could not*... vanish. Even with the failed mimicry of humanity lying in a growing pool of its foul blood, eyes staring sightlessly towards Honnou City, she wanted to stomp its head into a bloody pulp. Only the sacred vows she recited upon swearing loyalty to Iscariot stayed her hand. She was someone who struck fear into the enemies of God and inspired reverence in His children. The *notion* of desecrating a corpse, even of one's enemies, shouldn't even cross her mind.

But this sociopathic creature deserved not a shred of sympathy. Not after it attacked her transportation without warning, puppeteering the wounded pilots into killing each other before leaving. All without losing its insufferable and arrogant smirk.

"We need to move," she reloaded the Carnifex before firing another three needles into the corpse, just for good measure, "How fast can you..."

The question died in her throat when a prickling sensation unrelated to the bitter cold or the slowly cooling corpse raced down her spine. Turning around, following the shinigami's line of sight, her lips immediately quirked into an amused smirk. The Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier, the blasphemous creation which had loomed above the highway since she emerged from the wreckage of her transportation, was dissolving. Patches of scintillating crimson were unraveling before her eyes, leaving both Honnou City and the academy perched upon the artificial island's summit vulnerable to attack.

And almost *instantaneously* Ragyo Kiryuin assaulted Isshin Kurosaki with renewed ferocity.

"Ragyo Kiryuin is rather upset."

She ignored the pressure upon her shoulders as pink-tinged explosions rippled above the Tokyo skyline, courtesy of Nonon Jakuzure's regalia. Aware of the COVERS floating towards their position, the suit-like creatures likely summoned by the corpse lying at her feet before its death, Heinkel reloaded her weapon with more *passion* than was necessary, "We should fall back before -"

"STAND CLEAR, MISS WOLFE!"

Tessai didn't hesitate when the presumed deceased creature's fingers twitched. Clenching his shoulder for support as the Life Fiber being sprang off the ground only to run into Heinkel's boot, false cartilage and bone audibly shattering under the force sending it flying several feet into the air, he waited until she leapt out of range before thrusting his palm forward, "Hado Number Eighty Eight - Hiryū Gekizoku Shinten -"

"COMIN' THROUGH!"

A supersonic *boom* interrupted the assistant manager's incantation when Ryuko appeared out of nowhere. Armored fingers gripping the Scissor Blade, trails of crimson energy exploding from Senketsu's thrusters, she spiraled tightly over Tessai's shoulder, reciprocating his surprise with a predatory grin as she *sliced* through the Life Fiber creature. This was almost too easy! It was nothing like the one Ichigo destroyed before they separated back in Tokyo! Smirking at the memory of that annoying bastard's shocked expression when Ichigo destroyed its stupid-looking raiment, Ryuko briefly locked eyes with Heinkel before making a ninety degree turn and *rocketing* towards Honnouji Academy.

"Heh..."

Heinkel shook her head, smirking at Ryuko's impeccable timing. But as the foul creature spontaneously exploded, raining strands of burning Life Fibers onto the highway, she ignored the flames licking her body. Something *big* was coming. She could *feel* it. Her straw-blond hair rustling gently as the burning threads slowly cooled,



turning into embers and ash which scattered into the darkness, she clenched her empty hand into a fist when the ground suddenly *shook*.

"You creatures don't know when to give up, do you?"

An identical Anti-Life Fiber pistol appeared in her right hand as she turned around, eyebrows quirked at the *massive* COVERS rising from the darkened waters. Craning her head back as the creature loomed higher and higher, eventually casting the highway in perpetual darkness when the moon vanished behind its suit-like form, she was only partially aware of Tessai uncharacteristically cursing under his breath.

"Tch..."

She quickly reloaded the armor-penetrating weapons when dozens of slits opened across the COVERS, spheres of Life Fibers swiveling until they focused downwards with animalistic intensity. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of innocent humans had been devoured by this abomination. Yet rescuing them was impossible. They were likely already dead, their bodies drained of energy and blood by the COVERS. But still, this creature needed to be destroyed. And she would accomplish that feat no matter what it took.

"Hmm... it's larger than a Gillian."

The way the shinigami commented on the situation instantly dispelled what little tension existed. Crushing her cigarette beneath a boot as the COVERS *loomed* more than moved, one misshapen fist rising above the highway, Heinkel spat onto the ground before chuckling. Compared to the monster reduced to naught but scraps of Life Fibers by Ryuko... compared to *Alucard*... defeating this creature was hardly going to be a challenge.

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"You *dare* use something so annoying!?"

The Needle Blade ricocheted off Isshin's sword, multicolored sparks dancing across the edges of her vision. Her second strike was blocked when the man *moved*, forcing the other blade away from his neck. Yet Ragyo didn't *care* about his reciprocity. She pushed forward without abandon, pursuing the man through the skies above Honnou City. Every exchange of their blades - the explosions of spiritual energy and bursts of rainbow light - only worsened her growing ire. How *dare* Isshin pull such an egregious stunt! Did he think she was another one of his pathetic colleagues, those naked apes begging for scraps of power?

His impudent behavior *demand*ed compensation!

"I *expected* such an immature technique from a child!"

She allowed Isshin's hardened Life Fiber weapon to scrape against her cheek, leaving a jagged wound blemishing her features she momentarily prevented her Life Fibers from stitching shut. Taking advantage of his surprise, using Isshin's bewilderment towards something he was *all but certain* she was incapable of doing, she pivoted gracefully with a soft *clack*, fingers slipping against the grooved handles of the Needle Blades when she *smashed* her foot into his ribs, "Have you no shame!?"

"What can I say?"

Isshin brushed aside the phenomenal strength behind Ragyo's kick, grunting in minor discomfort as he slipped away before she attacked again. Three... no, four... of his ribs were nearly broken, something any lesser man would find difficult to overcome while dealing with an opponent of Ragyo's caliber. But *he* was perfectly fine. With an exaggerated pivot - mimicking the constant *clacking* of her heels - he shifted around Ragyo's rebuttal attack, avoiding the Needle Blades aiming for his chest. Only slightly bothered by the strands of silver hair falling in front of his eyes, the severed Life Fibers sending a mild shiver down his spine, he immediately countered with a straight

thrust that sent Ragyo reeling, blood spraying from the wound across her stomach.

"You're a woman with high standards. And I'm positive you'll beat me senseless if I tried using anything from Nudist Beach. So, I decided to think outside the box."

Thin, yet substantial, cuts appeared upon his shihakusho when Ragyo took his comment as an offense. Locked into the deadly embrace, his strength faltering against the relentless fury of an insulted woman, he nevertheless broke the tension with a bit of levity, "But if it makes you feel any better, Ichigo had the same reaction when I used that move on him."

Ragyo twitched at the inane statement, the brief lapse in concentration allowing Isshin enough time to retreat. Why on earth did he have to say something so *merde* absurd!? She knew he was mocking her, purposely wearing down her patience with childish antics. Yet as she broke away from the man, skidding upon the air before arresting her momentum with a soft *clack*, she found herself simply not caring. The Original Life Fiber's voice, the whispers urging her to destroy Isshin for his betrayal, fell upon deaf ears. At the moment, fighting against the man she'd ever loved thousands of feet above the ground, the only thought filtering through her mind was *beating* manners into Isshin's thick skull.

After all, there was *some* time until dearest Nui finished Shinra Koketsu.

With some reluctance - just enough to garner Isshin's suspicion - she released the Needle Blades, allowing the twin swords to fall away from her hands. In the moment that immediately followed, while Isshin was preoccupied with determining her motives, she *impaled* her left hand upon his blade. Twisting her wrist, pulling the man into a lover's embrace while gripping his weapon with bloody fingers, she breathed deeply, chuckling at the realization playing across his adorning features.

"That may be true, Isshin..."

The sound of shattering cartilage - flesh rippling around her other fist as it smashed into his face - was downright *cathartic* . And as Isshin recovered, his Life Fibers weaving damaged flesh back into place, she punched him again, spittle flying from his mouth, "But I'm still insulted you would even *consider* using such an asinine move against me!"

Expressing her disappointment with Isshin's *many* mistakes in life, conveying her longstanding frustration concerning his reluctance in reciprocating her feelings, was something long overdue. Yet as her fist smashed into his cheek for a third, fourth and fifth time, Ragyo felt no satisfaction. The man's blood was coating her fingers, the bruises on his face visible, but the pleasure previously thrumming through her Life Fibers had abated. Something wasn't right. Despite everything - betraying Original Life Fiber, assisting the naked apes and training Satsuki to use Junketsu - Isshin should be putting up more of a fight.

It was almost as if...

"Are you *stalling* ?"

The question carried a level of annoyance as she callously removed her impaled hand from Isshin's weapon, flesh sliding off the razor-sharp metal with a sickening *squelch* . She should have seen this coming. Isshin's presence was, after all, nothing more than an obvious - and disheartening diversion. Something to occupy her attention while Satsuki and the naked apes stripped themselves bare trying to stop the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet.

"What exactly are you planning, Isshin?"

The accusation rolled off her tongue, annoyance tainting every syllable as she narrowed her eyes, "Are you waiting for Kisuke Urahara? Or perhaps you're stalling until Satsuki somehow regains the ability to ascend Junketsu into her fashion week apparel?"

Isshin shrugged his shoulders, "Does it really matter why I was stalling?"

"No, I suppose not," Ragyo conceded with a small, yet appreciable, sigh. It was *always* a hassle dealing with Isshin's childish mannerisms, which had only worn upon her patience since his untimely arrival. Smirking at his subdued reaction, or rather lack thereof, towards the admission, she tucked a strand of silver hair back into place, "But it doesn't really matter. I'm afraid I simply cannot allow you to interfere with the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. It's nothing *personal*, Isshin. Although you'll nevertheless continuing trying to stop me. So, if you don't mind, I'm going to -"

The sentence devolved into a strangled gasp when the barrier surrounding Honnou City *disintegrated* .

" *Quelle ?*"

Her amusement vanished as the high-velocity Life Fibers dissipated into nothingness, leaving Shinra Koketsu vulnerable. Confusion mingled with primal fury as she *stared* downwards at Honnouji Academy, lips quivering in disbelief. She had anticipated Kisuke Urahara inventing *something* - perhaps a method of locally short-circuiting the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier. But this? *This* was unexpected! Unfathomable! How was this possible!? The naked apes didn't possess the means of penetrating the barrier without getting torn apart. And the pigs in human clothing didn't have the *power* to breach Hououmaru's defenses.

"Isshin..."

The single word hung in the darkness, drawn out over several seconds. Why was Isshin being so *merde* difficult!? Her lips curled furiously at the man's blasé reaction, the triumph upon his face obnoxiously disgusting. Fingers twitching around the Needle Blades as she forcibly stopped herself from attacking the man, scarcely aware of the massive COVERS emerging from Tokyo Bay in

response to the pigs in human clothing, she *seethed* when a streak of familiar crimson light caught her attention.

Ryuko!?

It took the blink of an eye - the amount of time required for her daughter to pass over Honnou City's No-Star neighborhoods - to determine *where* Ryuko was heading. And in the next fraction of a second she turned away from Isshin, *heel* clacking as she almost instantaneously cut the distance to her daughter by a third. It was painfully obvious Ryuko's objective was the Sewing Club. Glancing over her shoulder, mouth pursed into a snarl, when Isshin gave pursuit, chasing her through the darkness, she waited until the man was several meters away before abruptly twisting around, spiritual energy coalescing above a manicured fingernail.

"Lumière Divine."

The explosion of multicolored incandescence slammed into Isshin's instinctively risen guard. Faceted beams of light curled around his sword, burning away folds of his shihakusho as her lips curled upwards. It was a shame the divine technique, born from her intimate connection with the Original Life Fiber, couldn't kill Isshin. Horribly maim during the scant seconds required for his wounds to regenerate? Yes, but that wasn't the *point*. She had no intention of physically injuring the man. Even now, her patience and temper pushed to their limits by his contemptible actions, she found the notion of wounding Isshin completely reprehensible.

A chuckle escaped her lips when Isshin sliced through the technique, turning the divine energy into nothing more than dissipating shards of light. The next moment she punched him in the stomach, taking advantage of his preoccupation to relieve most of her remaining stress. Her mouth quirking into a smirk when Isshin crashed into the bay, sending a column of water rising upwards into the sky, she looked over her shoulder at the crimson passing over the Two-Star dormitories before taking *another* step.

"What the -"

Her fingers clasped around Ryuko's throat, turning the rest of the question into a strangled gasp, "Oh dear."

She *slammed* Ryuko against Honnouji Academy's outer walls before her daughter realized what happened, the sickening impact forcing Senketsu out of his flight configuration. As the concrete and metal façade *flexed*, first cracking and then *shattering* in an expanding wave of destruction, Ragyo sighed when Ryuko punched her shoulder, wasting Senketsu's standard strength on the ineffective attack, "Children these days simply have no respect for their elders. What make you think you could sneak past your own mother?"

Ryuko coughed when the manicured fingers around her throat tightened, "You ain't... my damn... mom!"

"Your stubbornness is commendable," Ragyo caressed the fabric beneath her fingers, marveling at Senketsu's exquisite quality despite its origin, "But I blame Souichiro for your lack of manners. A daughter *should not* address her mother that way."

The Needle Blade in her other hand snapped upwards, intercepting the hardened Life Fiber weapon inches from her neck in a screech of metal upon metal. As her arm quivered, muscles unyielding against Ichigo's strength, she stiffened when a flash of blue light and twinkling stars enveloped the youth. His synchronization with Mugetsu was astonishing, almost enough to pull her attention away from Ryuko. The stubbornly curious Kamui had transformed into her battle configuration without a single word on his part, bypassing the unnecessary delays that had plagued Satsuki time and time again.

"Getsuga..."

However, her interest in Ichigo's phenomenal progress was constrained by reality. While intriguing, curiosity about such things came second to the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. And despite the technique's limited range, there existed a small - yet highly

consequential - chance the backlash from allowing Ichigo to unleash a Getsuga Tenshou could affect the satellite transmitter in Honnouji Academy's courtyard. Her eyes closed, a smirk pulling at the corners of her mouth, when Isshin's son disappeared in a flash of speed, moving at speeds requiring a *modicum* of her attention.

It was shameful she didn't have enough time to *enthusiastically* test Ichigo's newfound abilities.

"... Tenshou!"

She waited until Ichigo stepped within range, the angle of his approach calculated to prevent Ryuko from getting caught in his Getsuga Tenshou. Half-lidded eyes analyzing the energy wrapped around Tournesol, Ragyo smirked before countering the technique with the minimal required effort. The stubborn teenager was immediately *stopped* when his weapon struck the Needle Blade, hands shaking from the sudden halting of his momentum. But far more importantly - and the cause of the breathless sigh escaping slightly parted lips - deflecting the collected energy towards the sky.

"You *really* should be more careful, Ichigo."

A sharp intake of air accompanied the cold laughter, sadistic amusement playing out across her features at Ichigo's bewilderment. Releasing Ryuko from her loving embrace as Ichigo recovered from his shock, confusion transforming into a mixture of annoyed stubbornness and embarrassment, she allowed her daughter a moment's respite before *smashing* the handle of the Needle Blade into her stomach.

"FUCK!"

The obscenity left Ryuko's gasping lips as a strangled cough forced its way from her lungs. What the hell!? She hadn't even seen her bitch of a mom move! Spitfire flew from her mouth as she bent around the weapon, taut muscles quivering at the sensation of having several of her organs rearranged without her permission.



Only subtly aware of Senketsu's voice in the back of her mind, attention focused on the cruel laughter coming from Ragyo, Ryuko *screamed* when the concussive force behind the seemingly gentle strike sent her crashing through the roof of a Two-Star apartment hundreds of feet away.

"Ryuko!"

Ichigo's concern towards her daughter was touching, almost commendable, as she effortlessly blocked, parried and deflected every one of his attacks. Her arm blurred from the intense speed, lips curled into an amused mockery of a smirk at the amount of effort Ichigo was putting into ending her life. There was no question. Isshin's son was considerably stronger than during the Great Culture and Sports Festival. Perhaps enough to overwhelm dearest Nui. But it was nowhere near *her* level. Someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber.

"Well, you've certainly grown faster," Ragyo made no effort to chase Ichigo when he retreated, "But your reflexes are somewhat lacking. Is something bothering you, Ichigo?"

"Shut up."

She could tell Ichigo had a lot on his mind. That much was obvious. The tightening of his jaw, the indignation playing across his features while Mugetsu whispered warnings, was proof the youth was determined to continue this charade of a battle, which was perfectly acceptable. The longer Ichigo fought her using every tactic imaginable - and some Satsuki undoubtedly shared during their time together in Karakura Town - the probability he interfered with the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet before Nui finished Shinra Koketsu lessened. Her only lament, the *single* reason she further raised Ichigo's unfounded suspicions, was knowing he would never see the beauty of her plans. *Understand* the glory of sacrificing humanity - the pigs in human clothing experiencing pale facsimiles of existence - to Life Fibers.

And the impertinent man silhouetted against the full moon.

But why ruin the surprise?

"ISSHIN FLYING DROPKICK!"

Ichigo's eyes widened at the familiar announce before a pair of sandals slammed into the back of his head. Instincts honed over years of surprise attacks, including every battle since he obtained shinigami powers from Rukia, faltered when he tumbled forward, bouncing past an amused Ragyo before crashing into Honnouji Academy. Was his old man seriously doing this *now* of all times!? His eyebrow twitched when Mugetsu, ignorant of everything prior to her awakening, curiously wondered why his dad attacked them. Pulling himself free, pieces of concrete lodged in his hair, Ichigo expressed his confusion in the most effective way possible.

"What the hell was that for!?"

"Why are you wasting time fighting Ragyo?"

Ichigo shamefully glanced downwards at the armor-piercing question. His old man was right. Why was he wasting time fighting Ragyo Kiryuin? He should have retreated once Ryuko was safe. But now that he had a moment to think, the strangeness of the situation dawned upon him. He could sense the woman's spiritual pressure. But something about its consistency didn't feel right. It was too constrained... too *smooth* and tranquil... for something fighting his old man. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek, absorbing into the Life Fibers pressed tightly against the underside of his chin.

"You're right. Sorry about that."

He pushed the train of thought to the back of his mind, momentarily ignoring Mugetsu's concern about his blood pressure. Even after all this time - dealing with Satsuki and her Elite Four, awakening Mugetsu and encountering Nui - Life Fibers *still* didn't make any damn sense. Scoffing derisively, turning away from the old goat and

Ragyo with his mouth twisted into a scowl, Ichigo grabbed Tournesol from its perch in the wall, "Just promise me one thing, all right?"

Mugetsu transformed into Gufū without a single word, monochromatic armor shifting and warping alongside a flash of sapphire light. As the Kamui's twin jets ignited, sending streams of energy blasting towards the ground, he hesitated before snapping, "Don't fall for any stupid tricks, got it? Satsuki told me what happened with Hououmaru. I don't want to save your ass because you didn't see something coming from a mile away!"

A constrained groan rumbled in Isshin's throat at Ichigo's flagrant lack of respect. Yet he stopped himself from saying anything. Chastising his wayward son could wait until after they stopped the Original Life Fiber. Unbothered by the awkward silence when Ichigo rocketed upwards, twisting around Honnouji Academy's fortifications, he took advantage of the brief lull to brush dust from his shihakusho.

"You can drop the act."

His expression didn't waver when Ragyo smiled, malevolence visible beneath the contemptuous amusement, "I know you're still angry."

" *Bien sûr, je suis furieux...* "

Ragyo laughed, the mirthless sound conveying the fullness of her dissatisfaction. How long had Isshin played the role of a bumbling man? Someone pretending to be human? She could not deny his acting was superb. Yet she remained *frustrated* with many of his decisions - purposeful or otherwise. It had been... disheartening... when she learned through Hououmaru that he condensed the last twenty years into an absurd and pathetic story. Relegating their relationship into nothing more than plutonic friendship.

Her jaw *clenched* at the ludicrous notion.

"Simply not to the point of blinding rage."

She folded her arms underneath her bosom when something familiar obtained her attention. It was faint - purposeful so - but sensing *that* meant everything was falling into place, with or without Isshin's cooperation. Closing her eyes, a feeling of warmth rushing through her Life Fibers, she sighed, traces of anger clinging onto every word, "While losing the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier was *tragique* - and I'm certain Satsuki is planning something as we speak - I'm not terribly concerned. Nothing in life is infallible. Nor am I bothered with Mr. Akiyama's failure. No, I'm disappointed with *you*, Isshin. Because whether you like it or not, Ichigo made a valid point."

A muffled *whump* shook the landscape when Ichigo crashed through Honnouji Academy's walls. Only barely paying attention to the youth, focused instead on Isshin's surprise, Ragyo continued, "After falling for Hououmaru's machinations..."

Her eyes swiveled towards the darkened figure relentlessly chasing Isshin's son, "... why on earth do you keep presuming I have *nothing* left up my sleeves?"

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### **Kamui Tales #35 - The Temporary Transfer Student**

*This is a continuation (of sorts) of the alternate universe introduced in Kamui Tales #30 - The Temporary Guest.*

"Finally! I've been looking everywhere for you, Ichigo."

Renji halfheartedly waved, mental and physical exhaustion preventing anything more enthusiastic, as he walked into the classroom, the box lunch purchased that morning from Kisuke's shop tucked underneath his arm. Collapsing into a chair, groaning as he leaned backwards, he rubbed his sore neck, "Damn it, Kisuke's working me like a dog. Between waiting around for Aizen's next

move and helping Ururu move boxes of heavy merchandise, I'm exhausted! I swear, the bastard's purposely torturing me."

It took a few seconds - just long enough to ponder whether Kisuke poisoned the rice in his lunch with a powerful laxative - before he realized the gloomy atmosphere. A deathly pallor enveloped the classroom, muting the background noise of students going to lunch and actually dimming the late morning sun shining through the open windows. Turning to Ichigo, who was scowling more intensely than usual, before glancing at Uryu, who seemed morbidly disturbed by something important, Renji pondered the situation through the one method proven to work.

"Did someone die?"

His tattooed eyebrows twitched when Ichigo turned away, grumbling something under his breath. Oh, it was like *that*, was it? He grabbed the substitute shinigami's shirt, clenching the fabric hard enough to pull the teenager from his seat. Leaning forward, face nearly pressed against Ichigo's, he seethed, "Hey! I heard that! What the hell do you mean it's none of my damn business!?"

"You want me to say it again!?"

Ichigo was pulled from his depressed funk - something Tatsuki coined during homeroom - by the sheer stupidity of the question. Didn't the bastard know how dangerous it was showing his face around Karakura High School for the next few weeks? He *had* to know! Nobody could be this stupid! Or did hat-and-clogs not tell him anything? Removing Renji's hand with a well-placed elbow to the stomach, he decided to repeat the question, "Why are you here, Renji?"

For a moment Renji considered punching Ichigo - both to recover his pride *and* because the guy's mood was seriously starting to piss him off. But he stopped, backing down when his stomach growled. Returning to his lunch, mentally hoping Kisuke didn't screw with his food after what happened *last* time, he removed the plastic cover,

"I'm here because the Seireitei is still waiting for Aizen's next move. So, until the bastard decides to do *something*, I'm just another average high school student."

"Wait, you don't know?"

Renji froze at Uryu's question, the clump of rice stopping inches from his mouth, "Huh? What don't I know?"

"Nui Harime," Ichigo glanced towards the windows, muttering the name with the same level of exhaustion reserved for Kenpachi, "It seems my dad promised Ragyo Kiryuin she could stay in our guest room for a couple of weeks while she's off doing something in Europe."

The lieutenant paused at the name, missing the slight breeze as another presence entered the room through the open window. Nui Harime? He knew a lot of people in the Soul Society with names ranging from normal to the absurd. But nothing quite on the level as Nui. Ignoring the growing sense of apprehension as he returned to his lunch, failing to realize Ichigo's attention was focused to his left, the rice *just* touched his tongue when it *hit* him like a ton of bricks.

"That *psychopath* !?"

The ball of rice fell from his mouth, rolling onto his shirt before hitting the floor with a wet *thump* . He still remembered every vivid detail of that night. Finding Rukia and dealing with the human who took her shinigami powers should have been simple. And for a brief moment - after getting his ass thoroughly kicked by Ichigo due to a combination of arrogance and cockiness - he had assumed things were finished. Ichigo was lying on the ground in a pool of his own blood, stripped of Rukia's powers by Captain Kuchiki and slowly dying from the Senka. While Ichigo's stubborn refusal to give up - that he was *still alive* - defied all common sense, he knew things were over. At the time, he assumed there was no way anyone could survive such grievous wounds outside of the Fourth Division.

But just as he opened the Senkaimon - under Captain Kuchiki's orders - *she* appeared.

What happened was still a blur of colors and sounds, mostly because Nui Harime kicked him in the face. According to Rukia, the girl's surprising attack sent him crashing through the nearby brick wall, shattering several bones requiring an extended visit to the Fourth Division. She had then *flipped* - that was the only word Rukia claimed could describe Nui Harime's movements - around Captain Kuchiki's zanpakuto, leaving only after commenting about the archaic fashion choice of wearing a silk scarf over a white haori.

The girl was insane.

Renji leapt to his feet, the chair *screeching* against the linoleum floor tiles, and nervously glanced around the almost empty classroom, "She's not mad at *me*, is she?"

"Nui was kind of upset after Byakuya almost killed me. She was planning to come to the Soul Society. Luckily, my old man took her out of town for some 'Revocs-associated' clothing conference or something."

Ichigo air-quoted the words before looking at his own lunch. Poking the sandwich, scowling at its eerily perfect shape and the expensive-looking desert wrapped in plastic, he shrugged off Renji's apprehension, "But I'm sure she's over it. I mean, there's no way she would hold a grudge this long."

"Gosh! Now isn't this a sight for sore eyes!"

Hours from that moment and knowing Kisuke's paranoia prevented anyone from sneaking into his shop, Renji would admit - to himself - that perhaps his scream at seeing Nui Harime sitting to his right was a little unmanly. Reflexively flinching away from the nascent Grand Couturier, tumbling head over heels onto the floor when his foot got stuck in the legs of the desk, the mortified shinigami carefully weighed his options. Escape was always an option. Not only was he

faster than three months ago, he was also several times stronger. Even if Nui Harime dodged all of Captain Kuchiki's attacks when his power was restricted in the World of the Living, there was no way she was as strong as a captain.

... right?

Nui smiled when she noticed the man glancing towards the window. Was he trying to escape? He wouldn't be the first. And Lady Ragyo gave her first-hand experience on successfully preventing humans from escaping through a variety of routes - including windows, doors, hatches in the floor and ventilation shafts. But was this guy actually human? She didn't think pigs in human clothing could survive getting kicked through a brick wall without suffering irreparable damage. Well, there was only one way to find out! Her drill-like pigtailed bounced cutely as she leaned forward, grinning at Renji's apprehension, "Hmm... nope, that won't work, you know."

"Don't kill Renji."

"Gee, that's an interesting thing to say, Ichigo."

Her head bobbed back and forth, which unnerved the Quincy trying to focus on his lunch. She couldn't understand why Ichigo was friends with Uryu. The guy was a wet blanket with no sense of humor. Something that reminded her of Lady Satsuki. But *Ichigo* had Satsuki's perpetual scowl, which was honestly impressive. Expressing her disappointment with Ichigo ruining her fun, she closed her eyes before giggling, "But that's rude! I promised the old goat I would stay on my best behavior. And *maman* ordered me to listen to the old goat's every word. So, if you don't want me humiliating the guy who beat you senseless, that's all on you! I certainly don't hold a grudge against the person who nearly killed my favorite cousin."

"Stop call me that," Ichigo scowled, *annoyed* by Nui's insistence on saying they're related.



"For the record, it was *Captain Kuchiki* who almost killed Ichigo. Not me," Renji emphasized his captain's name, making sure Nui Harime heard every syllable. Was it dishonorable to place his captain in danger? Yes. It went against everything he learned since graduating from Shin'ō Academy. But at the moment he didn't care about archaic traditions. Being on Nui Harime's bad side - scratch that, *issing off* a psychopath worse than Captain Kurotsuchi - was the worst possible outcome, "But if it helps, Ichigo kicked my ass when he invaded the Soul Society. That should make everything even, right?"

And he was almost certain Nui Harime couldn't get to the Soul Society.

"Hmm... nope! But it's awfully cute you think that makes everything better."

Nui propped her chin upon a manicured hand, leaning forward slowly enough that the desk creaked, "Gee, you really think I'm still angry you nearly killed my favorite cousin? Holding grudges is passé, you know! Still, you should be *really* careful. Someone like you could wind up disappearing without a trace."

The subtle dark tone in her voice, the way her eyes narrowed slightly despite the widening smile, set off every warning bell in Renji's mind, "Uh... she's kidding, right Ichigo?"

"I don't know," Ichigo scoffed at Nui, who returned his scowl with a friendly smile, "But if I were you, Renji, I wouldn't leave Kisuke's shop alone at night."

# Coat of Many Colors

I had a lot of inspiration when writing this chapter. Several events have been in the works for years, *since the first drafts of the story, which made it easier to get characterization correct. Also, I recently discovered the light novel "Cannot Fear Your Own World," involving events in the time period between Yhwach's defeat and the final chapter of Bleach. And let me just say... it was interesting. I won't spoil anything, but the information in the light novel really helps shed some light on certain character's actions.*

*So, enjoy the chapter!*

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## Chapter 60 - Coat of Many Colors

"So, this is the place?"

The question lingered as Kinue Kinagase stepped around the tattered remains of a COVERS, heels disturbing the dying Life Fibers left in Sosuke Aizen's wake. With Danketsu's silence on the matter concerning, a stark departure from her Kamui's normal mood, she pressed a hand against the wall, frowning at the electric-like sensation immediately crawling down her arm. Pulling away, fingers clenching and relaxing several times, Kinue stared at the doors looming overhead, the intricate pattern carved on the metal surface standing out in the darkness.

Something lay beyond the closed threshold, an otherworldly power that could only be the Original Life Fiber. She could *feel* it.

It wasn't a comfortable sensation.

"What can we expect?"

Her tone possessed a sharp edge as she turned towards the former captain standing in front of the entrance, "Should we expect an army of COVERS guarding the Original Life Fiber?"

"I don't know."

The admission left a bitter taste in Aizen's mouth. It was one thing possessing minimal information on a subject. A lack of knowledge could be rectified by collecting data and running experiments. But the creature eloquently described by Kinue Kinagase - and worshipped as a *god* by Ragyo Kiryuin - was esoteric in nature. Even after researching the sample of Life Fibers appropriated from its body, his knowledge on the Original Life Fiber lacked finer detail. A problem compounded by his inability to return to the Kiryuin Manor. But that did not mean he was blind. On the contrary, Kisuke Urahara's progress involving the manipulation of Life Fibers merely filled the gaps in his knowledge.

He knew before Kisuke, for example, that Ragyo Kiryuin and Isshin Kurosaki were mentally connected to the creature. He was also aware, thanks to the former's behavior in Karakura town, that the Original Life Fiber harbored an unsettling hatred for the Hogenyoku.

And during the decades following the creation of his original Hogenyoku, concealing the truth of his actions from Gin and Kaname through careful misdirection and other, less important experiments on Hollowfication, he observed the Original Life Fiber's activity. Analyzing how it grew increasingly aware every sacrificial cycle. He watched the *thing* evolve its defenses after his intrusion. He indirectly tracked the rate the creature recovered its strength by precisely measuring ambient spiritual energy, which dwindled every year as the countryside turned into a desolate wasteland, lacking the ability and spiritual density to support life.

"However, the information Kisuke collected on Ragyo Kiryuin's weave preferences has proven invaluable. Increasing our chances of success beyond my original predictions."

Seras Victoria scratched her forehead in confusion, the Harkonnen shifting awkwardly upon her back, "Weave preferences?"

"When Ragyo Kiryuin reweave the Life Fiber wards, she subconsciously based them upon the same pattern," he lightly pressed a hand against the doors, half-smirking at the matriarch's ingenuity and creativity. Weaving a ward into the conductive metal framing was impressive, something he hadn't considered possible until Kisuke Urahara's incursion. It was deserving of recognition. If anyone other than himself - or Ragyo Kiryuin - attempted breaching the perimeter, they would have been devoured. Painfully and in excruciating agony as their body and soul were torn apart by the constituent Life Fibers.

"Knowing that..."

The Hogenyoku pulsed beneath his jacket, drawing Kinue Kinagase and Danketsu's attention when the doors opened with a gentle push, "By isolating the *Banshi* from the rest of the Life Fibers in the ward, disrupting Ragyo Kiryuin's work was rather straightforward."

Seras stiffened when vermillion light filtered through the slowly opening doors, allowing her to see *what* laid beyond, "Is that the -"

"Yes. That's the Original Life Fiber."

Kinue's heels clacked against the mat of Life Fibers covering the floor as she stepped into the Forbidden Room. She could feel Danketsu's apprehension. Her Kamui's nervousness was bleeding through their connection, inadvertently twisting her own thoughts. There was a foulness filling the chamber, permeating every fiber of her being and earning a single but large shiver from Danketsu. But that wasn't why her hand drifted towards the Genji Blade. Nor did it explain why her armored fingers tightly gripped the weapon's hilt, well-trained muscles only a single thought from drawing the prototype blade.

For only a brief moment, something had brushed against her mind.

"Whether out of self-preservation or instinctual awareness of its surrounding environment, the Original Life Fiber will try to stop me."

Aizen observed the artificial hybrid's reaction to the creature with mild curiosity. The tensing of her muscles, how her gaze focused upon the primordial being's central body, indicated an apprehensive state of mind. Intriguing. It seemed her transformed physiology granted her unique sensitivity towards the Original Life Fiber. Something he would need to consider if things progressed poorly. But, for the moment, he gave Kinue Kinagase and Seras Victoria no room for arguments. A beneficial decision considering the multitude of questions plaguing the latter, "However, the nature of Kisuke Urahara's technique requires minimal movement. Avoiding its attacks, or even proactively protecting myself with Bakudo, will interfere with the process. I'll require both of you to stall for time. Intercepting its attacks until I finish the incantation."

"So, we *are* your decoys."

"To some degree," Aizen brushed aside Kinue Kinagase's reasonable skepticism, focusing instead on the matter at hand. As long as the Original Life Fiber was sealed - preferably with minimal loss of life - she had no right to complain.

"And to answer your *other* question, I was not lying in Karakura Town."

He stepped around the perturbed woman, matching her Kamui's equivalent of an irritated scowl with a half-smirk, "However, ask yourself this. Even if I was concealing the truth, hiding it for some ulterior motive, would you entrust this task to Satsuki Kiryuin? Or perhaps you're comfortable asking normal humans - such as your brother - to hold off the Original Life Fiber until I'm finished?"

Kinue hesitated at the man's brutal honesty, refusing to listen to Danketsu's annoyance at being tricked. She knew Sosuke Aizen wasn't threatening Tsumugu - merely pointing out his chances of survival against the Original Life Fiber were slim to none - but

hearing the arrogant and condescending tone, no matter how sincere his words, was aggravating.

A stifled grunt escaped her mouth as she forced herself to relax, draining the intense emotions passing through their synchronized connection with a single, muted sigh, before turning towards the creature hovering in the center of the room, "How much time do you need?"

"Less than thirty seconds," Aizen mentally noted the woman's frustration as he raised his left arm, twisting the limb clockwise in front of his body, "Now, shall we begin?"

Seras unstrapped the Harkonnen, allowing the anti-tank cannon to hit the ground with a muffled thump. She still didn't know much about Life Fibers. And trying to understand how she and her Master could hear Kamui gave her a headache. And finding out Heaven didn't exist was depressing, but none of that matter. Sosuke Aizen might be an arrogant bastard like that infuriating Major, but he was still *right*. If they didn't stop the Original Life Fiber... if Ragyo Kiryuin managed to win... then everybody would die, "I'm ready when you are!"

The Genji Blade appeared in Kinue's hand when dozens of slits opened across the Original Life Fiber's central body, exposing jagged edges and glowing crevasses that caused Danketsu to comment upon its ugliness. Raising the prototype Anti-Life Fiber weapon parallel to her shoulder, she suppressed the tension creeping down her spine when Aizen began chanting.

*" My left hand holds the shears to sever fate."*

She was halfway across the room before Sosuke Aizen finished the first word.

The purple lines covering Danketsu shimmered when the Original Life Fiber responded, sending a tendril of Life Fibers towards the shinigami. Swinging the Genji Blade in a tight arc as she stepped in

front of Aizen, severing the threaded fibers several dozen times before her other heel *clacked* against the matted floor, she flexed her knees. With Danketsu's excitement bleeding across their connection - pulsing through her mind with enough fervor that she grinned - Kinue *leapt* upwards, launching herself towards the creature while streams of purple energy blasted from the Kamui's vents.

Only to scowl when dozens of crimson spheres erupted from its surface.

This was *unexpected* .

She twisted her upper body without thinking, muscles tightening beneath taut fabric. Swinging the Genji Blade in a crisscross pattern while her heel *pushed* off nothingness, launching her further into the rafters of the Forbidden Room, crimson energy clung to its edge as she sliced through the projectiles. With traces of a smirk - her own - at the multitude of explosions, Kinue flipped the prototype weapon into her other hand before reaching out, *catching* the final sphere inches away from her face.

As the orb pulsed in her hand, she *squeezed*, shattering the concentrated spiritual energy into motes of light.

All without leaving a single scratch on Danketsu.

" *My right fist clenches the needle to thread destiny.*"

The burning darkness twisted into a facsimile of her missing arm shifted, transforming into a single, jagged wing as Seras *pushed* off the ground. Darting around Kinue while dodging spheres of crimson energy faster than the human eye could follow, gravity abruptly inverted itself - causing blood to rush to her head - when she landed in a crouch above the Original Life Fiber. Jagged claws of shadows *gripping* the alcove, shattering the Life Fibers wrapped around the stone façade, she aimed the Harkonnen downwards, mindful of Kinue's current position.

"Take this, you bastard!"

Her arm buckled - shoulder bouncing against the wall from the recoil - when the depleted uranium shell *penetrated* the Original Life Fiber, tearing through sheets of Life Fibers before slamming into the ground with an ear-wrenching *boom* . Hissing when the hole sealed itself, *thousands* of Life Fibers pulling themselves together before the echo stopped bouncing off the walls, Seras stiffened at the crimson spheres already halfway to her perch.

" *The falling stars in the heavens flicker and dim!*"

Shadows curled around her body when she pushed off the wall, avoiding the spiritual bombs by the skin of her teeth. Landing in a controlled crouch on the Original Life Fiber - clawed fingers dragging through its Life Fibers - Seras promptly leapt back into the air. She twisted backwards, hissing at the jagged gash across her waist from the veritable garden of spikes emerging from the creature's surface. Shooting like a bullet away from the Original Life Fiber, the darkness writhing from her shoulder transformed into a jagged wing, her mind ground to a halt when one of the spheres made a right turn.

She needed to stop moving.

And then she *did* .

"Huh?"

It took Seras an awkward moment - just long enough to swing her good arm around for balance - to realize she was floating. Standing literally on nothing but air. Amazed - and greatly confused - how she was flying using such a strange method, she nevertheless shot sideways, fading into the shadows moments before the Original Life Fiber's attack turned her into a bloody smear.

" *Red fades to black which fades to nothingness!*"

"Danketsu Genkai!"



Kinue *felt* the red highlights in her hair change colors, the artificial dye devoured by the vibrant purple spreading from the nape of her neck. With the sound of clothing *snapping* tightly into place, thigh-high boots transforming into dark blue, pleated hakama while Danketsu's eyes shifted upwards, she brushed aside the warmth coursing through her body. The strength coming from her weak - but improving - bond with Danketsu. Listening to her Kamui's excitement at destroying the Original Life Fiber, the opportunity to tear apart the source of Life Fibers filling Danketsu with a sense of exhilaration impossible to ignore, she spun the Genji Blade once... twice... over her shoulder, crimson energy trailing from the edge.

"Youkou Genshou!"

" *The falling stars in the heavens flicker and dim!*"

Her heels dug into the matted Life Fibers - first cracking and then *shattering* the pliable material - as she swung the Genji Blade, releasing the spiritual energy concentrated across its cutting edge. With Danketsu tightening around her body, purple light shimmering from the Kamui's pleated hakama and heels, the attack slammed into the Original Life Fiber, covering the creature in a crimson conflagration that nearly reached the ceiling. Torrents of flames enveloped every inch of his massive form as she landed in a kneeling crouch, small flickers of spiritual fire still clinging to the Genji Blade.

Watching with bated breath as the creature vanished within the spiritual inferno, Kinue grimaced when something caught her eye. A milder... *tamer*... reaction than her Kamui's shocked protests.

" ***What the fuck!? It didn't do ANYTHING!?***"

There was not a single scratch on the Original Life Fiber.

" *Deny the hand of destiny to obtain the key to freedom!*"

Aizen quirked an eyebrow when Seras Victoria intercepted one of the Original Life Fiber's attacks. Darkness leaked from the hole in her stomach, burning shadows writhing as she flew over his shoulder, crashing through the entranceway into the corridor beyond. No matter how disconcerting, he could not allow empathy to cloud his judgment. Time was had always been of the essence when it came to Life Fibers. But it was more important *now* than at any other moment during the last two centuries.

Pointing two fingers at the Original Life Fiber, ribbons of spiritual energy wrapped around his body as he *shouted* the final line.

*"Let the heavens weep and the earth erupt with fire! Life Fiber Seal Number Two! Kōgō Nuno Shīru!"*

Cloth-like streams of spiritual energy spun from his hands, twisting through the air towards the Original Life Fiber. Wrapping around the *creature*, coiling together as the angry orange-red light permeating the Forbidden Room's darkest shadows flickered and dimmed, Aizen waited exactly three seconds before clenching his fist - one of the few modifications he made to Kisuke Urahara's technique. As the translucent sphere shimmered into existence, interlocking hexagonal plates glowing with emerald incandescence, he lowered his arm, grinning at the otherwise resounding success.

The overbearing presence - bordering on incomprehensibility - had disappeared, leaving only wisps of fading energy and smoking craters.

"Is it over?"

He half-smirked when Seras Victoria reappeared without a single scratch on her body, "Kōgō Nuno Shīru warps space and time, trapping the Original Life Fiber within a dimensional barrier."

"It's not only incapable of escape, but my modifications severed its connection with Ragyo Kiryuin, preventing the same failure that befell Kisuke Urahara's first attempt," he emphasized the latter point,

specifically to draw a distinction between Kisuke's previously rough sealing technique and his own, improved one. Looking over his shoulder when Kinue landed next to Seras, Aizen noted her Kamui's expression of unfulfilled satisfaction before turning back to the Original Life Fiber, "You have my thanks. Sealing the Original Life Fiber would not have been possible without your assistance."

"That's it?"

Kinue watched Seras walk away, hopping over thick tendrils of Life Fibers towards the Harkonnen *stabbed* into the wall, before frowning, "I expected... more. It doesn't feel like we've won."

"Your worry is not unfounded. In fact, it's reasonable to assume sealing the Original Life Fiber won't be enough to stop the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet," Aizen momentarily paused when Seras Victoria returned, Harkonnen propped over her shoulder, "Even with her connection to this primordial creature severed, Ragyo Kiryuin's strength has not diminished."

"Isshin might be keeping her preoccupied but she's not blind," Kinue frowned when Danketsu shivered, something that surprised both Kamui and wearer, "When she realizes what you have done..."

"She'll slaughter everyone in her path, using the Hogyoku as a beacon to track me down. Even Isshin Kurosaki's strength won't be enough to prevent her from inflicting massive losses on Nudist Beach and his son's allies."

The matted Life Fibers crunched beneath his sandals when he turned around, intrigued by Kinue's subdued worry, "Fortunately, I've already prepared contingences. Precautions created for a different - yet still applicable - set of circumstances. However, escaping Ragyo Kiryuin becomes completely meaningless if she manages to wear Shinra Koketsu."

"Then we should leave."

Kinue hesitated before following the shinigami, spinning the Genji Blade around her fingers and sheathing it against the small of her back. She needed to inform Olivier on the situation before Ragyo Kiryuin realized what happened. Despite finding Aizen's smugness overbearing - nearly to the point where she was *agreeing* with Danketsu - he was right. The Original Life Fiber might be sealed, but their plan hinged on Isshin keeping Ragyo Kiryuin busy while Ryuko destroyed Shinra Koketsu.

Something that wasn't guaranteed.

***" Are we going to Honnouji Academy? That means I can slaughter Ragyo Kiryuin before Mugetsu! She'll have no choice but to admit I'M the superior Kamui!"***

She ignored the Kamui's boasting - which lacked its usual arrogance - and raised a hand to her ear, "That's the plan. We'll need to rendezvous with Olivier before leaving for Honnouji Academy. But I'm sure you'll get the chance to demonstrate your power, Danketsu."

***" Maybe we'll run into the Grand Couturier! Wiping the smile from that psychotic bitch's face will be exciting!"***

And there it was.

But the simple answer, which earned honest approval from Danketsu as her child-like excitement bled across their connection, gave her time to think. Perhaps she was overthinking the situation. Isshin might be prone to behaving like an immature teenager but when it came to Life Fibers the man possessed one of the sharpest minds on the planet. The chances he would fall for another of Ragyo Kiryuin's schemes *after* allowing Orihime Inoue to fall into her clutches was slim to none.

"We're leaving already?"

Seras turned away from the Original Life Fiber, walking alongside Kinue as the woman raised a hand to her ear, "You know, that was

sort of strange. I never imagined fighting an alien ball of yarn to save mankind. It's like something out of a television show."

Kinue only partially listened to the vampire, her attention focused on the static coming across the radio. It appeared they couldn't contact Olivier until returning to the surface. Switching off the radio, several seconds passed in silence before her brow slowly creased into a frown. The skepticism in her eyes matched by Danketsu's confusion, both Kamui and wearer were in complete synchronization when she asked, "Wait, wasn't Alucard an immortal vampire? An undead monster who devoured souls and blood?"

"Yes," the vampire nodded, missing Kinue's sarcasm, "But that's different! Master was -"

Time stopped - the conversation grinding to a screeching and sudden halt - when the Hokyoku flared to life, dimmed purple replaced by a multicolored splendor which *burnt* away the front of Aizen's jacket.

"What!?"

Aizen panicked at the rainbow luminescence beneath his fingers. What was happening!? Stumbling forward before collapsing onto his knees, he was left speechless when the Hokyoku's power - the strength he'd used against Ragyo Kiryuin - *vanished* . Ripped away in a manner lacking Isshin Kurosaki's camouflaged interference or Ragyo Kiryuin's sadistic arrogance.

"I... miscalculated..."

He strained to speak, sweat dripping from his chin. As the Hokyoku dimmed, multicolored radiance returning to purple before fading away entirely, Aizen focused on the impossibility of the situation. He used the implausible scenario... the sense of wrongness... to brush aside the weakness spreading throughout his body. And he used the singular goal that had propelled him for two hundred years - the

overarching objective of *saving* humanity from Life Fibers - to stand back on his feet.

"But how..."

The question didn't necessitate an answer. But he couldn't understand *how* Ragyo Kiryuin was suppressing the Hogyoku. Subjugating his Life Fiber invention required visual contact, impossible when she was fighting Isshin Kurosaki at Honnouji Academy. And careful observation of Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi demonstrated they lacked the ability to mentally dominate the Hogyoku - willingly or otherwise.

Which suggested only one conclusion...

A sound akin to shattering glass filled the Forbidden Room when the Kōgō Nuno Shīru shattered, blown apart by an explosion of spiritual energy powerful enough to nearly drive him to his knees. Drawing his zanpakuto as he leapt back, avoiding the pieces of rubble raining upon the ground, Aizen stiffened when the Original Life Fiber started transforming. Morphing shapes as waves of Life Fibers were drawn upwards, wrapping its central body in a cocoon of pulsing threads.

"It seems we're out of options," Aizen raised Kyouka Suigetsu, holding his zanpakuto perpendicular to the ground, "Miss Kinagase, I suggest you and Miss Victoria leave. Use whatever strength you possess to get as far away from this room in the next twenty seconds as humanly possible."

The woman hesitated at the command before nodding, taking his decision to confront the Original Life Fiber with greater ease than he expected. Calmly walking towards the primordial creature while Seras Victoria quickly followed Kinue Kinagase, granting him a single concerned look over her shoulder, he steadied his breathing, focusing his thoughts on minimizing unwanted consequences.

"I'm afraid I cannot allow you to reach Honnouji Academy."

A violet aura enveloped his body, fighting against the burning vermilion growing increasingly brilliant with every passing second. Smiling faintly when their spiritual pressures abruptly decreased, signifying both women had breached the manor's walls and escaped into the surrounding countryside, he tightened his fingers, Kyouka Suigetsu slowly dissolving into shards of glass. He wasn't certain this would actually work. Not after Ragyo Kiryuin rapidly adapted to his zanpakuto's illusions. But with everything at stake - humanity's existence hanging by a single thread - he needed to at least *try* .

"Bankai: Seirei-no-Makoto Kyouka Suigetsu."

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" ***She's strong.***"

"Yeah, I know."

" ***If you knew, why didn't you stop her from kicking us halfway across Honnou City?***"

Ichigo ignored Mugetsu's sarcasm as he wiped a hand against his mouth, the smudge of blood rapidly absorbed into her threading. How could he *possibly* have expected something like *this* ? A living, breathing clone of Satsuki had been the last thing on his mind when the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier went down, "Tch... she just took me by surprise."

He leapt back through the hole in the building created during his abrupt expulsion from Honnouji Academy, landing outside as the neon sign above the front door crashed to the ground with an ear-wrenching *groan* . The clone - or whatever it was - had all of Satsuki's strength. And then some. But it wasn't something they couldn't handle, "She's not any stronger than Ryuko. And you know how hard she can kick. Next time she attacks, I'll be ready."

**" Senketsu might have brute force, but my power is more than enough to destroy this pale imitation of Satsuki,"** Mugetsu grumbled as she *reluctantly* admitted her impressive strength wasn't equal to Senketsu's, something the other Kamui always mentioned, **"However, this off-colored lookalike's appearance is unnerving. Her spiritual pressure is nearly identical to Junketsu's after she influenced Satsuki's mind. But she's NOT a Kamui. And her body contains Life Fibers. Just like yours and Ryuko's."**

She *wanted* to help Ichigo. It was, after all, the reason behind her creation. Nothing else mattered. But as she experienced Ichigo's emotions shifting through their connection, annoyance mixing with concern before settling on general irritation, her lapels metaphorically dropped. Despite her best efforts, she couldn't think of *anything* . Nothing came to mind. There wasn't anything in her memories, nothing woven into her Life Fibers by her creator, about this mysterious being.

And that feeling of helplessness - being unable to assist her wearer - was frustrating.

Not to mention their opponent's insulting sense of fashion!

Only someone lacking the most basic knowledge of Life Fibers would assume the clone was wearing a Kamui! It was absurd! That inverted mockery of Junketsu possessed none of her fellow Kamui's childishness and innocent curiosity about the world! It lacked Junketsu's incessant desire to ask Senketsu question after question! It was nothing more than an inanimate piece of clothing! A second-rate imitation created by someone lacking the ability to weave Kamui!

**" Yet she's STILL different,"** another grumble rippled through her Life Fibers, **"It's all very confusing, Ichigo. I don't know what we're actually fighting."**

"This thing might look like Satsuki, Mugetsu..."



Mugetsu's eyes turned bloodshot at the unstated command, fabric warping and armor shifting before the flash of sapphire light completely dissipated. As a single, quick, burst of steam erupted from her vents, Ichigo stared at the ground, Tournesol quivering in his tightening grip, "... but it's *not* her."

" ***Ichigo. You -***"

"Is that right, Ichigo Kurosaki?"

Ichigo's eyes widened at the arrogant - and painfully familiar - voice whispering into his ear, masking the faint whistling of a blade cutting sharply through the air.

He reacted without thinking, relying upon months of experience - not only from Honnouji Academy but during his time as a substitute shinigami - to raise Tournesol in an underhanded grip, parrying the golden version of Bakuzan. As his blade bounced off the hardened Life Fiber sword, releasing a pressurized blast of air that *pushed* away every mote of dust and dirt for hundreds of feet, Ichigo cursed under his breath. Damn it! Why the hell didn't he sense its spiritual pressure!? *Immediately* pushing the thought from his mind when the clone rushed forward, sapphire spiritual energy clashing against emerald as their blades clashed once more, he grimaced at its arrogant smirk when the ground cracked - and then *crumpled* - beneath their feet.

"Why do you PURPOSELY refuse to acknowledge reality!?"

The clone grinned when Ichigo pressed downwards, using the difference between their heights - even with her heels - to his advantage. Pushing back, forcing Ichigo away with a burst of strength his Kamui had not expected, she curled her hand into a fist, basking in the sensation of power thrumming through her Life Fibers, before closing the distance between them with a single *clack* of her heel, "Open your eyes and accept the truth!"

"I am the real SATSUKI KIRYUIN!"

Ichigo stiffened when the clone twisted around Tournesol, allowing the blade to scrape against her stomach before *thrusting* Bakuzan towards his heart. Damn, this thing really *did* fight like Satsuki! With a quick pivot, flickering across the desolate neighborhood hundreds of feet every step, he instinctively braced his left arm against Tournesol, stopping Bakuzan from cleaving through his neck.

"Shut up!"

The ground cracked beneath his feet, splintering into fragments of concrete. Forced on the defensive when the clone pirouetted through his guard, swinging Bakuzan with enough speed that blocking its attacks only redirected the enormous spiritual energy, he scowled at the malevolent grin stretching across her ashen grey - and intimately familiar - face, "If you were really Satsuki, you would NEVER help Ragyo Kiryuin!"

He glowered when their blades clashed, allowing him to see the inhuman hatred in the clone's eyes. No matter how much she sounded like Satsuki... or even acted like her... this thing would *never* be Satsuki, "Not after what she did to Ryuko! To her dad! And especially after what Ragyo did to *her* !"

"I've heard enough of your garbage!"

Ichigo was caught by surprise when spiritual pressure *exploded* from the clone, sending him careening through the No-Star Slums. Skidding above the ground, boots digging into asphalt while leaving a trail of collapsing buildings in his wake, he snarled at the familiar *clacking* growing louder by the second. What the hell just happened? How did the clone suddenly get twice as strong!? Stiffening at the clone's spiritual pressure as it closed the distance, sprinting across the ruined slums with traces of emerald light glittering from Bakuzan's edge, Ichigo swung Tournesol in an upwards arc, stopping the strike meant to remove his right arm.

And the next second they both vanished.

"Ichigo Kurosaki!"

The clone jubilantly shouted his name as they *danced*, moving through the No-Star Slums with their respective blades fighting for the slightest advantage. Yes! This was why the Grand Couturiers brought her into existence! Ichigo's ability to counter her strength - to match the power imbued into her Life Fibers by Lady Ragyo and the Original Life Fiber - filled every fiber of her being with exhilaration! Yet she was disappointed by his decision to assist the pigs in the human clothing, pledging his loyalty to those whose only purpose is nourishment for Life Fibers.

Kicking off a dilapidated rooftop, a single, shuddering breath left her lips as she chased Ichigo, laughing despite the fresh wound tracing ugly patterns across her stomach. Even if Ichigo chose humanity over family, this was still the greatest experience in her short existence.

Now she understood the Grand Couturier's infatuation with Lady Ragyo's godson!

Her heel slammed into Ichigo's stomach, bypassing his guard and eliciting a strangled *gasp*. Impressed by the quickness of his recovery when she was forced to parry his counterattack before the pleasure finished traveling down her spine, she leered viciously, basking in his feelings of inferiority, "Unleash Mugetsu's full potential so that I may prove MY superiority ONCE and for ALL!"

**" *Is she telling ME what to do?* "**

A bead of sweat dripped down Ichigo's cheek, pooling against the edge of Mugetsu's armor as he forced the clone's taunts to the deepest corners of his mind. This thing might look and sound like Satsuki - it might somehow even have her memories - but it *wasn't* Satsuki, "I don't care what you want!"

Spiritual pressure exploded from Mugetsu, achieving little more than a mildly surprised expression from the clone. Twin *cracks* echoed

across the No-Star Slums as the ground beneath their feet splintered, jagged fractures widening until the surrounding buildings collapsed. As sapphire streams of energy erupted from Mugetsu's vents - matched only by the identical emerald blasted from the clone's faux Kamui, Ichigo pushed against Bakuzan with everything he could muster, "I WON'T let you stop me from saving Orihime!"

"You DARE imply I'm standing in YOUR way, Ichigo Kurosaki!?"

She snarled at Ichigo's impertinence, frowning at his inability to understand the truth of the world. It was infuriating! How could *he* - someone gifted with power from the Original Life Fiber by Lady Ragyo - willingly interfere with the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet? Frustrated by his naïve behavior and Mugetsu's constant mockery of her existence... as if her position in the world wasn't important... she lashed out, snapping her leg upwards in a perfectly executed kick aimed at puncturing Ichigo's trachea.

"Coming from YOU, whose motives are anything BUT noble, such a declaration rings HOLLOW!"

Despite the consistency in which her blows were parried or dodged - Ichigo's minor advantage in speed proving decisive - she refused to relent. Even when Ichigo vanished in a flicker of sapphire light, moving across the No-Star Slums, she gave pursuit, catching up to him in matter of seconds. She *hunted* him down, clashing blades over and over without rest, keeping him on the defensive.

"Saving Orihime Inoue?"

Golden hair whipped frenziedly in the moonlight as she twisted around Tournesol, moving within Ichigo's guard until she felt his breath on her face. Cutting open his shoulder, bypassing Mugetsu's armor with laughable ease, she frowned at his reaction, uncaring that the wound already regenerated, "What do you hope to accomplish with such a treasonous act!?"

"Orihime's my friend!"

Ichigo awkwardly blocked Bakuzan with a metallic *clang*, the golden blade trembling inches away from his body, "I don't need any other reason to save her!"

The clone reciprocated Ichigo's bold declaration by switching Bakuzan into an inverted grip when sapphire energy erupted from Mugetsu. Backflipping over the initial strike, shuddering at the hardened Life Fiber weapon arcing beyond the tip of her nose, her heels barely *clacked* against the ground before she rushed forward, meeting Ichigo head-on in a titanic explosion of light. Yes! This was it! She could sense the nearly palpable elation when Bakuzan slipped against Tournesol, carving open Ichigo's waist. Hououmaru might have ordered her to fight Ichigo to limit his interference in the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet, undoubtedly a sentiment shared by Lady Ragyo, but defeating him was *her* purpose!

"Your naivety is unbecoming, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

Bakuzan clashed against Tournesol in a monumental display of power as she physically demonstrated to Ichigo the futility of his resistance. Their respective blades fought for dominance while the surrounding landscape suffered the consequences, disintegrating beneath the power contained within their Life Fiber. As multicolored sparks illuminated her smirking visage, she chuckled, taut muscles struggling against Ichigo's synchronized strength, "Orihime Inoue is Lady Ragyo's daughter! The keystone of everything! It is *her* existence - not yours or the Grand Couturier's - that will facilitate humanity's destiny!"

A jagged gash opened across Mugetsu, the Kamui's eyes widening at the blood spraying through the opening in her armor, "You may have cast aside your birthright, Ichigo Kurosaki, but you are still Lady Ragyo's godson. All but family! One of the few who will survive beyond the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. Which is why YOU, of all people, should understand the purity and benevolence guiding her -"

He stabbed Tournesol into the clone's stomach with a sickening *squelch* before *tearing* the blade out the side. As something

resembling blood spurted from the wound, oozing from her abdomen alongside emerald light, Ichigo watched the ashen grey flesh stitch back together, his eyes shadowed in the moonlight. He still remembered Satsuki's inner world down to the smallest detail. That place, from the castle to her inner sanctum, couldn't be easily forgotten. Not after he risked everything to save Satsuki and Junketsu from his Life Fibers. Witnessing Satsuki's memories firsthand - seeing her childhood through her own eyes - had allowed him to understand her motivations.

Which was why he couldn't *stand* hearing this clone speak about Ragyo Kiryuin with such devotion.

"I don't pretend to understand how you were created..."

Ichigo watched the clone stagger backwards, aware of Mugetsu's confusion surrounding his anger, "But hearing you talk about Ragyo like that... is *sickening* ! The Satsuki I know would *never* call anything her mom did 'pure' or 'benevolent!'"

"Incomprehensible nonsense!"

Her anger destroyed any remaining misconceptions when she shattered the sound barrier, smashing her fist against Ichigo's face with enough force that his head whipped sideways. The shock in his eyes - the surprise that she *punched* him - infuriated her! Did Ichigo believe Mugetsu's speed meant she couldn't touch him? That she couldn't *hit* him!? Leaning backwards when Ichigo retaliated, she tracked Tournesol with a sense of *purpose* . *Glaring* at the sword cutting several strands of blonde hair. Her heel immediately *clacking* when the blade finished arcing over her body - the ground fracturing as emerald energy blasted from her back - she positioned herself within Ichigo's guard before swinging upwards.

Sending him soaring skyward with a resounding *clang* of metal upon metal.

"Damn it!"

Ichigo grimaced as he cleared the skyline above the One-Star Residential District, "Was she holding back this whole time!?"

***" I can't believe Ragyo Kiryuin had something this powerful up her sleeves,"*** Mugetsu stared into the smoke created by their abrupt departure and *shivered*, goosebumps racing along her uniform, ***"She's not wearing a Kamui yet her speed's comparable to ours. Don't lower your guard, Ichigo. I have a strange feeling she's planning something."***

"We fought plenty of people stronger than us," Ichigo stopped midair with his back to the full moon, Tournesol shimmering brightly in the pale light, "This clone's no different!"

***" But -"***

Mugetsu was left sputtering when Satsuki's clone flickered into existence inches away, her mouth quirked into an arrogant smirk. His own expression tightening at the unexpected burst of speed, eyes widening and jaw clenching at the blade swinging towards his shoulder, Ichigo felt time slowing to a crawl. He flexed his knees as emerald spiritual energy curled around Bakuzan, Mugetsu tightening with a subtle *snap* in response. Shifting his center of balance sideways without taking his eyes off the golden weapon aiming to remove his left arm from the rest of his body, he took a single step and *vanished* .

"Impressive, Ichigo Kurosaki."

The clone wasn't dismayed when Ichigo disappeared before Bakuzan could momentarily dispel his ability to fight. On the contrary, she was *ecstatic* her attack missed. Ichigo was faster than she remembered, his reflexes sharper and talents honed! Perhaps crushing Mugetsu beneath her heel would actually prove something of a challenge. Chuckling with barely repressed exhilaration upon noticing a flicker of black and white, she grinned viciously at the dozens of afterimages encircling her position.

Mugetsu was truly the fastest Kamui!

But she *remembered* the first time Ichigo Kurosaki used this technique with eidetic detail! It was before he earned the hard-fought privilege to wear Mugetsu's advanced configuration, when he stubbornly resisted her authority over Honnouji Academy to rescue Matoi! The memories of that fateful battle - the first time she *truly* experienced defeat - were stitched into her Life Fibers! And it was *that* knowledge which granted her the instincts and experience to pivot clockwise, her heel *clacking* against solidified spiritual energy as she thrust Bakuzan into Ichigo's chest.

Only to hit nothing but an afterimage.

"What's wrong? Am I moving too *fast* for you?"

She frowned at the *arrogance* in Ichigo Kurosaki's voice. How *dare* he insinuate she couldn't follow his movements! Her existence might pale compared to those blessed by the Original Life Fiber - an existence Ichigo and Matoi disregarded without the slightest understanding of the consequences - but she was *beyond* Kamui!

"You're indeed faster than me."

Bakuzan dragged against Tournesol in a shower of blue-green light when she parried Ichigo's blade. As the corners of her mouth twitched, devolving into a scowl upon finding herself momentarily locked in a deadly embrace, she *seethed* at the expression in his eyes, "But adulation prevents you from landing the finishing blow! Affection clouds your judgment! And that is why you will lose, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

"No, you might have Satsuki's memories... but you're NOT Satsuki."

Sapphire light coalesced around Tournesol, rippling in turbulent waves down the hardened Life Fiber weapon. As spiritual energy exploded from Mugetsu, aware of the clone's shocked expression,



Ichigo ignored the dryness in his throat - the pounding of his heart - before uttering two simple words.

"Getsuga Tenshou."

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The smoke from her improvised entrance barely settled as Ryuko *punched* the cover bolted onto the wall, turning steel into a crumpled mess of metal. As patches of moonlight streamed through the holes in Honnouji Academy's classrooms, teacher lounges and club rooms - each crater bigger than the last - she threw the disfigured cover over her shoulder, the crushed wreckage of Satsuki's low-tech security stabbing *through* the wall. Reaching into Senketsu's armor, searching for something tucked away beneath his threading, she froze upon realizing it was *gone* .

" ***What's wrong?***"

Ryuko grumbled as she turned away, refusing to look Senketsu in the eye, "... I lost the damn passwords."

Senketsu gave his best efforts at a contemplative frown. She was right. He couldn't feel the uncomfortable piece of paper lodged between Ryuko and his threading, "***How did you lose it?***"

"It must have fallen out when Ragyo Kiryuin freakin' blindsided us!"

She *really* wanted to punch the keypad until it was nothing more than a crumpled mess of metal and wires. Not simply for losing the passwords, which was freaking embarrassing, but because Satsuki went out of her damn way to make them as complicated as possible! Who the hell thought making *both* passwords thirty digits long - letters, numbers and even freaking symbols - was a good idea!? But she couldn't vent her frustrations. Because doing *anything* to the

keypad would lock down the Sewing Club *and* inform her bitch of a mom what they were planning.

"Damn it! I guess we got no choice, Senketsu..."

The Scissor Blade spun around her wrist before she clasped its curved handle with both hands, "Let's slice through this stupid door and -"

" ***Wait, Ryuko!***"

She stumbled when Senketsu shouted - *loudly* - into her ear, "What?"

" ***Forcing our way inside might work. But it will also alert Ragyo Kiryuin. You should consider all consequences before doing anything rash,***" Senketsu ignored the subtle twitch of Ryuko's eyebrow at his blunt yet helpful comment, " ***Fortunately, I took the liberty of memorizing the excessively complicated passwords before leaving Karakura Town.***"

"Hold on a second!"

Ryuko's eyes widened as her head snapped back and forth between Senketsu and the door, "You can do that!?"

" ***I may be your Kamui, Ryuko, but I am also your school uniform,***" Senketsu preened smugly as he met her gaze, confidence washing across their connection, " ***Compared to helping you study for Satsuki's difficult exams, memorizing seventy different numbers was trivial.***"

"Heh... is that right?"

She grinned when Senketsu began reciting the passwords from memory, giving her *just* enough time to press the damn buttons on the keypad. After everything that happened over the last few weeks,

his ability to memorize pointless facts and information had completely slipped her mind, "I forgot you were so useful, Senketsu."

" **Yes,**" Senketsu glanced towards the holes leading outside Honnouji Academy. Ichigo was fighting something incredibly powerful - and dangerous. While impossible to sense Mugetsu within the academy's halls, likely due to Ragyo Kiryuin's spiritual pressure overwhelming everything in the vicinity, such a surprising sent a chill through his threading, **"But we should hurry. There's no telling what other tricks Ragyo Kiryuin has up her sleeves."**

Her smirk faltered at the warning, wavering before she shook her head and sprinted into the Sewing Club, "Then let's move quickly!"

The first thing she noticed - or rather *felt* - while the lights flickered, specialized fans spinning to life when the doors closed, was the air. It was *stifling*, causing her lips to tingle. There was something *wrong* about the way it felt... the way it smelled. Even as she leapt down the staircase several steps at a time, landing gracefully with a soft *clack* before kicking open the doors leading into the central sewing chamber, the strangeness was the only thing on her mind.

"Hey, Senketsu..."

She stood prone with her leg extended, ignoring the doors slamming against the wall, leaving a noticeable indent in the reinforced steel, "You feel that?"

" **Yeah,**" Senketsu looked around the darkened room, the multicolored bands of his eye narrowing slightly, **"Stay on your guard, Ryuko. I have a bad feeling in my threading."**

Ryuko nodded as she cautiously walked into the darkness, heels clacking ominously with every step. Damn it! It was too freaking dark to see anything. If Shinra Koketsu was anywhere in the Sewing Club, how the hell was she supposed to find the damn thing!? For all she knew, the ugly outfit was standing right in front of them!

She winced when every light simultaneously turned on, flooding the Sewing Club with blinding bursts of crimson. God damn it! Someone was messing with her mind! Scowling as her vision cleared, fingers tightening around the Scissor Blade for good measure, Ryuko *gasp*ed when she saw the enormous gown-like dress floating in the middle of the room, illuminated by several spotlights.

"Is that..."

" ***Shinra Koketsu.***"

Senketsu couldn't explain the emotions coursing through his Life Fibers. It wasn't nervousness or apprehension. It wasn't even fear. No, the closest word that sufficiently described his reaction to Shinra Koketsu was *awe* . The ultimate Kamui was far larger than they imagined, stretching nearly twenty feet from hood to hem. And unlike Mugetsu, Junketsu, himself and even Danketsu, it resembled more of an elaborate wedding dress than school uniform. Befitting someone as pompous as Ragyo Kiryuin. Yet the thing that caught his eye, causing him to rustle slightly, was that despite looking finished, the perfectly-stitched white and ruby pattern radiating power, he couldn't sense anything from its Life Fibers.

"Ragyo plans on wearing *that* !?"

Ryuko scowled as she hefted the Scissor Blade overhead. Thinking about the stupidity of Shinra Koketsu - and how her bitch of a mom planned on wearing the damn thing - was giving her a headache. But that wouldn't matter once she destroyed the damn thing!

"Tch... let's slice this thing into scraps, Senketsu!"

As she experienced Senketsu's power flowing through her body, his armor shifting against her skin before *snapping* into Senkou alongside an intense burst of crimson stars, Ryuko did her best *not* to look at the corpses scattered across the Sewing club. She didn't *want* to think about what happened to Satsuki's students who weren't able to escape Ragyo Kiryuin and the COVERS. With anger fueling

her resolve, she took a deep breath, the ruby undertone of her feathery, dual-colored hair glowing in the light. Scowling as she stepped forward, *flying* above the ground towards the so-called ultimate Kamui, Ryuko yelled at the top of her lungs and *swung* the Scissor Blade.

Only to hit a familiar purple blade with a loud *clang* .

"Nui Harime!"

Sparks danced from the point of contact between the Scissor Blades as Ryuko *glared* at the Grand Couturier. Her twin-toned hair fluttered violently in the ensuing explosion of spiritual energy, Senketsu fluttering while the weapons scrapped against each other with an ear-wrenching *clang* . Grunting when Nui lashed out without warning, spittle flying from her mouth as a pink boot spontaneously planted itself into her stomach, she bounced several times against the ground before skidding to an embarrassing stop. What the hell just happened? Pulling herself off the floor, loose strands of Life Fibers falling from her head as she stood back on her own feet, Ryuko hissed under her breath.

How the hell did Nui Harime sneak up on them? She might not be the best person at detecting spiritual pressure. Even Ichigo was better at this spiritual crap. But she'd improved since fighting that bastard vampire. Sensing a psychotic bitch like the Grand Couturier should have been easy .

"Hey, Ryuko..."

Nui slouched forward, trembling fingers gripping the purple Scissor Blade as she watched Ryuko recover from her embarrassing flight, "I-I was waiting for you, you know."

Ryuko ignored the way Nui's voice cracked to focus on something *more* important - like how the hell she knew they were coming. She *wasn't* stupid. Yoruichi explained that anyone could sense spiritual pressure. But it should have been impossible to sense Senketsu's

power with Ragyo Kiryuin and Ichigo's dad kicking each other's asses! Even *knowing* Ichigo was outside fighting against a Life Fiber clone, she couldn't sense his or Mugetsu's spiritual pressure.

So how the hell did Nui sense Senketsu's?

Scoffing at the question as she flipped the Scissor Blade around, sliding one heel backwards while the razor-sharp edge shimmered in the light, Ryuko frowned at Nui's disheveled and messy appearance before glaring into her bloodshot eyes, "Huh, is that right? I'm surprised you could sense anything. What, with Ichigo's dad kicking Ragyo Kiryuin's ass."

"D-Don't be silly, Ryuko."

Nui's already strained smile wavered, quivering to the point of collapse, "I felt you coming from a mile away! I-It's *really* hard not sensing your Kamui!"

" ***Be careful, Ryuko,***" Senketsu glanced away from the Grand Couturier when Ryuko's blood pressure spiked, "***Nui Harime is a particularly powerful adversary. Yet something about her behavior seems off...***"

Ryuko nodded, refusing to take her eyes off the Grand Couturier. She couldn't afford getting pissed off at Nui Harime. If she wanted *any* chance at kicking her ass, she needed to fight with a clear head, "Don't worry, Senketsu. After all the shit we've been through, kicking Nui's ass should be a piece of cake!"

"Where's Amu?"

Her eyes widened when Nui's Scissor Blade appeared *inches* from her face. Leaning sideways, avoiding the sword by the skin of her teeth, Ryuko felt her heels leave the ground when Nui delivered a haymaker to her cheek.

"FUCK!"

She spat out blood while planting her hand against the ground. Fingers digging into the metal plating moments before the purple Scissor Blade skewered through the floor, creating an expanding wave of liquefied steel blasting across the Sewing Club, Ryuko leapt over Nui's head only to find the Scissor Blade swinging towards her neck. Immediately forced onto the defensive by the insane assault, Ryuko cursed for the millionth time when her heels cracked into the floor. Damn, Nui was *faster* than expected! But when she propped her forearm on the Scissor Blade, stopping Nui from pulling the same shit with a resounding *clang*, she smirked savagely at the Grand Couturier's nervousness.

"What's wrong?"

The question reeked with smug confidence as she easily matched Nui's inhuman strength - and then some, "Upset that my bitch of a mom can't control Ururu anymore?"

Nui visibly *flinched* at the accusation, "Don't say that stupid name!"

"And what the hell are you going to do about it!?"

An explosion of energy reached the furthest corners of the Sewing Club when Ryuko forced both weapons to the ground before *head-butting* Nui, "Because compared to last time..."

Her knee smashed into the Grand Couturier's stomach, "... all of your attacks..."

Pushing off the ground as Nui hovered midair, sapphire eyes trembling with unregistered shock, she followed with a bone-shattering kick that sent the Grand Couturier crashing through the far wall, "... are *fucking* predictable!"

" ***Now's our chance, Ryuko!***"

"Yeah! Time to tear that ugly ass outfit apart!"

Spiritual energy wrapped around the Scissor Blade as she *flew* towards Shinra Koketsu, "Ichiban Gen-"

"Nope!"

The Life Fibers wrapped around her arms, pulling taut before she could react. Cursing violently when Nui sent her crashing through multiple abandoned sewing stations with a dramatic flick of her wrist, Ryuko snarled upon slamming face-first into a wall. Damn it! She *won't* let this murderous psychopath stand in her way! Not when everybody was counting on them destroying Shinra Koketsu! As ruby-colored energy erupted from Senketsu, the crimson undertone of her feathery hair glowing with power, she *snapped* the Life Fibers, giving her just enough time to block the purple Scissor Blade swinging towards her face.

"God damn it! Just give up already!"

Waves of spiritual energy exploded from their trembling blades as everything not bolted to the floor - and several things that were - was sent flying across the Sewing Club. For a brief moment, sweat dripping down her face, she pushed against the purple Scissor Blade, staring into Nui's dulled yet strangely conflicted expression. But as flashes of crimson mixed with violet, heels digging into the ground before she vanished, clashing again and again while pushing Senketsu's power to the limit, Ryuko's eyes widened. Senketsu was right. Something *was* strange. Even with Senkou boosting her strength, fighting Nui Harime shouldn't be *this* easy.

But easy or not, she *WAS* going to kick Nui Harime's ass!

"We shouldn't be fighting, Ryuko!"

It was impossible to miss the quiet desperation in Nui's voice as she leapt backwards, avoiding Ryuko's flurry of strikes by the hem of her dress. Stumbling slightly when she landed in front of Shinra Koketsu, her already disheveled appearance was further blemished by the blood trickling down her arm. Unaware - or ignorant - of the liquid



dripping from her trembling fingers, twisting down the Scissor Blade's handle, she slouched forward, her voice a harsh whisper, "O-Once Lady Ragyo wears Shinra Koketsu, the pigs in human clothing will become food for Life Fibers! B-But not you! Or Ichigo! You're different! You're family! Y-You'll be fine!"

"SCREW THAT!"

Ryuko didn't bother listening to the crap leaving Nui's mouth. She threw caution to the wind without hesitation, *buckling* the floor beneath her heels into sheets of fraying metal as she sprinted towards the Grand Couturier. Immediately kicking her speed up another notch when Nui managed to block her blade, appearing behind the psychotic bitch in a flash of flickering crimson light before the metallic *clang* finished echoing, she flipped her wrist, spinning the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip.

"I'm going to make sure that *bitch* never wears Shinra Koketsu!"

She leaned around the predictable counterattack before *smashing* the Scissor Blade against the underside of Nui's chin with enough force that her boots left the ground, "Even if it's the last thing I do!"

Nui's neck snapped with a sickening *crunch* from the force of Ryuko's underhanded attack, eyes widening as she gagged on spittle and blood. Landing on her head, twisting her already damaged neck sideways, a painful migraine lanced through her foggy mind when she saw Ryuko turning towards Shinra Koketsu. Still laying on the floor, unable to move despite her body having mostly regenerated, she whispered in a trembling voice.

"Why?"

Blood dripped from her fingers, coating the purple Scissor Blade, as she stumbled onto her feet. She forced herself to *move*, muscles trembling at the expression in Ryuko's eyes. This didn't make any sense! It wasn't right! She couldn't understand why Ryuko was

risking everything for the pigs in human clothing! Why? WHY!? Why was Ryuko willing to throw her life away fighting Lady Ragyo!?

They were sisters! And all sisters should do their very best - even if they didn't always get along - to help their *maman* !

After all, they were family.

She threw herself at Ryuko, ignoring the clenching within her chest as their matching blades clashed in a vibrant display of crimson and purple, "Why do you hate Lady Ragyo? She's our *maman* ! She -"

"She AIN'T my damn MOM!"

Spiritual energy exploded from Senketsu as Ryuko shouted down the pathetic distraction. She didn't know - or care - why Nui Harime was mentioning pointless crap! All that mattered was kicking her ass! Roaring defiantly as she overpowered the Grand Couturier with an ear-splitting *clang* of metal upon metal, she waited for the perfect opportunity before *punching* Nui in the face, "Dad and I had issues! He was always busy working on some strange crap! And maybe he missed a few of my birthdays..."

Crimson-tinted smoke curled between her clenched fingers as Nui Harime soared across the Sewing Club, leaving a perfect silhouette in the wall next to Shinra Koketsu. Rubbing two fingers against the side of her mouth, wiping away the faint trail of blood, Ryuko sneered hatefully, "... but he was still my DAMN dad!"

She gripped the Scissor Blade with trembling hands as Nui Harime stumbled back into the room, her richly adorned dress damaged while blood trickled down her face, "And you killed him! So take that 'sister' crap and shove it up your ass!"

"N-No! No! This isn't *right* !"

Nui rushed Ryuko without a second thought, her expression a combination of impotent rage and despondent desperation. As she

attacked again and again - throwing everything she had into winning only for Ryuko to *constantly* block the Scissor Blade - only a single thought echoed through her mind, "You and Ichigo... you're not like those naked apes!"

The ground underneath her boots buckled, cracking into splintered waves of pulverized metal when Ryuko *counterattacked* . Struggling beneath her sister's overwhelming strength, her vision wavering when the world briefly transformed into familiar images of a rocky landscape overlooking a city, she stammered, "So why are you helping them!? Why did you betray Lady Ragyo? Family should ALWAYS stick together! Through thick and thin! And -"

"Get it through your thick skull!"

Ryuko twisted her arms, sending the purple Scissor Blade flying out of the Grand Couturier's hands. As the hardened Life Fiber weapon spun through the air, embedding itself into the ground near Shinra Koketsu, she followed up with a punch that caused Nui's head to snap sideways, blood spraying from quivering lips, "My body might be made of Life Fibers... but I'm still human!"

Steam rose from her fist as she watched Nui bounce several times before crashing through a sewing station, "And nothing you, my bitch of a mom or that bastard vampire say will ever change that!"

**" Ryuko!"**

She turned her attention back to Shinra Koketsu. The appearance of the so-called ultimate Kamui sent shivers down her spine. But that wouldn't matter in a few seconds when she sliced the oversized dress into scraps of Life Fibers! Gripping the Scissor Blade with both hands as crimson energy coated the weapon, streaming down the dark red surface in turbulent waves of burning power, Ryuko stiffened - more from annoyance than shock - when Nui Harime slowly struggled back onto her feet.

"Give up, Nui Harime!"

With her shoulders slumped and dress tattered, blonde hair laying in disheveled curls against her back while blood trickled down her face, Nui *forced* her body to move, stumbling until she was standing between Ryuko and Shinra Koketsu.

"... why?"

It was difficult hearing Nui's quiet mumbling, which further annoyed Ryuko, "What the hell are you saying?"

"W-Why does Ichigo like you?"

Ryuko's mind ground to a screeching halt at the question. But the surprise rendering both Senketsu and herself completely speechless was eclipsed when Nui looked up, tears streaming down her cheeks. What the hell was going on? Nui Harime - the psychopath who murdered her dad, Ginjo, Shinjiro and nearly killed Mako - was *crying* ?

"H-He'd do anything for you and those stupid naked apes. B-But he won't even look at me," Nui trembled as she cried, shoulders shaking with every wracking sob.

Stopping Ryuko didn't matter anymore. *Nothing* mattered without Amu. But her sister was never coming back. Amu was *gone*, killed by the same hateful man who kidnapped her from Lady Ragyo when she couldn't protect herself. It wasn't *fair* . Ichigo hated her. Ryuko wanted to kill her. And the old goat? He preferred that *fake* thing calling itself Ururu, choosing to save something that didn't even exist.

"A-All I wanted was a family..."

Nui's vision blurred as she collapsed to her knees, anguish piercing her voice, "B-But Amu's gone. I'm all alone. I-I don't have *anyone* ."

A moment passed in silence as Ryuko watched the Grand Couturier break down into tears, unable to think of anything to say. She still

*hated* Nui Harime. That would never change in a million years. But seeing... *this*... after everything that happened - after the psychotic bitch attempted to murder Mako for no damn reason - was confusing. She was conflicted, something Senketsu noticed when her arm lowered, the Scissor Blade tapping against the floor.

" **Ryuko?**"

"This doesn't feel right, Senketsu," she grimaced, remembering Ururu's question during the Great Culture and Sports Festival, "Kicking her ass is one thing. But *this*..."

Senketsu's eyes swiveled, the multicolored bands narrowing before his voice echoed in her mind, ***"In any case, I don't think we need to worry about Nui Harime. Let's destroy Shinra Koketsu and -"***

Something pulsed through her soul before Senketsu finished, a sensation that caused the Kamui to instinctively tighten around her body. Turning around, eyes widening as an enormous explosion of spiritual pressure *slammed* into Honnouji Academy, Ryuko felt sweat dripping down her face.

"What the hell was that?"

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Ichigo stepped backwards, eyes narrowing from the wind erupting in the aftermath of his Getsuga Tenshou. His breathing was slightly strained as the crescent-shaped spiritual energy slammed into the No-Star Slums, leaving a trail of destruction that vaporized entire neighborhoods. Lowering Tournesol as he watched the technique slam into Tokyo Bay, creating an enormous column of water extending nearly to the shore, his frown deepened when something emerged from the smoke, waist-length blonde hair fluttering gently as she plummeted to the ground.

**" Did that kill her?"**

He vanished without answering Mugetsu's question, covering hundreds of feet before landing near the clone. It was difficult sensing spiritual pressure with his old man fighting Ragyo Kiryuin, but being this close to Satsuki's clone made this easier, "I doubt it."

**" Really?"**

He brushed aside Mugetsu's disbelief when he noticed the golden blade lying next to the clone. Funny. He thought Bakuzan would have been thrown further away. She must have held onto her weapon even after falling unconscious. Reaching down, grabbing the off-colored weapon while keeping an eye on the clone, he watched the dark blue spread across its surface while Mugetsu grumbled, **"She was nearly as tough as the REAL Satsuki."**

"It makes sense she survived your Getsuga Tenshou if she's wearing something modeled after Junketsu," Ichigo conceded, aware of Mugetsu's eyes suddenly widening, "Junketsu was always tougher than she looked."

Mugetsu huffed at the notion that Junketsu was better at, well, *anything*, before her eyes swiveled towards the sword in Ichigo's left hand, **"What do you plan on doing with that?"**

"According to Kisuke, hitting Ragyo Kiryuin with both Scissor Blades at the same time should prevent her from regenerating," Ichigo stared at Bakuzan's replica, his voice increasingly strained, "Even if we don't get the chance to fight her..."

**"... we can use it against Nui Harime?"**

Ichigo's silence confused Mugetsu, causing her multicolored eyes to droop before immediately perking back up, **"Nui Harime doesn't matter! The clone's defeated, right? We should focus on rescuing Orihime and leaving dealing with that psychopath to someone else! Like Ryuko and Senketsu!"**

"Yeah", Ichigo nodded, craning his head upwards, staring at Honnouji Academy silhouetted against the moon, "Let's get back -"

"I-Impressive, I-Ichigo K-Kurosaki..."

Blood splattered beneath her mouth as the clone coughed, a sound that sent shivers down Ichigo's spine. Propping a trembling hand against the ground for support, fingers digging *into* the concrete, she raised her head, crimson trailing from the corners of her mouth, "B- But this fight isn't over..."

"You're still *conscious* ?"

"D-Did you think getting hit by your Getsuga Tenshou was enough to defeat *me* ?"

The clone forced herself to chuckle at Ichigo Kurosaki's childish naivety despite the copious amount of blood pooling underneath her body. Why would someone like *him* - who fought Lady Ragyo and the Grand Couturier - presume she would be so easily defeated? It was *insulting* . Without fanfare or further mockery, she tried pushing herself off the ground only to stumble, falling back onto her face. Coughing once more as blonde hair obscured the blood trickling down her face, she grimaced upon realizing most of her left arm was *gone* . Missing nearly halfway down her bicep with the familiar emerald glow of her Life Fibers accompanying the thick blood dripping freely from the wound.

"I-I am Satsuki Kiryuin..."

She staggered onto her feet, refusing to show the slightest weakness in front of Ichigo and Mugetsu. One of her pauldrons was missing, destroyed in the initial explosion of energy from Ichigo's Getsuga Tenshou, while burns and wounds marred her ashen gray flesh. Clenching her remaining hand into a trembling fist, fabric crinkling as her eyes focused upon Bakuzan in his grasp, she suppressed the slightest pangs of *panic* when she realized her

injuries weren't regenerating, "I-I won't allow myself to be defeated so easily! This battle won't end until one of us is dead!"

"No... it's over..."

Ichigo lowered Tournesol, the blade almost touching the ground as his frown softened. The clone might not *be* Satsuki, but he couldn't stare into those familiar eyes, "I can tell you're trying to hide it... but your regeneration has reached its limits."

The clone's simmering anger dampened at the comment, faintly glowing green eyes widening as the wind swelled through the ruined streets, "Whatever Ragyo Kiryuin did... however she created you... wasn't perfect. If we keep fighting... if you keep throwing yourself at me without stopping... you'll die. So, that's why, I won't fight you anymore."

"Hold your tongue, Ichigo Kurosaki!"

He ignored her outrage, his voice lowering as he forced himself to stare into the clone's eyes, "There's something else... something I realized towards the end of our battle. Whenever I fight someone, I can generally tell how they think. I'm not suggesting I can read minds or anything like that, but I can get a general feeling of their resolve, whether they respect me or look down upon me. That's why I understand your anger. Why you're so determined to prove yourself stronger than Mugetsu. You know you're not the real Satsuki, don't you?"

"SHUT UP!"

The clone stammered, unable to properly articulate her thoughts as she staggered towards Ichigo. Gripping the front of Mugetsu, seething as blood continued spilling from between her lips, she snarled, "I am what she **SHOULD** have been! Someone loyal to the Original Life Fibers! Someone who wasn't a **FAILURE**! The perfect heiress to Revocs! Someone who was your equal, Ichigo Kurosaki!"



The clone fell to a knee, gripping her bleeding stump of an arm, "Defeating you! Besting Mugetsu and proving my superiority! That's the only reason for my existence! It's -"

"That's enough."

Ichigo and the clone turned simultaneously, the latter's eyes widening in recognition. There was no mistaking the owner of the voice. Walking across the ruined landscape without any nervousness in her stride, clad in an intricate black cloak fastened across her chest by several brass clasps, Satsuki's gaze momentary focused on Ichigo before turning towards the clone kneeling on the ground, "I see my mother has been busy in our absence."

"H-How..."

The clone staggered back onto her feet, blood dripping like water from the remnants of her arm as she viciously seethed, "Even with Lady Ragyo's presence... even focused on proving my superiority over Mugetsu... I should have sensed Junketsu!"

If Satsuki was perturbed at hearing something her voice and inflections refer to her mother with such obnoxious reverence, she did not show it. The only sign of her discontent with the clone's response was a tightening of her already appreciable scowl. Her heels *clacked*, reverberating sharply in the moonlit silence as she approached the clone, motioning towards her cloak with a sweeping gesture, "This cloak is one of Kisuke Urahara's inventions, capable of completely concealing one's spiritual pressure from inquiring eyes. My original intent was to use it to track down Hououmaru without drawing my mother's attention, leaving Ichigo and Ryuko free to carry out their own objectives."

Her eyes flickered towards the blade in Ichigo's left hand, identical aside from its coloration to the sword sheathed at her waist. A hint of annoyance appeared across her scowling visage at the implications. Without another word, without giving her replica a single moment to argue, she clasped her fingers around Bakuzan, the weapon's

obsidian edge shimmering in the moonlight as the hood of her cloak was blown backwards.

"However, seeing *you* has forced my involvement."

She pointed the weapon between the defiant clone's eyes, waist-length black hair billowing in the swelling wind, "A Life Fiber clone of such high quality must have required the Grand Couturier's personal involvement. And for all her talk about me being a 'failure' and 'disappointment' to the Kiryuin name, my mother could not help herself to create an abomination modeled in my image yet utterly subservient to the Original Life Fiber."

"Satsuki!"

Ichigo grabbed Satsuki's wrist, meeting her determined gaze with one of equal resolve, "Even if that's true... killing her when she can't defend herself isn't right!"

"I have no intention of killing her."

His surprise at her answer - as quick and forthcoming as it was honest - was not unexpected. Staring into the clone's eyes, meeting its frustration with burgeoning commiseration, her brow furrowed, "Bereft of her weapon and confidence shattered by Mugetsu's power, striking her down would be immeasurably cruel."

She sheathed Bakuzan when Ichigo's grasp around her wrist loosened, the blade sliding into its scabbard with a soft *click*, "It would be an act condoned by one lacking morals. Striking down a defenseless adversary, even one created by the Grand Couturier, would make me little better than Ragyo Kiryuin. However, don't let empathy cloud your judgment, Ichigo!"

A sharpness pierced her voice as she glared at Ichigo, refusing to back down from their confrontation, "This clone is loyal to my mother. Neither words nor arguments will ever change her mind! As long as she lives, there exists the possibility she will inform Ragyo Kiryuin of

our plans. Putting humanity's survival at jeopardy without the slightest hint of guilt."

"I know..."

Ichigo couldn't look at Satsuki. Despite hoping otherwise, she was right. Even if her clone couldn't fight, the only way to make sure she couldn't reach Ragyo Kiryuin - and sentencing humanity to a fate worse than death - was killing her. His jaw clenched at the conclusion, drawing Mugetsu's attention when he despondently added, "But still..."

"Shut your mouths!"

The clone grasped the front of Satsuki's cloak, clenching the fabric between fingers. Furious emerald stared into stoic sapphire as she pulled herself closer, strands of blonde hair falling over ashen gray skin while her shoulders trembled from the exertion, "Why don't you finish me off!? I would *slaughter* you without hesitation! I would tear Junketsu from your unworthy corpse! So why won't you do the same to *me* !? Am I not worthy of your attention, *Satsuki Kiryuin* !?"

**" *Huh? Why would she pull me away from Satsuki?* "**

Satsuki didn't hear Junketsu as the wind sweeping across Honnou City intensified, only deriving her Kamui's inquisitive question from the subtle changes across the face so familiar to her own. She understood her clone's frustration, perhaps better than anyone else. While twisted by her mother and Nui Harime until she was nothing more than a leashed animal fervently loyal to the Original Life Fiber, she still possessed her memories. The determination, resolve and decisiveness laying at the heart of her actions, which kept her focused, lay within her clone, albeit warped into something nearly unrecognizable.

Which is why killing her clone would be an act of mercy.

Yet she hesitated, allowing Ichigo's words to resonate within her mind. Something in the clone's expression - in its frustration and defiance - struck a cold, hard blow. And it took only an imperceptible moment, while familiar emerald eyes narrowed and eyebrows furrowed, to understand why. Twisted by the Grand Couturier's sadism, corrupted through her mother's physical ministrations or otherwise, the clone was *Satsuki Kiryuin*. The Student Council President who wouldn't have thought twice against striking down someone standing in the path of her goals.

Her expression tightened, drawing Junketsu's focus and worry. Ragyo Kiryuin had granted the worst parts of her psyche existence in the form of the Life Fiber clone, someone willing to slaughter anyone standing against the Original Life Fiber without hesitation, conscience or empathy.

But *she* had grown better than that.

"You are indeed worthy of my attention..."

Satsuki's expression softened, "... because you are a reminder of who I used to be."

She watched confusion, so alien coming from someone identical to herself, play across the clone's façade at the honest admission. But she wasn't surprised. Nor was she shocked when her clone released Kisuke Urahara's cloak, fingers trailing down the fabric as she collapsed onto her knees. It was apparent, she realized as the last traces of defiance escaped from what was so familiar, that Ragyo Kiryuin never believed the clone could defeat Ichigo. She might have briefly equaled Ichigo's prowess, but the absolute loyalty woven into her Life Fibers blinded her from the truth.

That she was *expendable*, a distraction to keep Ichigo occupied for several minutes. That her mother would sacrifice anything - *anyone* - to facilitate the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet's success.

"Why are you still here, Ichigo?"

The *clack* of her heels echoed sharply across the ruined landscape, snapping Ichigo from his thoughts as her brow furrowed, "Orihime Inoue won't rescue herself."

"Yeah," Ichigo nodded and, after a moment's hesitation, prepared to leave, pausing only to look back at the clone, "What about her?"

Satsuki kept her expression ambivalent as she gave the Life Fiber clone another, more sympathetic glance, "The injuries she sustained are severe, limiting her ability to move, let alone reach Ragyo Kiryuin. Leaving her alive should pose minimal risk to our plans."

Ichigo felt relieved when Satsuki marched away from her clone, adjusting Kisuke's cloak around Junketsu without breaking her stride. Frowning as Mugetsu muttered something about Satsuki wearing something hideous, he effortlessly pushed his Kamui's annoyance to the far corners of his mind and turned towards Honnouji Academy with renewed resolve. She was right. He needed to rescue Orihime and leave before Ragyo Kiryuin discovered their plans. Who knew how much longer his old man could keep her occupied? Especially considering she already tricked him... *twice* .

**" *Rescuing Orihime might be trickier than expected, Ichigo,*"**  
Mugetsu brushed aside her annoyance at Satsuki, choosing instead to focus on something slightly more important at the moment,  
**"*Satsuki's clone was waiting outside Orihime's room. It's likely Ragyo Kiryuin has -*"**

Her concern went unfinished, cut off with a strangled gasp when a *massive* wave of spiritual pressure slammed against Honnou City.

"Aizen!?"

Sweat trickled down his face, pooling around the edges of Mugetsu. He *recognized* this spiritual pressure. Incredible! Aizen was hiding something this powerful up his sleeves? Turning around, instinctively tightening his grip around Tournesol and Bakuzan, Ichigo immediately *froze*, eyes widening in stunned disbelief. The

mountains north of Honnouji Academy were warping. With Satsuki tensing beneath the massive spiritual pressure, the clone driven to her hands and knees, he watched the horizon flicker, segments of the landscape fading into and out of reality.

But it was only when the effect *expanded*, rippling outwards like water on a lake, that he realized *what* Aizen had done.

"What the hell? That's his *Bankai* !?"

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"What's wrong, Ragyo?"

The blood trickling down his arm vanished - absorbed by his Life Fibers - as he pushed away from the stunned matriarch, sandals skidding against the air. Rolling his shoulders while the wound on Ragyo's neck regenerated, flesh weaving itself back together with a sickening *squelch*, Isshin had little time to rest before she *moved* . But the sounds of her heels *clacking* gave everything away. He pivoted around the Needle Blade in her left hand, grimacing when several strands of silver hair floated in front of his eyes. He parried the *other* hardened Life Fiber weapon, simultaneously darting backwards as blood splattered the front of his shihakusho.

Spurting from the wound on Ragyo's stomach.

"Distracted in the middle of a fight? That's not like you."

Isshin took a moment to rest when an explosion of sapphire spiritual energy slammed against the No-Star Slums, sending a powerful shockwave reverberating outwards for miles in all direction. Something wasn't right. Ragyo's reaction time was slowing down. Her attacks were growing more predictable. And, most importantly, she stopped responding to his perfectly timed taunts. Yet his eyes widened, disbelief flooding his mind, when the faint string of French

curses reached his ears, coinciding with the *disappointment* in her narrowed eyes, "Don't tell me you expected that science project to defeat Ichigo?"

*That* caused the matriarch to scoff derisively, " *Hardly*, Isshin."

Ragyo rolled her eyes at Isshin's behavior. Did he believe she would be enraged by such childish mockery? Or, better yet, that she *cared* about her experiment's fate? Tucking an errant strand of silver hair behind her ear, she stared at the smoking ruins of Satsuki's former kingdom, watching Ichigo's Getsuga Tenshou crash into Tokyo Bay, "Contrary to what you may believe, I never expected the project to defeat Ichigo. Yet I'm still disappointed by the level of failure. After all that effort dragging Nui and Amu away from their work, spending some of my own time stitching a replica of Junketsu onto its skin and implanting memories into its Life Fibers, I *assumed* it could preoccupy Ichigo or Ryuko long enough for me to deal with *you* ."

A wistful sigh passed between slightly parted lips, "But it appears no matter what I do, Satsuki will always manage to be a failure."

"Don't sell yourself short, Ragyo."

Isshin wasn't disappointed when Ragyo's eyebrow quirked upwards in mild curiosity as her attention shifted away from Ichigo, "Masaki always said I had no sense of fashion. But even I could tell that clone was significantly higher quality than the others. And that replica of Junketsu? It might pale in comparison to Junketsu, but it's still pure Life Fiber clothing. Better than any Goku Uniform or Raiment on the planet. Weaving its Life Fibers without Junketsu's dress patterns must have taken *hours* . Between you and me, Ragyo, I don't think I could have created something that unique even if I tried."

"Oh, Isshin. *Flattery* will get you nowhere," Ragyo brushed aside Isshin's mentioning of *that woman*, choosing instead to focus on more pressing matters. There would be enough time to deal with Isshin's flagrant disrespect once humanity fulfilled their collective

destiny. As food and nourishment for Life Fibers. But right now, she needed to address the source of the man's shifting emotions.

"But it appears something else is bothering you."

The corners of her mouth curled into an amused smirk as her heels *clacked* softly upon air, "If it involves my pet project, please don't hold back. I AM open to criticisms on improving my technique."

"... the clone had Satsuki's memories, didn't it?"

Isshin glowered when Ragyo's grin slowly broadened, carrying a sense of sadistic amusement that sent disgust rippling down his spine, "You probably also gave her free will, something most clones don't have. That means she knows..."

"... she's not actually Satsuki? *Oui*..."

Ragyo found Isshin's surprise towards her admission, the disgust twisting his handsome features, strangely endearing. But as someone possessing every secret on Life Fibers, his reaction to an otherwise failed project was *pathétique*. Honestly, listening to Isshin's *human* complaints was frustrating! Even stitched into a replica of Junketsu, her daughter's martial prowess and memories woven into its Life Fibers, she *never* believed her pet project - which was *so much more* than a normal clone - could overwhelm Ichigo and Mugetsu. Or Ryuko and the Kamui woven by her former husband. It was powerful, yes. Strong enough to slaughter those naked apes, barring that one interesting hybrid on their payroll? Without question.

Defeat Satsuki, tearing Junketsu from her unworthy flesh? Of course, but with some difficulty thanks to Junketsu's evolved strength. But Ichigo or Ryuko?

*Jamais* .



"But putting aside the question of Ichigo using Getsuga Tenshou, I'm quite surprised he defeated my project so *ruthlessly*," she closed her eyes, chuckling lightly as the breeze billowed around them, "I expected Ryuko - not Ichigo - to use her Kamui's power with adolescent recklessness. After all, his feelings towards Satsuki have already been made abundantly clear."

Isshin's silence spoke volumes. More than any excuse or attempt at diverting the conversation. It appeared she touched a *nerve* . Something previously thought impossible. She smirked at the notion - a malicious and sadistic expression. Stepping closer to the man only to immediately leap backwards when Isshin launched himself towards her, Ragyo avoided the blade carving towards her throat, eyes wide and pupils dilated in *amusement*, "What's wrong, Isshin?"

She *threw* his question back in his face, taunting him with the irony, as they danced through the skies above Honnouji Academy. Every time their blades clashed in a magnificent display of multihued light, blood gushing from wounds already half-regenerated, her smirk *broadened*, pleasure coursing through her Life Fibers. For the first time, *Isshin* lost control over his temperament! And she was *ecstatic* ! Basking in the revelation! Nothing could take away the amusement - the *gratification* - racing down her spine! Not even the uncomfortable feeling of Isshin's sword dragging against the Needle Blade in a burst of tri-toned sparks, piercing her sternum without the slightest traces of hesitation.

"Don't tell me *you* were oblivious towards Ichigo's affection for Satsuki!?"

Isshin frowned when Ragyo pulled herself off his tachi, removing the blade from her chest with a sickening *squelch* . In an instant he vanished, moving before Ragyo's wounds had the time to regeneration. As spiritual energy wrapped around his hardened Life Fiber weapon, he swung downwards, ears ringing when both Needle Blades intercepted his sword barely an inch from her face, "That's not important, Ragyo!"

" *Au contraire*, Isshin!"

Her arms quivered at the effort necessary to counter Isshin's impressive strength, manicured fingers trembling when the Needle Blades pushed towards her neck, "His *affection* towards Satsuki made it THAT much more difficult for Ichigo strike it down! Even if Ichigo *knew* otherwise, defeating something that looked, sounded and *behaved* like my failure of a daughter must be *devastating* !"

"Then you certainly don't know Ichigo!"

Cartilage shattered - blood and spittle spraying from gasping lips - when Isshin slammed his forehead against Ragyo's nose. As the normally composed and implacable woman staggered backwards, one hand clutching her face, he scoffed, shihakusho rustling as spiritual energy thrummed through his Life Fibers, "Ichigo's tougher than you think, Ragyo. But you're right about one thing. He's probably feeling guilty about destroying your clone of Satsuki. I'll be sure to talk to him later about how he feels. He'll probably yell at me, saying he's fine and to mind my own business. That's Ichigo's decision. But I'll have all the time in the world once you're stopped."

"Stopped!?"

The word rolled off Ragyo's tongue alongside a short, yet deep, chuckle, "Don't be absurd, Isshin. *You*, of all people, should know the Original Life Fiber cannot be stopped."

She lowered her hand, exposing the manic grin as the damage marring her features vanished, "Life Fibers are the beginning and end of ALL things. Humanity's existence - no, everything on the planet - are fated to become their nourishment! To be devoured as part of the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet! Stalling me with this pathetic display of resistance won't change -"

An appreciable wave of spiritual pressure brushed against her mind, turning her condemnation of Isshin's poor life choices - including betraying *her* for the naked apes - into a strangled grunt.

*HIM!*

Ragyo's eyes twitched furiously at the familiarity. Her fingers gripped the Needle Blades tightly enough that the weapons trembled. That man - that *shinigami* - was inside the Kiryuin Manor, which meant only one thing. A hiss of air escaped clenched teeth, arms quivered from barely suppressed *rage* as she looked over her shoulder, watching with widening eyes as the landscape surrounding her ancestral home twisted, warping and rippling like waves on stilled water. What!? What was this!? What had that abominable man DONE!? With righteous indignation, Ragyo turned back to Isshin, *seething* at the guilt concealed beneath false innocence.

An overwhelming sensation of *betrayal* swept through her mind. So, this was his plan! He was keeping her distracted - *stalling her* - long enough for that atrocious shinigami to reach the Forbidden Chamber! The Original Life Fiber was in danger! And it was all ISSHIN'S fault He betrayed her! All for the pigs in human clothing! How could -"

The anger clouding her judgment, urging her to attack Isshin without abandon, vanished when a celestial presence filled her thoughts.

She repressed a jubilant laugh. Did that contemptible shinigami attempt to seal away the Original Life Fiber using Kisuke Urahara's technique? *La vie est drôle!* It was a flagrant insult to her intelligence! After breaking through her wards, bypassing the *other* protections and witnessing the majesty of the Original Life Fiber with his unworthy gaze, the man attempted using the exact, same technique as Kisuke Urahara? Ragyo didn't know what was worse - his overbearing arrogance or contemptible rudeness. A man possessing his knowledge of Life Fibers should have *known* the Original Life Fiber wouldn't fall for the same thing *twice* .

That he didn't spoke *volumes* about her overestimation of Sosuke Aizen's abilities.

Ragyo felt herself moving when the Original Life Fiber enveloped her mind, filling her body and soul with its glorious presence. Isshin, despite his stubbornness and refusal to see the truth, wasn't *stupid* . They were *equally* connected to the divine creature awakening beneath the Kiryuin Manor. And as her body raised its arm, multicolored radiance coalescing around her fingers, she believed - no, knew - beyond a shadow of a doubt he was *terrified* . Horrified by the sudden presence inside his mind, something he *forcibly* suppressed for years. It was obvious from his frozen posture, a brief moment where his guard was lowered relative to her own.

With her lips curling into a smirk independent of any conscious control, Ragyo watched her hand press against Isshin's stomach, bringing the man back to harsh reality.

"Éclat Divine."

The energy detonated point-blank, sending a shockwave of *rippling* rainbow light smashing into the ground. Pressing harder than necessary as a *secondary* explosion encompassed her body, grinning despite the feedback vaporizing half of her right arm, Ragyo memorized Isshin's expression in the brief moment time stood still, her chin resting over his shoulder right before he was sent soaring backwards. With the front of his shihakusho destroyed, exposing his physique unaffected by the ravages of time, she watched the only man she loved smash into the ground, crashing through building after building before stopping in the outskirts of Tokyo thousands of feet away.

And then she *moved*, descending towards Honnouji Academy.

There was no point wasting her precious time basking in the fleeting sense of temporary victory. Even a point-blank Éclat Divine would only inconvenience Isshin for a minute. Three at the most. In fact, she could already feel his presence recovering. Tearing through the *many* anti-Life Fiber defenses Satsuki 'secretly' installed throughout her former kingdom, metal and concrete parting like water against

her body, Ragyo smirked as she landed in the Sewing Club, her heel tapping against the floor with a soft *clack* .

"Oh Nui..."

She offhandedly noticed the Grand Couturier slumped against the ground, tears streaming from her eyes, "It appears you underestimated Ryuko's newfound strength. Still, you managed to protect Shinra Koketsu long enough for me to deal with Isshin. And that's all that matters."

"RAGYO KIRYUIN!"

An earsplitting *clang* echoed across the Sewing Club, shattering the metal plating underneath her heels as she halted her daughter's attack. With the Scissor Blade quivering against her Needle Blade, streams of crimson blasting from her former husband's weapon, Ragyo sighed, "How rude..."

Ryuko coughed as she found herself lifted off the ground, the muscles in her stomach twisting around Ragyo Kiryuin's fist. What the hell!? She didn't even see the bitch move! Gagging on the blood trickling from the corner of her mouth, *choking* when Ragyo wrapped a hand around her throat tightly enough that she found it difficult to breath, she snarled at the arrogant expression in the matriarch's eyes. Like hell she was going to let the bitch win! Not this time!

"Take this!"

Crimson energy enveloped the Scissor Blade as she swung towards the only target available - Ragyo Kiryuin's neck - with Senketsu's full power, "Niban Gen -"

"... but I simply *don't* have time to deal with your childish nonsense."

Ragyo afforded herself a moment's hesitation to ponder the situation as Ryuko crashed through the ceiling of the Sewing Club, screaming obscenities at the top of her lungs. It appeared her former husband

was a terrible father. A young lady - *especially* her daughter - should watch their language. It was unbecoming of a Kiryuin, even one raised without proper guidance or direction, to shout, let alone *speak*, such ugly words. But Ryuko's resilience *was* surprising. Her misguided daughter had grown stronger than expected fighting those pathetic Quincy and that vampire. And, if Senketsu's power was any indication, on the cusp of something *wonderful* .

It was a shame there was no time to examine the Kamui's threading. The things she could *learn* from her former husband's creation...

*Mais telle est la vie.*

"Your work is finished, Nui."

She hooked two fingers underneath the straps of her dress, pausing long enough to frown, before pulling down the silk-like material with fond reverence. It was a shame discarding one of Isshin's gifts. But she no longer needed to adorn herself with lesser clothing. Something he *would* understand soon enough. There was simply nothing he - nor anyone - could do to stop the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet.

As the fabric slid against her skin, exposing taut flesh before falling around her feet, Ragyo took a single, shuddering breath and stepped towards Shinra Koketsu, ignoring the comatose Grand Couturier barely acknowledging her presence, "I can't *wait* to find out how it feels on me."

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" ***Ryuko!***"

"I'm working on it, Senketsu!"

Ryuko gnashed her teeth as the kaleidoscopic energy crashed against the Scissor Blade. The constant humming of the spiritual energy beating against her ears - an annoying sound that made it almost impossible to hear Senketsu - pissed her off! Snarling when the scenery beneath Ragyo Kiryuin's overpowered attack changed, shifting from the familiar neighborhood that looked a lot like Mako's to the eerily calm surface of Tokyo Bay, her dual-toned hair whipped frenziedly in the rushing wind as crimson energy enveloped the Scissor Blade.

Like hell she was going to let her bitch of a mom send them flying all the way back to Karakura Town!

"Screw this! Ichiban Genkai!"

Her mom's technique warped as she swung the Scissor Blade as hard as possible, throwing Senketsu's full power into the Ichiban Genkai. Multicolored spiritual energy buckled against the hardened Life Fiber weapon, clashing violently in an explosion of light that seriously hurt her eyes. But Ryuko didn't stop. She could feel Senketsu's pain as their Life Fibers reached their limits. And that only made her want to win even more! Shouting at the top of her lungs, Ryuko pushed every last scrap of power into the Scissor Blade, *slashing* through her mom's attack.

"God... damn... it!"

Ryuko struggled to catch her breath, panting heavily while smoke wafted from the Scissor Blade, "That was too damn close, Senketsu!"

**" *It could have been worse, Ryuko.* "**

Senketsu grumbled at the damage to his threading. Not only were several patches of his Life Fibers scorched, but deflecting something as powerful as Ragyo Kiryuin's attack left them rather drained. It was an uncomfortable - and unwanted - sensation. Especially so soon after fighting that shinigami in London. The one with the disturbing

Bankai, " ***Do you remember what Ragyo Kiryuin said about Ichigo's father?***"

"Not really," Ryuko lowered the Scissor Blade and looked down, noticing for the first time she was standing hundreds of feet above the ground. *Without* Shippu. Something that would have been handy against the shinigami and her stupidly overpowered Bankai.

"But talking about Ichigo's dad can wait! Senketsu Shippu!"

Her lower body transformed in a burst of crimson light and stars. Newly-formed jet engines wrapped around her legs, momentarily sputtering before *blasting* at full power, sending her rocketing back towards Honnouji Academy. Senketsu might not be the fastest Kamui, but he was pretty damn fast when push came to shove! And right now, kicking her mom's glowing ass meant they couldn't afford holding anything back!

"Because I want to see the look on her face when I tear that stupid outfit apart!"

She reached the outer limits of the No-Star Slums in *seconds* . Another second later she spiraled over Honnouji Academy's walls, Senketsu's eye briefly turning bloodshot as the Scissor Blade transformed into Decapitation Mode. Ignoring the transmitter in the middle of the courtyard, she spiraled tightly towards the hole in the side of the school leading straight into the Sewing Club.

Only to slam face-first into a Life Fiber barrier.

"Gah!"

An undignified grunt accompanied Ryuko's descent when she bounced against the ground, rolling head-over-heels with her cursing becoming increasingly vulgar. Angrily stabbing the Scissor Blade into the ground when she *finally* came to an embarrassing - and completely undignified - stop, she turned around, *glaring* at the shimmering barrier, "Fuck! I forgot about that stupid thing!"



**"Ragyo Kiryuin hasn't been sitting around,"** Senketsu shook around Ryuko, dislodging the shredded Life Fibers from his threading, **"I'm still a little lightheaded, but I don't remember it being so large. Or forming so quickly. And I'm certain the Life Fibers are circulating as fast as those in Isshin Kurosaki's barrier. So be careful, Ryuko. We don't know whether or not Ragyo Kiryuin wove any more surprises."**

"That's just freakin' great!"

Ryuko rubbed away the smudge of dirt on her cheek. She should have guessed one of Satsuki's crappy inventions would eventually bite them in the ass! How the hell were they going to destroy a Life Fiber barrier? It was impossible to scratch the damn things! Something she learned first-hand after Senketsu's Niban Genkai failed to *dent* the barrier around Karakura Town. But there had -

Her mind ground a screeching halt when she remembered something important. It might look the same. It even *felt* the same. But this thing *wasn't* a Life Fiber barrier! It was something else!

And that meant they had a chance!

"Hey, Senketsu. I have an idea. But it's gonna be risky..."

**" Yes! I see what you're planning!"**

Senketsu gave his best impression of a smirk - the multicolored rings of his eye narrowing - at the interesting idea, **"Hitting that barrier with our full power should work!"**

"Then what the hell are we waiting for!? Senketsu Senkou!"

The sensation of Senketsu tightening around her body was overshadowed by the seriousness of the situation. She needed to hit Satsuki's stupid barrier hard and fast! There was no time to waste *thinking* about a plan! Spitting angrily onto the ground as Senketsu's horns lengthened, resembling Junketsu's only significantly more

jagged, Ryuko gripped the Scissor Blade with both hands, curling her fingers through the perfectly-shaped grooves along the handle, "We'll only get one shot, Senketsu, so let's make it count!"

"Don't waste your energy, Ryuko!"

Satsuki landed between Ryuko and the High-Velocity Life Fiber Jammer, preventing her sister from wasting energy attempting to achieve the impossible. Turning around with a sharp *clack* of Junketsu's heel when Ichigo arrived, brow furrowed at the limited number of possibilities explaining Ryuko's predicament, her frown deepened into a glowering scowl, "The High-Velocity Life Fiber Jammer might not have the same defensive capabilities as Isshin Kurosaki's barrier, but it's not less formidable! It must be attacked simultaneously and with perfect coordination if we are to have the slightest chance of overloading the redundant Life Fiber systems!"

"Damn it!"

Ichigo frowned as the autumn wind gusted, blowing through Honnouji Academy's courtyard with ominous ferocity. He could sense Orihime's spiritual pressure inside the building but she wasn't in the same place. She must have left the Student Council chambers after he was ambushed by that Life Fiber clone. And if she was currently running around, that could only mean Ragyo Kiryuin didn't have any other traps waiting for them, "That complicates things. I'm guessing Ragyo Kiryuin is hiding somewhere inside that barrier, right?"

"Yeah, she blindsided Senketsu and me after we finished kicking Nui Harime's ass."

Ryuko swung the Scissor Blade towards Honnouji Academy's central tower, snarling at the *intimate* memory of Ragyo sending her flying out of the Sewing Club, "The bitch's probably busy fitting her ugly ass into Shinra Koketsu!"

"Oh, dear. That is *not* how a daughter should address her mother."

A series of powerful explosions rippled through Honnouji Academy, crisscrossing up the central tower in alternating colors as mocking laughter filled the courtyard. With an entrance worthy of someone of her stature - announcing her reemergence with extravagant flair - Ragyo appeared upon the school's pinnacle alongside an eruption of blinding radiance, Shinra Koketsu conveying both *power* and *hierarchy*. Smirking triumphantly while floating above Honnouji Academy, the thought of *dirtying* Shinra Koketsu by touching something so filthy never crossing her mind, she extended a single, talon-like finger, the gesture almost unnoticeable within the multicolored light effusing the ultimate Kamui.

"In any case, what makes you think I'll give you the chance to ruin my plans?"

**" *That's Shinra Koketsu!? It's...* "**

**"... *colorful?* "**

Ryuko frowned, but not at Mugetsu's question or Junketsu's answer. Something didn't feel *right* about Ragyo Kiryuin. The bitch was flaunting the so-called ultimate Kamui like it was the newest fashion. Something that gaudy *had* to be powerful. But her mom's spiritual pressure didn't feel any different than it did five minutes ago. Cursing under her breath, Senketsu shuddering as goosebumps broke out across his Life Fibers, she tightened her grip on the Scissor Blade.

"That gaudy outfit didn't make her any stronger! So why the hell is she so damn confident!?"

"That does not matter, Ryuko!"

Satsuki *dared* not look away from their mother, focusing her recently acquired spiritual prowess on the billowing white and ruby cross-stitched folds of Shinra Koketsu, "Ragyo Kiryuin would never announce herself in so grandiose a manner - ruining the element of surprise in the process -without a plan! But not the circumstances of

her arrival! Despite wearing Shinra Koketsu, our mother deigned to emerge behind the safety of the High-Velocity Life Fiber Jammer!"

"Which means she's not yet at full power," Ichigo raised Tournesol and his duplicate Bakuzan, scowling when Ragyo Kiryuin's smirk widened, "The only question is how do we take her down."

Ragyo listened to her eldest daughter's astute observation, a twinge of something resembling motherly pride forming in the back of her mind. But she wasn't smiling at Satsuki putting thirteen years of meticulous sculpting - gently molding her body into the barest facsimile of a worthy daughter - to barely adequate use. That much she *expected* from the start. No, she was pleased that Isshin's son had confiscated her experiment's copy of Bakuzan, forged from hardened Life Fibers much like the original blade. And judging from Ichigo's posture and scowl, he *knew* what two hardened Life Fiber weapons could accomplish against a Life Fiber Hybrid.

Something he undoubtedly learned from Isshin or Kisuke Urahara.

"Oh, Ichigo..."

A hint of burnt orange appeared beneath Shinra Koketsu's billowing sleeve when she raised her right arm, grinning at the sudden *terror* filling Honnouji Academy, "You have *so much* to learn."

"ORIHIME!"

Ichigo *moved* the moment he saw Orihime in Ragyo Kiryuin's grasp, flickering across Honnouji Academy before Mugetsu finished transforming into Zangetsu. Spiritual energy writhed around Tournesol and Bakuzan when he reappeared in front of Ragyo, separated from the woman by the High-Velocity Life Fiber Jammer. He could hear Satsuki shouting, telling him to calm down. But he couldn't - no, he *refused* - to let anything happen to Orihime! Slamming both weapons into the barrier only to snarl when they abruptly *stopped*, skittering across the vibrating edge without doing *anything*, Ichigo shouted despondently, his voice turning *desperate* .

"Let her go!"

Ragyo ran several fingers through Orihime's hair, ignoring Ichigo's outburst while keeping her other hand clamped over her daughter's mouth, "Orihime's powers are unique, wouldn't you agree?"

Amusement fluttered through her soul as she caressed Orihime's cheek, wiping away the tears staining her daughter's face, "Only a true Daughter of the Original Life Fiber could undo the damage to the Grand Couturier's eye! Eliminating Souichiro's final act of pitiful defiance against me!"

A melodramatic sigh passed between her lips when Ryuko decided to assist Ichigo's foolish efforts. Children these days simply *didn't* have respect for their elders. Without the slightest care about their efforts, only moderately interested in the power being thrown against the High-Velocity Life Fiber Jammer, she brought Orihime into a tight embrace, fingers clasped around her daughter's waist. Leaning over Orihime when Ichigo and Ryuko's spiritual pressures increased, forcing the barrier to compensate, a single, shuddering breath passed between her slightly parted lips.

"But that's only a small fraction of her true capabilities."

She pressed a hand against Orihime's heart, holding one of the cheap hairpins between her fingers, "The true form of Orihime's power - that which you call Shun Shun Rikka - is none other than Absolute Domination!"

"What!?"

"It's quite obvious, Ryuko," Ragyo was mildly annoyed by her daughter's disbelief. Did Ryuko believe an ordinary human - even those with peculiar and interesting abilities - could regenerate damage caused by the Scissor Blades? Did she arrogantly assume a pig in human clothing - shinigami or otherwise - could bring the dead back to life?

It was ludicrous even considering such foolish notions!

"While dearest Nui and Amu were created with the singular purpose of *weaving* Shinra Koketsu, they could not grant it life."

She swept her gaze downwards, lips curling into a smile, "Another component was necessary. The finishing touch, if you will."

Ichigo's heart *stopped* when thousands of Life Fibers emerged from Shinra Koketsu, wrapping around Orihime before she could blink, "DON'T DO IT!"

He stabbed Tournesol and Bakuzan into the High-Velocity Life Fiber Jammer when Orihime was *pulled* into Shinra Koketsu. An explosion of spiritual energy sliced into his arms when the backlash burnt Mugetsu's Life Fibers, blackening the armor around his hands. But despite pushed *everything* into shredding apart the barrier - his heart sinking at the pain Mugetsu felt as the barrier rippled, forcing their spiritual energy up his arms - Ichigo realized it *wasn't working* .

"ORIHIME!"

Ichigo was *forced* to watch - to listen to Ragyo Kiryuin's laughter - when Orihime disappeared inside Shinra Koketsu. Teetering on the edge of despair, shouting Orihime's name one final time, he felt Ryuko's hand grab Mugetsu and *pull*, yanking him sideways moments before an explosion of multicolored spiritual energy slammed into the barrier.

"GETSUGA TENSHOU!"

The High-Velocity Life Fiber Jammer *popped* like a cork when Isshin unleashed the spiritual energy writhing around his blade. Strands of shredded Life Fibers disintegrated within the kaleidoscopic wave of energy carving a path *through* Honnouji Academy, turning the pinnacle of the school - and the Student Council Chambers - into dust. A thump shook the artificial island keeping Honnou City from sinking into Tokyo Bay when his Getsuga Tenshou sliced through the

Two-Star Residential Districts before detonating in a blast of light overwhelming *everything* for miles.

"Ichigo!"

Isshin shouted over the crackling energy of his Getsuga Tenshou, out of breath for the first time in *ages*. He understood why Ichigo was shell-shocked. What Ragyo did to Orihime was reprehensible. If he had recovered from Ragyo's sucker punch a little faster... if he hadn't allowed the Original Life Fiber to get inside his mind... none of this would be happening. But there wasn't time to drown their sorrows! Not when Ragyo was on the verge of destroying everything, "Pull yourself together! Ragyo might have absorbed Orihime but there's still time to save her!"

"I..."

"Hey!"

Ryuko stomped towards Ichigo before ending his stupid protests by punching him in the shoulder. *Hard*. After the initial shock wore off - and Ichigo's surprise faded into something a little more familiar - she scowled, turning away while keeping her hand pressed against Mugetsu, "The old goat's right, so pull yourself together! Because there's no way I'm going to let Ragyo Kiryuin win! Senketsu and me... we're gonna kick her ass! And when we're done kicking her ass, we're gonna save Orihime. Got it!?"

"... you're right. Thanks, Ryuko."

"Damn straight I'm right," she playfully punched Ichigo again - just to get the point across - before noticing Satsuki standing next to his dad. But her sister somehow arriving without making a sound *wasn't* why she suddenly turned around, covering her eyes with one hand.

"Put on some freakin' clothing, will ya!?"

Isshin ignored Ryuko's embarrassment with experience born from seventeen years as a father, raising three *normally* well-behaved children. That he wasn't wearing anything other than hakama and a single sandal - all that remained after Ragyo took advantage of his momentary lapse in focus - shouldn't bother anyone with confidence in their own self-image. Frowning when the presence in the back of his mind strengthened, he turned to Satsuki, brushing aside Ichigo's own complains, "There's a way to save Orihime. But I'll need -"

"Welcome back, Isshin."

The smoke enveloping Ragyo vanished when she casually flicked her wrist, sending the talkative man slamming into the wall above Honnouji Academy's entrance. She smiled tenderly when blood spewed from Isshin's mouth as the concussive force shattered his bones and liquefied several of his organs. Now, why on earth would she allow him to speak about sensitive matters in front of their children? Isshin truly was an audacious man. Not only did he presume she *wasn't* listening to their conversation, but he was so focused on stopping her - stopping the Original Life Fiber - that he neglected his personal appearance, leaving him naked from the waist up.

Not that she was complaining.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to kill me."

Ragyo chuckled softly when Ryuko attacked without the slightest provocation. She would be the first to admit that Senketsu's power was impressive. More so than expected. However, compared to Shinra Koketsu, *all* Life Fibers - Kamui included - paled in comparison. Maroon eyes, ringed by kaleidoscopic coloration, closed as her daughter screamed angrily at the top of her lungs. A single, talon-like finger extended from her curled hands when spiritual energy rippled down the Scissor Blade, painting the crimson edge with light so grandiose she could *feel* Ryuko's spiritual energy in her Life Fibers.



And an earsplitting *clang* resonated across Honnouji Academy - timed *beautifully* with Ryuko's expression of terrified shock - when she *stopped* the hardened Life Fiber blade's descent using nothing more than a single finger.

"What the hell!?"

Her shoulders trembled, shaking from repressed laughter as she clamped the Scissor Blade between her finger and thumb, preventing Ryuko from retreating despite her daughter's best efforts. Absolute Domination was magnificent! She could feel Orihime's power flowing through Shinra Koketsu! Through her own Life Fibers! Filling her with power befitting someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber! It was unlike anything she'd ever experienced!

"Tenrai Kagai!"

She allowed Satsuki the opportunity to strike Shinra Koketsu with all the strength her frail, human body could handle. It didn't matter whether Junketsu ascended into her Fashion Week Apparel. The concepts of physical ability and spiritual prowess amounted to *nothing* against Absolute Domination. That was simply how the world worked. And when Bakuzan stopped *cold* against Shinra Koketsu, trembling angrily against the nape of her neck while the sapphire energy enveloping the midnight black weapon shattered like glass, she laughed, the sound both melodious and regal.

"It's useless, Satsuki."

She heard Satsuki's faint gasp when Bakuzan failed to damage Shinra Koketsu. She sensed her daughter's frustration when the backlash left her hands trembling, blood dripping down her cheek. And yes, it was impossible to ignore Junketsu's shock, her curiosity silenced by the actions of her eldest daughter. Yet she tempered the pleasure threatening, refusing to let amusement at Satsuki's *hopelessness* cloud her judgment.

With Orihime having fulfilled her purpose, there was nothing in Isshin's repertoire capable of matching Shinra Koketsu. Let alone countering Absolute Domination. She stood upon the cusp of victory. Nudist Beach's headquarters in Osaka was crippled by Esdeath and Yuu. Everything required to commence the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet - heralding the beginning of the end for humanity - was within her grasp.

However, Isshin was acquaintances with Kisuke Urahara.

And she knew *from experience* not to underestimate that contemptible man.

"I'm afraid you lack the strength to cut a single thread on Shinra Koketsu. And even if you could, *I* would not allow you to do so."

Satsuki's eyes widened when Ragyo Kiryuin's fist smashed into Ryuko's stomach, the accompanying shockwave sending her sister crashing through Honnouji Academy's walls. She did not hesitate to *move* when their mother swept her arm backwards, hastily raising Bakuzan to fend off the same wave of physical force that incapacitated Isshin Kurosaki. Blood and spittle spewed from quivering lips when her arms buckled, Bakuzan forced aside by the overwhelming power of Shinra Koketsu.

Crashing towards the ground with a sharp *crackle* of thunder, darkness forming along the edges of her vision while Ragyo Kiryuin's mocking laughter filled her thoughts, Satsuki tensed when Ichigo's arms wrapped around her waist, their combined momentum sending him skidding nearly halfway across the courtyard.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she staggered away from Ichigo, stumbling when pain wracked her body. Even with Junketsu's superior endurance, she wasn't like Ichigo or Ryuko. She couldn't allow her mother to land another blow. With blood trickling from the corners of her mouth, peripherally aware of Isshin Kurosaki intercepting Ryuko before she

left Honnou City, she scowled at Ichigo, cutting off his warranted concerns involving her health.

"My wounds are superficial, Ichigo! They can wait until after we rescue Orihime Inoue from Shinra Koketsu!"

"I know," Ichigo glared at Ragyo Kiryuin, meeting the woman's amused gaze as Ryuko and his dad landed next to Satsuki, "So, what's the plan? There has to be a way to pull Orihime out of that thing!"

"EXCELSUS."

Satsuki felt Junketsu's curiosity while Ichigo's brow furrowed at the name, "Honnouji Academy's final defense apparatus against the Original Life Fiber. If we can activate EXCELSUS without drawing Ragyo Kiryuin's attention, the combined power of its Anti-Life Fiber weaponry might be enough to weaken Shinra Koketsu's hold upon Orihime."

"An interesting plan, Satsuki."

Satsuki stiffened at the amused voice nearly whispering in her ear. She immediately pivoted, Junketsu's heels *clacking* as she leapt away from Ragyo Kiryuin, Bakuzan held diagonally across her chest. Without preamble, giving neither sign nor indication from her monstrous spiritual pressure, her mother had appeared behind them. *Moving* from Honnouji Academy's tower fast enough that even Isshin Kurosaki was unprepared.

"EXCELSUS is quite possibly the strongest Anti-Life Fiber system on the planet," Ragyo memorized her eldest daughter's frustration before sweeping her gaze towards Isshin, sighing wistfully at the conflicted expressions dancing in his eyes, "But I'm afraid you *sadly* overestimate its capabilities. Your 'final defense apparatus' cannot hope to stand against the Original Life Fiber. Which means against Shinra Koketsu... it's no more of a threat than those naked apes!"

"I don't give a crap about Shinra Koketsu!"

The Scissor Blade shimmered as Ryuko clenched the sword with both hands, "Because once we're done kicking your ass, we're going to pull Orihime out of that ugly dress!"

"Is that what you think?"

Ragyo shook her head, sighing in faux disappointment when Senketsu - followed by Junketsu and Mugetsu - transformed into their advanced configuration. Even Isshin's posture had changed, the stubborn man raising his weapon despite *knowing* the true power of Absolute Domination coursing through Shinra Koketsu. It was tragic. And *irritating*. That Ichigo and her daughters believed they possessed the ability to remove Orihime from Shinra Koketsu - to cripple the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet when she stood upon the cusp of victory - was insulting.

And that could NOT go unpunished.

The large, billowing sleeves of Shinra Koketsu rustled when she extended her arms, sweeping them outwards in a welcoming gesture. Talon-like fingers splayed widely as kaleidoscopic light enveloped her hands, rising in flame-like waves dissipating several meters above her head. Smirking when symmetrical sets of eyes spun from Shinra Koketsu, the largest framing her hooded visage, she chuckled at Isshin's terrified expression, something Ichigo appeared to notice with surprising rapidity.

"It would be foolish to presume the possibility you succeed - however remote - doesn't exist. Miracles *do* occur, after all."

Her voice twisted demonically as the light enveloping her hands *erupted* outwards, radiating *proudly* across the courtyard while the multicolored backdrop accompanying Shinra Koketsu devoured the darkness, "But I cannot - no, I refuse - to allow your arrogant, childish resistance interfere with the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet!"

Ichigo's eyes widened at the light surrounding Ragyo Kiryuin's hands. Something was wrong. He could sense it. Whatever this light was, it wasn't spiritual energy. But before he could move - retreat to a safe distance until he determined *what* Satsuki's mom was planning - Mugetsu *screamed* inside his head, trembling as she returned to normal in a flash of blue light.

"Mugetsu!? What's going -"

He stumbled to his knees, when every last scrap of spiritual energy was suddenly - and *violently* - ripped from his body. Struggling to move, fingers curled through the dirt as the light from Shinra Koketsu *intensified*, Ichigo stiffened when he noticed the same thing happening to Ryuko and Satsuki, "What the hell? Why can't I move!?"

"***I-I don't know,***" Mugetsu quivered, her threading unresponsive, "***But that light... it's doing something to me, Ichigo! My Life Fibers are paralyzed!***"

"C'mon, Senketsu!"

Ryuko leaned against the Scissor Blade, gripping the curved handle with shaking fingers, "Pull yourself together! We've been through tougher crap than a little light show!"

"***It's no use, Ryuko! I have no strength! The moment that strange light hit us, all of my power vanished!***"

"Shinra Koketsu is the master of all Life Fibers."

The divine light enveloping her hands flickered - and then faded entirely - when Ragyo watched Isshin falter, his Life Fibers weakened nearly to the point of death. It was disheartening having to strike down the only man she loved. But Isshin's refusal to accept the truth shown to them by the Original Life Fiber - that humanity only existed to serve as nourishment for Life Fibers - required some tough love, "Any Life Fibers that choose to rebel against it are

rendered powerless, stripped of their strength until such thoughts are removed. That, my dear Ryuko, is Absolute Domination!"

"RAGYO!"

Isshin staggered onto his feet, forcing himself to stand despite Absolute Domination and eliciting a raised eyebrow from the woman, "STOP THIS!"

She snapped her fingers, cutting off Isshin's outburst as *pure light* streamed from Shinra Koketsu towards the transmitter in the middle of the courtyard. Weakened or not, allowing the man even a modicum of time to think was foolish. While it was almost certain Isshin was trying to dissuade her from commencing the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet, playing upon her emotions and empathy for the pigs in human clothing that, quite frankly, didn't exist, there was also the possibility he was stalling for time.

"Now..."

And considering Kisuke Urahara was still alive, she couldn't take that chance.

"Awaken, all you slumbering Life Fibers!"

Honnouji Academy *shook* when a column of glorious light - equally magnificent in both beauty and divinity - erupted from the transmitter. The artificial island upon which the school stood trembled as the clouds above Honnou City - above Tokyo and Karakura Town - dispersed. Torn apart by the signal reaching the satellite locked in geostationary orbit above her daughter's fortress. Raising a hand towards the sky, *staring* at the multicolored light spreading throughout the heavens, Ragyo *laughed*, aware not only of Isshin's reaction but those of her daughters and his son, "Take on your true forms and cover this entire planet!"

"SHINRA KOKETSU! ABSOLUTE DOMINATION!"

# Come and Get Your Love

*Well, I don't have much to say for this chapter. I enjoyed writing it. Some parts more than others. Several loose ends were tied up. And seemingly insignificant events from Kill la Kill and Bleach were brought back into focus. So, I hope you enjoy reading it!*

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## Chapter 61 - Come and Get Your Love

"What the hell are we doing here!?"

Hiyori Sarugaki was annoyed. No, strike that. She was pissed off! Her nose was stuffed with snot, her cheeks stung from the cold and she couldn't feel half her body. It was bad enough they were in New York City, unable to speak a word of English. But standing outside in the middle of a blizzard, literally freezing their asses off while watching a stupid building? She was going to kill that bastard! As the corners of her mouth twitched, a single fang poking against her chin, she turned around with a huff, stomping away from the edge of the roof with more force than perhaps necessary.

Only to immediately slip on a patch of ice.

"We're supposed to observe the Revocs Distribution Facility. And report to Nudist Beach the strength of the Life Fiber uniforms produced. "

Lisa Yadomaru sipped the expensive brand of coffee. She savored the liquid's bitterness, tasting every exotic flavor while patiently waiting for the string of obscene curses leaving her fellow Visored's mouth to finish. It was fortunate their current vantage point was several stories above the street. And the snowstorm covering the

east coast muffled everything. Not to mention the Kido barrier covering the roof. Having to relocate because of Hiyori's short temper - and the ability of Ragyo Kiryuin's employees to track suspicious movements without knowing how to sense spiritual pressure - would have been problematic.

"Don't repeat that crap!"

Snow cascaded down the blonde's face as she waved an arm at the New York Distribution Facility. It was impossible for anyone - even morons like Ichigo and that short-tempered girl always at his side - to not sense the strange spiritual energy coming from the building, "I don't get it! Something that suspicious shouldn't exist! The shinigami should have investigated this place years ago! And where are the damn Hollows!? With this much spiritual energy, the bastards should be swarming the place!"

The former lieutenant narrowed her eyes. She had noticed the distinct lack of Hollows since arriving, "I suppose you -"

"It's bad enough I'm freezing my ass off!"

Hiyori pulled out her phone - a caricature of Kisuke's face sketched on the back - and threw it against the roof, "But why the hell did we agree to help the bastard? We don't owe that badly crap!"

"Don't you remember?"

Lisa turned the page in her manga, "We decided not to help Kisuke. The decision was unanimous."

It was difficult forgetting the afternoon almost a week ago when Kisuke arrived at their new residence, a fruit basket in one hand and plane tickets in the other. After their former safe-house was destroyed during Satsuki Kiryuin's invasion - conveniently when they were out of town - Ryuken Ishida had offered them a new place to live. One of the many apartments abandoned after the Karakura Town Raid Trip. Fully furnished with all the amenities and free of



charge. While Love had expressed his gratitude, she made sure the Quincy knew they owed him nothing.

They had no reason to help Nudist Beach fight Ragyo Kiryuin or deal with the psychotic Grand Couturier.

Which made Kisuke's appearance - after faking his death *and* duplicating the keys to their new apartment - that much more frustrating.

"Unfortunately, Olivier Armstrong made a very persuasive argument."

Lisa had trouble hiding her grin when Hiyori's frustration immediately vanished. The reaction was, as always, hilarious. There were only a handful of people capable of convincing her fellow Visored to do anything. At least, not without risking their health. Or getting barraged by insults. But the leader of Nudist Beach accomplished the impossible, which was no small feat. Olivier Armstrong - an otherwise normal human without a sense of humor - *scared* Hiyori into obedience.

The short-tempered Visored's eyes twitched nervously at the woman's name, "That bitch had no -"

"Although, Kisuke had a point. There's been a lot of suspicious spiritual activity across the World of the Living over the last few weeks," Lisa placed the empty mug on the small table before reaching into the bag near her feet. Pulling out the well-worn next issue of the manga, she flipped open the back cover, purposely ignoring Hiyori, "The Quincy have been rather busy. But I'm more concerned about Alucard. The vampire devoured millions of souls before vanishing, which we only know about because of the Hellsing Organization's partnership with Nudist Beach."

"Hey! I wasn't done talking -"

"And there's Ragyo Kiryuin," Lisa flipped to the next page, "The CEO of the Kiryuin Conglomerate and something *worse* than Aizen. It's hard to imagine she's a monster determined to sacrifice humanity to Life Fibers in some grand, over-the-top, misanthropic plan that will not only destroy the World of the Living, but tear apart the Soul Society and Hueco Mundo as well."

More than an inch of thick snow covered the roof as she shrugged, "Which is why, personally, I think helping Kisuke was the right choice."

"Shut up! That's not what I was talking about!"

It took Hiyori most of her self-control not to throw the pair of binoculars in her hand at Lisa. She didn't care about Alucard, Ragyo Kiryuin or anyone else! Jabbing a finger against her chest, she snarled, "I want to know why we're doing Nudist Beach's grunt work *HERE* instead of someplace warm!"

"Because *you* pissed off Olivier Armstrong."

Lisa closed her eyes. It appeared she wasn't going to have any semblance of peace and quiet. Not after reminding Hiyori their predicament was *her* fault. Kisuke's horrified expression when Hiyori called the leader of Nudist Beach a 'bitch' should have been enough for Hiyori to know something was terribly wrong. But trying to slap the woman with her sandal? She turned to the next page in her manga and sighed. After punching Hiyori through a wall, blood spewing from her fellow Visored's broken nose, the woman proceeded to scare the living crap out of everyone present without raising her voice.

The woman was almost as frightening as Captain Unohana.

"God damn it!"

Hiyori stomped away, snarling at the mental image of Olivier Armstrong's cold eyes, "But we're ordering take-out tonight! No more

fancy food, got it!?"

"Whatever you say," Lisa drawled, "Just don't choose -"

The manga slipped from her fingers when the Kido barrier covering the roof shattered beneath an eruption of spiritual pressure. Disintegrating into shards of translucent energy. Reaching for her zanpakuto as echoes of the spiritual pressure reverberated across the city, shaking snow from several buildings before fading into nothing more than a whisper in her mind, Lisa glanced back and forth. Something with that much spiritual pressure, capable of emitting enough of a presence to physically affect the World of the Living, wouldn't stop at announcing their arrival.

But nothing happened.

Lisa breathed softly at the sudden stillness in the air. She couldn't sense anything wrong. No dimensional gateways between the World of the Living and Hueco Mundo. No Quincy or Life Fibers. Nothing. There was absolutely nothing accompanying that explosion of spiritual pressure. So, what was -

"Holy shit!"

Hiyori nearly tripped over her own feet when bands of multicolored light rippled through the clouds, "What the hell's going on!?"

The bookish Visored unsheathed her zanpakuto without a second thought, "Ragyo Kiryuin."

"What!?"

The blonde's neck audibly cracked as she turned around, "No way! There's no way we should sense that bitch all the way from -"

Screams. Thousands upon thousands of screams echoing across the city before suddenly ending - severed with almost surgical precision - caused both Visored to freeze. Watching with mounting

horror at the millions of Life Fiber cocoons disappearing into the clouds, Hiyori didn't notice the binoculars slipping from her fingers when everything turned *crimson* .

"What the fuck!?"

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Ragyo considered herself a passionate woman.

For decades, she'd striven to achieve the Original Life Fiber's mission. She spent every waking moment expanding the Kiryuin Conglomerate's influence across the planet. Assimilating competing textile companies and eliminating anyone standing in her way. Everything else - including her pursuit of Isshin - had come second to the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet.

With immense satisfaction, accentuated by the exhilaration thrumming through her Life Fibers, she clenched her hand into a fist. It took twenty years and dealing with countless setbacks and obstacles, but she finally delivered the *coup de grâce* . The signal from Shinra Koketsu was encircling the planet, activating the dormant Life Fibers worn by humanity. The Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet could no longer be stopped. Not by the naked apes, her children or even Isshin.

And that meant she could focus on tying up loose ends.

"Well now..."

She purposely drawled out the words, allowing each syllable to slowly pass between her lips. After seventeen years of stubbornness - betraying the Original Life Fiber and assisting her former husband's foolish organization - Isshin was finally rendered speechless. Laughter welled in her throat at his horrified expression. His reaction to her victory was touching, pulling on her heartstrings.

But it was her daughter's expression that earned a short, mocking sigh.

"You seem troubled, Satsuki."

It was depressing seeing her daughter in such a pitiful state. But she couldn't blame Satsuki. To have wasted her life pursuing Souichiro's asinine goals only to fail at the most inopportune moment had to hurt, "Is something wrong?"

"Don't think you've won yet, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

She barely acknowledged her daughter's petulant defiance. The blood trailing from the corner of her mouth, the way she struggled to move under Absolute Domination, diminished the effectiveness of the otherwise laudable statement, "Oh? Well, in that case, I assume you have something up your sleeves? A technique you've been saving? As far as can tell, Absolute Domination is affecting Junketsu."

"But perhaps you're only pretending Junketsu is rendered powerless," Ragyo pressed a hand against her cheek, sighing at the hatred burning in her daughter's eyes, "It wouldn't be the first surprise tonight."

The mockery served its purpose as Satsuki struggled to articulate her thoughts, "Now, if you're through bluffing. I believe I've -"

A soft fluttering caught her attention when Ryuko rushed forward, swinging the Scissor Blade with all the strength her weakened body could muster. Maroon eyes flickered towards the Kamui next to Satsuki - sleeves trembling under Absolute Domination - before returning to her daughter, who was wearing nothing more than her bra and panties. Impossible! Ryuko shouldn't be able to move, let alone raise the Scissor Blade against Shinra Koketsu.

Unless... of course.

Her lips curled into a facsimile of a smile. Senketsu was paralyzed by Absolute Domination. Its Life Fibers instinctively understanding the divine nature of Shinra Koketsu. Ryuko, on the other hand, was her flesh and blood. *Sa fille*. The heir to the Kiryuin name she wished Satsuki had been, albeit lacking manners and respect for her elders. A habit undoubtedly due to Souichiro's atrocious parenting. It seemed Ryuko was forcing her Life Fibers to ignore Absolute Domination with the same level of delicateness and decorum she applied to everything else in life, risking damaging her body to the point of death.

Children could be so *stubborn* .

Ryuko snarled when her bitch of a mom caught the Scissor Blade, *grabbing* the weapon between two fingers. Struggling under the weight of Absolute Domination, muscles seizing as the disturbing light sapped what little strength she had left, she stumbled, mouth opened in a silent gasp as blood dripped from her fingers.

"W-What the!?"

"Absolute Domination rendered your Life Fibers powerless, remember?"

She stiffened when a hand - the one that released the Scissor Blade - touched her shoulder, "That means your regeneration no longer works. For the moment, you're nothing more than a pig in human clothing."

Ragyo allowed the statement to sink into Ryuko's subconscious as her daughter struggled dealing with the concept of *pain* for the first time in weeks, "But let's be honest, did you really believe you had the right - *the privilege* - to touch Shinra Koketsu?"

**" *Ryuko! You're bleeding!* "**

"I'm fine, Senketsu," Ryuko pulled away from Ragyo, snarling as her vision swam. She could hear Ichigo saying something - maybe her

name - but her headache made it hard to hear anything. Damn it! Absolute Domination sucked! Her arms felt like lead, it was difficult to breathe and she couldn't feel her fingers, "It's going to take a lot more than some bruises to stop me!"

"You should listen to your Kamui."

Her former husband's masterpiece tried - and failed - assisting Ryuko. Collapsing onto the ground after only a few inches. Such an interesting specimen of Life Fiber clothing. To think it possessed enough strength to move under Absolute Domination, "Now, where was I?"

Ragyo caressed Isshin's shoulder before he realized she wasn't standing next to Ryuko. Her heart was fluttering at the tension pulsing through his Life Fibers, breath hitching at the fury bubbling beneath his silence. Unlike her daughters, Ichigo and the Kamui, all of whom could sense Shinra Koketsu's divine power, only Isshin could *feel* the vastness of its magnificent strength. His connection with the Original Life Fiber granted him the privilege of experience the purity of its Life Fibers. And as she leaned forward, pressing her hand against his bare chest, she quipped, "Ah, yes."

Kaleidoscopic threads spun from her finger, tracing patterns over Isshin's stomach as his tattered shihakusho regenerated. Weaving itself back together in a matter of seconds. She could not have the only man she loved stand before Shinra Koketsu half-naked, "*J'ai gagné*, Isshin."

"Ragyo..."

Isshin conserved his strength. Limiting his movement to no more than was necessary. Absolute Domination wasn't affecting his Life Fibers nearly as bad as Ichigo's or Ryuko's thanks to his connection with the Original Life Fiber. But his mouth felt like it was full of cotton. And his hair - the same shade of silver as Ragyo's - had dulled, the glowing undertone gone along with most of his spiritual energy.

There was no doubt about it. At this point, he wasn't sure anyone could defeat Ragyo before the World of the Living was destroyed.

But still...

He grabbed Shinra Koketsu, holding onto its sleeve with a trembling hand, "What have you done!?"

" *Vraiment?* "

It took considerable self-restraint to conceal her annoyance. Isshin *wasn't* stupid, which begged the question *why* he bothered saying something so inane in the first place, "I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer."

She lamented, not for the first time, her failure to reconnect with Isshin. To reconcile their differences. He wasn't like Kisuke Urahara or the naked apes, inferior beings convinced they could interfere with the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. They *were* troublesome. Perhaps irritating at times. But despite their best efforts, they were nothing more than annoyances. Cast aside like scraps of clothing at the first opportunity. She didn't doubt the naked apes - or even Satsuki - would sacrifice themselves given the chance. Throwing away their lives in some delusional attempt to destroy Shinra Koketsu.

But Isshin wasn't that naïve.

He knew Absolute Domination's effects were permanent unless she changed her mind.

And the man wasn't nearly boorish enough to request something so ridiculous!

"In any case..."

Her tone softened as she pried Isshin's fingers from Shinra Koketsu, "There's nothing you can say - *or do* - that will make me change my



mind. Although, to be perfectly honest, I'm disappointed by your performance tonight."

Maroon irises tinted with multicolored hues narrowed at Isshin's reaction. She couldn't help but find everything about the man fascinating. *Enrapturing* . Even knowing that humanity was hours from extinction - that they harbored no hope of harming a single one of Shinra Koketsu's threads - his expression was exactly what she expected. Above all else, despite his penchant for unpredictability, it was ludicrously simple pressing Isshin's buttons, "Stalling while that atrocious shinigami dared laying his filthy hands upon the Original Life Fiber was commendable. Tactical, even. And don't think I wasn't aware what Ryuko planned on doing to Shinra Koketsu."

A snarl - whether from Satsuki or Ryuko she did not care - caused her smile to broaden, "However, all this time I assumed you had one final trick up your sleeves. Perhaps another one of Kisuke Urahara's contemptible inventions. Something to be used on Shinra Koketsu or myself the moment I dropped my guard. But it seems, for once, I overestimated your intellect, Isshin. Not that I'm complaining."

Shinra Koketsu fluttered independently of the wind as she basked in Isshin's incompetency, "I *did* enjoy our time together."

"Wait a second!"

Ichigo struggled against the paralysis affecting Mugetsu. His arms trembled as he stumbled, one knee touching the dirt before he regained his balance, "You just said Kisuke could have made something capable of damaging Shinra Koketsu. But a minute ago you were boasting about its power. How Mugetsu and the others weren't a threat!"

He gasped for breath, panting while sweat trickled down his face. Damn it, it was difficult to move under Absolute Domination. He could barely hold Tournesol and Bakuzan. Removing Mugetsu could fix that problem - like Ryuko when she took off Senketsu - but fighting Ragyo Kiryuin in his condition was suicidal. Her spiritual

pressure was monstrous, beyond even Alucard's. And he could swear she was holding something back, "Which means you're either lying about Kisuke! Or your Kamui isn't unbeatable!"

"Oh? Lying, am I?"

Ragyo met Ichigo's dour glare with genuine interest. She didn't expect Isshin's son to remember her every word. It was impressive. But Ichigo wasn't *that* smart. He might be naturally gifted, able to analyze Satsuki's swordsmanship after only a single, childish confrontation in the schoolyard. His synchronization with Mugetsu might have progressed further than her initial expectations. But in his haste to prove her wrong, Ichigo unintentionally admitted the limits of his comprehension.

"Normally I would find such an accusation insulting," she flirted with punishing Ichigo before deciding against such drastic action, "But it appears Isshin never taught you the difference between fear and caution."

Shinra Koketsu fluttered when the Needle Blades appeared in a flash of light, teleporting from the Sewing Club into her hands, "Kisuke Urahara is brilliant. I never imagined a human, let alone shinigami, unravelling the Life Fiber Wards surrounding the Forbidden Room. Yet that man proved me wrong. I do not fear that man, Ichigo. His actions infuriate me, yes, but never I have believed, even for a moment, he could counter Absolute Domination."

A hint of anger permeated Ragyo's voice, "But I did not get this far assuming nothing was impossible. Kisuke Urahara *is* a threat. Or rather, was a threat. I cannot recall anyone other than Isshin or myself capable of unravelling Life Fiber Wards. And by removing the Marionette Threads from Amu, he made himself a far more present danger than Isshin, those naked apes and even than atrocious shinigami."

Maroon eyes flickered towards her eldest daughter, "Surely you agree, Satsuki, that it's better to err on the side of caution against

such an opponent?"

"Erring on the side of caution?"

Satsuki ignored the minor discomfort plaguing her body. She might be immune to Shinra Koketsu's Absolute Domination - an advantage over Ichigo, Ryuko and Isshin Kurosaki - but her humanity was a double-edged sword. Without Junketsu's power, honed over months through blood, sweat and sacrifice, the pain of her broken ribs pressing against her diaphragm was no longer numbed. But even so, she *refused* to grant Ragyo Kiryuin the satisfaction of anything resembling weakness!

"It's impossible to quantify the absurdities spewing from your mouth!"

She spat on the ground, clearing the coppery taste of blood from her mouth, "There's no question Absolute Domination is indeed powerful. But that you, of all people, would willingly divulge the possibility Kiske Urahara could undo your efforts, reverse decades of work, is laughable! Do you take us for fools!?"

"Think whatever you want, Satsuki."

Ragyo examined the Needle Blades, far more interested in their response to Shinra Koketsu than her daughter's delusions, before her lips slowly stretched into a smile. Closing her eyes as Honnouji Academy shook, exhilaration coursed through her Life Fibers as she stared at the crimson quilt blanketing the heavens, "Can you feel it? The Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet is progressing on schedule. The Life Fibers woven into every piece of Revocs clothing have begun converting humanity. In a few hours, this miserable world will shatter! Spreading the next generation of Life Fibers across the universe!"

"And once that's finished..."

The Needle Blades vanished into Shinra Koketsu as Ragyo curled a finger through Isshin's shihakusho, "We'll have *eternity* to work through our differences."

"Given my options," with a supreme effort, Isshin slapped away Ragyo's hand, "I'd rather die with the rest of humanity."

"Must you be so *stubborn* ?"

Ragyo hissed under her breath. There were limits to her patience. And Isshin seemed determined with his boorish refusal to accept reality to find just how far she was willing to tolerate his behavior. Why must he make their lives difficult? Unlike the naked apes, Quincy scurrying like rats in the shadows and shinigami, he would survive the Life Fiber diaspora alongside Ichigo, Ryuko and even dearest Nui and Amu. She would release them from Absolute Domination moments before the planet exploded, preventing any more childish skirmishes while allowing them to share in the glorious experience.

It was a shame Hououmaru wouldn't survive the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. Good help - especially a secretary with skills outside of corporate management - was hard to find these days. And, she reluctantly conceded, it was upsetting knowing Satsuki would perish alongside the rest of humanity. Her daughter somehow managed to ascend Junketsu into her fashion week apparel. Satsuki nearly tore her body apart, muscles tearing and bones shattering, but she accomplished the miraculous.

*La vie est drôle .*

She just needed to remember to recover Junketsu from Satsuki's corpse.

"And just what are *you* planning to do?"

Sarcasm clung to her question as an imposing figure marched through Honnouji Academy's entrance, shadows clinging to their tattered and torn cassock, "Iscaiot, right? I'm impressed you survived."

Heinkel refused to lower herself to Ragyo Kiryuin's level. There were far more pressing matters than worrying about childish taunts from an inhuman monster. Her expression tightened when the woman turned around, lips pulling back into a snarl. The kaleidoscopic light emanating from the monstrous garment was anathema. She didn't require supernatural perception to realize Shinra Koketsu spat in the face of God, "It's going to take more than puppets to kill me, Ragyo Kiryuin."

"I wasn't referring to those second-hand scraps of clothing."

Ragyo dismissed the paladin's insult against the Grand Couturier's work with all the mockery it deserved, "It's shameful, really. I expected *more* from my investment. After persuading the Pope to promote Enrico Maxwell to archbishop, knowing his lack of resistance to Life Fibers would render him little more than a puppet to his subconscious desires, realizing some of you people survived is disappointing."

"Wait a second!"

Ryuko couldn't believe what she was hearing, "YOU'RE the reason he went nuts!?"

"I consider myself a professional slayer of monsters and demons."

The wind swelled through the courtyard as Heinkel removed a damaged but mostly intact bible from her cassock. Placing her hand upon the holy scripture, aware of Ryuko's unkempt appearance, ethereal blue light shone from the inked pages as she focused upon the unholy abomination in the guise of Ragyo Kiryuin, "But for what you did to Maxwell, I'll make sure your soul rots in the deepest bowels of Hell."

"Alexander Anderson mentioned a similar threat..."

The intense light radiating from the bible in Heinkel Wolfe's hand was the only reason Ragyo didn't kill the woman. How interesting. She

couldn't remember Anderson using something like this. Lips curling into a smirk when the paladin swiped her other hand over the bible, sending countless pages fluttering through the courtyard, Ragyo *laughed*, "And since he's not here, I can only presume he perished in London."

"But you don't need to worry about mourning the dead."

Shinra Koketsu's eyes widened - the colors contracting in visible *anger* - as multicolored spiritual energy destroyed everything between Ragyo and Heinkel. The ground disintegrated beneath the paladin's feet, sending her flying backwards into Honnouji Academy's walls with a resounding *crack* . Her laughter resonating in the darkness as most of the glowing pages burst into flames, dissolving into ash raining upon the ground, Ragyo watched the paladin struggling with more than a modicum of satisfaction, "Because you'll soon be joining him."

"I think not, Ragyo Kiryuin."

A hiss of air passed through clenched teeth at the familiar voice.

"What!?"

She looked over her shoulder, pupils dilating as Tessai Tsukabishi materialized from within a swirling tornado of glowing pages. Snarling at the emerald light between the man's clasped hands, refusing to allow any acquaintance of Kisuke Urahara time to think, she lashed out, multicolored energy enveloping her fingers as the ground underneath Shinra Koketsu started glowing, "You -"

"KUKANTEN'!!"

In the blink of an eye, as Tessai forcefully separated his hands, veins bulging under the weight of the spiritual energy, Ragyo - and a sizable chunk of the courtyard - vanished in a flash of emerald light.

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"H-How..."

Electricity crackled along the surface of her raiment as she watched the screen showing Lady Ragyo. Or rather, where Lady Ragyo had been standing moments ago. Hououmaru tasted bile in her throat. Instead of Shinra Koketsu's breathtaking radiance covering Honnouji Academy - rendering all resistance useless - there was *nothing*. All that remained was a smoking crater and flickers of green light, "What happened? What did he do?"

Hououmaru rewatched the video, hands trembling when Lady Ragyo vanished in a flash of emerald light. How did that shinigami escape Lady Ragyo's attention? It was apparent Tessai Tsukabishi was working with Heinkel Wolfe. But even so, she should have detected his presence despite the paladin's obvious distraction. Snarling when the video repeated, the angle showing Lady Ragyo's bafflement at Tessai's arrival, she lashed out, slamming her hands against the controls. The shinigami didn't have the *privilege* of raising his hand against Shinra Koketsu, let alone behold the sacred garment with unworthy eyes!

And he had the *gall* to assault Lady Ragyo!?

She took a deep, steadying breath when the Life Fiber generator came online, filling the control room with its comforting hum. Her hatred towards the naked apes - towards the shinigami displaying unwarranted arrogance - transformed into tranquil fury as she closed her eyes.

This changed *nothing*.

Despite the outward appearance of success, Tessai Tsukabishi's actions accomplished nothing. It didn't matter if he miraculously transported Lady Ragyo across the world. Leaving her stranded in the middle of the ocean or somewhere in Africa. While impossible to

find out *where* - thanks to the quilt of Life Fibers rendering geolocation systems useless - their victory was already guaranteed. Absolute Domination was saturating the planet, awakening the dormant Life Fibers woven into every piece of clothing stitched by Revocs. Nothing could alter humanity's fate at this point.

Not even Isshin.

The pigs in human clothing were destined to serve as nourishment for Life Fibers. Not a single one would survive the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet - including herself, once she finished carrying out Lady Ragyo's final orders.

"But don't think..."

She *punched* the Life Fiber booster, injecting energy into EXCELSUS before twisting the curved controls in opposite directions, "... your insolent actions bear no consequences!"

A sharp, bitter laugh punctured the darkness as the electronic whining intensified. It was poetic justice that Satsuki's final defense apparatus - her so-called secret weapon - was turned against the Original Life Fiber's enemies. Those who dared stand against Lady Ragyo. She couldn't think of a more appropriate form of retribution. Satsuki deserved nothing less than watching her allies perish, slaughtered like the naked apes they were, after discarding her mother's generosity and benevolence. But she purposely stopped herself from fully activating EXCELSUS, content on allowing the weapon to remain on standby.

She needed to be careful about unleashing EXCELSUS upon the naked apes. Isshin, Ichigo and Ryuko remained within Honnouji Academy's walls. Their Life Fibers and Kamui were still weakened by Absolute Domination.

Lady Ragyo would be incensed if she injured Isshin in her haste to eliminate Tessai Tsukabishi.



"So, this is EXCELSUS."

Yuu Akiyama failed to conceal the noticeable limp in his right leg as he stumbled into the command center. Gripping the edge of the door as blood stained his Lâche Raiment, trickling from the fresh stitches across his abdomen, he chuckled despite the awkward silence, "It's fancier than I expected."

"Why are you alive, Yuu?"

Contempt dripped from her mouth as she demanded from the teenager a rather simple answer. His survival was an insult to everything she represented. And it took considerable restraint to not finish the job started by the naked apes. When the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier dissipated during Lady Ragyo's argument with Isshin, she presumed Yuu had fallen fighting Nudist Beach. Sacrificing himself to keep the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet from failing while killing several of the naked apes and their allies in the process. A self-professed coward he may be, but Yuu Akiyama belonged to Xcution. Lady Ragyo's orders were sacrosanct. Not to be questioned to debated. To be carried out to one's full capacity, even if it meant their death.

That he was standing before her, grievously wounded but *alive*, was unforgivable.

"Lady Ragyo's orders were simple. Yet you're standing *here* . Alive. And the Life Fiber Infinite Woven Barrier isn't functioning."

"Kisuke Urahara was smarter than I thought," Yuu removed his burglar's cap and domino mask, the pieces of clothing dissolving into Life Fibers, "He anticipated my plans with almost frightening accuracy."

Hououmaru didn't give the teenager a shred of sympathy. The torturous pain and internal bleeding wracking his body was nothing compared to what he'll experience once Lady Ragyo returned, "Fortunately, Lady Ragyo managed to adorn herself with Shinra

Koketsu despite your treachery. The Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet is still proceeding on schedule."

"You don't say? Well, at least there's some good news."

"Don't think I'm unaware what you're planning," Hououmaru could sense Yuu's mocking tone, the derision for authority that earned him more than one official reprimand throughout his tenure in Xcution. She wasn't foolish nor naïve. He was planning something, his mind calculating multiple avenues of approach to their conversation. But she didn't earn the privilege of assisting Lady Ragyo without learning a few things along the way, "Lying low won't save you from Lady Ragyo's wrath. Nor will destroying your raiment prevent her from tracking you down. However, if you wish to witness the culmination of humanity's destiny, deal with Tessai Tsukabishi and Heinkel Wolfe while Isshin and the others are powerless. Only then will Lady Ragyo forgive your incompetence."

"You caught me. I'll admit it."

Yuu ascended the stairs towards Hououmaru, pausing halfway as a wave of vertigo caused his vision to darken, "But before I head outside, let me just say one thing. Yoruichi Shihoin exceeded my expectations."

"Don't get me wrong, I studied her battle with the Grand Couturier extensively. Documented every technique utilized. Picked through the Grand Couturier's exaggerated report. And it still wasn't enough."

He collapsed into the co-pilot's seat with a pained grimace, "I can see how she survived fighting Ragyo Kiryuin. It took every trick in the book - and some I never realized existed - to escape with my life."

Hououmaru snarled at the mockery of an excuse, "And you *dare* admit your -"

An eerie silence descended upon the room, "What did you call Lady Ragyo?"

There was a flash - a shimmer of obsidian - as Hououmaru unsheathed her trench knife, drawing the weapon faster than the human nervous system could respond. Electricity crackled around the blade, arcing in lethal bursts before the question finished leaving her lips. Without warning, acting purely upon her authority as Lady Ragyo's secretary and the commander of Xcution, she spun around, intent on piercing Yuu's throat.

Only to stop mid-swing at a deafeningly soft *click* .

"You know..."

She felt the barrel pressing against her Écussion Raiment, the muzzle aimed between her armor's plating. Widening eyes staring incredulously at the Carnifex in Yuu's hand, wondering how he smuggled the weapon through Lady Ragyo's sensors, she snarled when he leaned forward, "I think it's time we discussed my severance package."

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Sweat trickled down Tessai's face, pooling on the underside of his chin before dripping onto the dirt. His breath escaped in short, ragged pants, the cold, autumn causing it to condense inches from his mouth. Transporting Ragyo Kiryuin had required a substantial portion of his spiritual reserves. Far more than he anticipated. Translocating Shinji and the other Visored halfway across the Soul Society to Kisuke's lab - after using Jikanteishi to halt their Hollowfication - hadn't left him more than briefly out of breath.

But then again, Kukanten'i wasn't designed to teleport someone so *monstrous* .

"It seems I owe Kisuke an apology."

He wiped a forearm against his brow, removing grime and sweat. As Isshin broke from his self-imposed stupor, staring into the crater where Ragyo had been standing only a few seconds ago, the former shinigami grimaced, "For what?"

"Kisuke described Sosuke Aizen's transformations under the Hogyoku's influence. Including how the man's spiritual pressure became unreadable," Tessai dusted shredded Life Fibers from his apron, missing Isshin's bemusement, "Until tonight, I believed he was exaggerating Aizen's power. But once Ragyo Kiryuin put on that strange garment, her spiritual pressure completely vanished. I could no longer sense her presence."

"Wait!"

Ryuko jammed her arm through one of Senketsu's sleeves, "You couldn't sense *anything* ?"

**" *You're putting me on backwards, Ryuko.*"**

"Oh, sorry, Senketsu."

Ryuko fixed Senketsu before sliding the Seki Tekko onto her hand. She curled her fingers into a fist as blood dripped from the cuts covering most of her arm, the pain almost enough to make her curse. God damn it! How the hell was she going to kick her bitch of a mom's ass if Shinra Koketsu could disable Senketsu? Grumbling under her breath, she decided to express her annoyance in the only way possible - taking it out on someone else, "I don't know about you but *I* felt her spiritual pressure just fine! In fact, it was impossible to NOT sense Ragyo Kiryuin once she put on that ugly piece of garbage!"

"Ryuko, your hand!"

"I'm fine, Ichigo," she grumbled at Ichigo's concern, "Now, as I was saying..."

**" *Ryuko, your hand!* "**

"I said I'm -"

The fact her hand no longer hurt didn't dawn on Ryuko until she grabbed Senketsu's neckerchief. Shocked when the blood dripping down her arm stopped - and then disappearing into her skin - she noticed her injuries glowing with a familiar crimson light before sealing shut, leaving her arm as good as new, "What the hell!?"

"Absolute Domination must require our mother's presence to function."

Satsuki suppressed the pain making it difficult to breathe, managing the growing discomfort from Ragyo Kiryuin's attack by glowering, "She announced the light shining from Shinra Koketsu rendered Life Fibers powerless. It makes sense that once the light vanished, your Life Fibers began recovering, allowing your wounds to regenerate."

"Please hold still, Miss Kiryuin."

Tessai loomed over the former heiress upon noticing the full extent of the injuries she was concealing. Years of treating Kisuke and Yoruichi's minor ailments - followed by months of assisting Orihime with Ichigo's injuries - afforded him a discerning, and experienced, eye, "You have two broken ribs. A rather serious injury. But even in my current condition, healing your wounds won't be difficult. However, if it's not too much trouble, can you ask your Kamui to refrain from absorbing my spiritual energy until after I'm finished?"

"There's no reason to concern yourself with Junketsu," Satsuki noticed her Kamui staring at the green energy enveloping the shinigami's hands - childish curiosity more than animalistic hunger - and immediately dismissed what little concern tainted her thoughts, "She won't interfere with your efforts."

A sigh, faint but noticeable, escaped her unyielding control when the pulsating pain from her wounds abated, numbed beneath a

sensation akin to cold water. The shinigami's technique might lack the versatility and power of Orihime Inoue's Shun Shun Rikka. A difference, in retrospect, between their individual origins. But the scrapes and bruises, the broken ribs and internal bleed sustained confronting her mother, wouldn't require more than a minute of his time. Already her broken bones were setting, muscles weaving together and bruises slowly vanishing, leaving nothing but unblemished skin.

It was unfortunate Tessai Tsukabishi couldn't do the same for Junketsu.

***" I don't want to experience something so terrifying again, Ichigo!"***

Mugetsu quivered at the memory of Absolute Domination paralyzing her Life Fibers. Such a sensation was the last thing she wanted to experience a second time! But her fear transformed into anger upon noticing Senketsu's amusement directed at her, ***"But that doesn't matter! I'll be at your side until the end! Although if we're going to fight Ragyo Kiryuin, I'll need some more of your blood."***

"You don't need to ask about something like that, Mugetsu," Ichigo stumbled to his feet, frowning at his Kamui's request, "Because I have a feeling we're going to need all the power we can get."

"Raw strength won't suffice against Shinra Koketsu," Satsuki breathed deeply as Tessai's efforts succeeded in lessening the worst of her pain, "Our Kamui are powerful. But we mustn't overestimate ourselves. Ragyo Kiryuin had proven formidable beyond estimation! We'll need to fall back and adjust our strategy! Determine any potential weaknesses in Shinra Koketsu before she returns."

"Hey! Where *did* you send her?"

Ryuko propped the Scissor Blade across her shoulders while glancing around Honnouji Academy, "I'm guessing someplace *really* far away. Like that desert with the Hollows."

**" I believe Kisuke Urahara called it Hueco Mundo, Ryuko."**

"Thanks, Senketsu," she snapped her fingers, "Did you send her to Hueco Mundo?"

"Unfortunately, Kukanten'i is unable to transport between different spiritual realms," Tessai only paid half-attention to Ryuko's atrocious pronunciation of Hueco Mundo as he stepped away from Satsuki, allowing the teenager to bask in the sensation of perfect health before nearly tearing at her appreciation, "So I did the next best thing. I teleported Ragyo Kiryuin as far away from Honnouji Academy as physically possible."

Satsuki returned Bakuzan to its scabbard with a *click* of polished metal against wood, "How far?"

"Hmm... it's difficult to say," the spiritual pressure from the quilt of Life Fibers covering the planet sent a chill down Tessai's spine, "But I'd guess approximately two thousand Ri to the east."

"Huh?"

Ryuko scratched her head, "Is that miles or kilometers?"

"It's an archaic term for distance, Ryuko. Something you would have known had you paid attention to Aikuro Mikisugi's history lessons," Satsuki bore her sister's misplaced aggression towards her former laziness with dignity and grace, only affording Ryuko a single, unflinching frown before closing her eyes, "But to answer your question, two thousand Ri is roughly eight thousand kilometers. Which should put our mother somewhere off the coast of California."

"That freakin' far!?"

"Even with Shinra Koketsu, it should take some time for Ragyo Kiryuin to make her way back," Satsuki allowed herself to smile - the imperceptibly faint gesture confusing those aware of her usual disposition. She didn't doubt their mother could return to Honnouji

Academy at any minute. The power coursing through Shinra Koketsu couldn't be underestimated. But the quilt of Life Fibers covering the planet would greatly complicate Ragyo Kiryuin's efforts to determine her position, "But we mustn't relax our guard! Tessai Tsukabishi's assistance has bought us precious time! We must use this time to adjust our strategy!"

"We need to save Orihime."

Ichigo couldn't forget the terror in Orihime's eyes when she was absorbed into Shinra Koketsu. The tears streaking down her face while Ragyo Kiryuin mocked his efforts were seared in his mind, "If we can pull her out of that thing, Ragyo will be weak enough for my old man and Junketsu to defeat."

"Rescuing Orihime Inoue *is* our ultimate objective."

Satsuki stared at the spire previously housing the Student Council chambers, the damage from Isshin Kurosaki's Getsuga Tenshou noticeable. Frowning as she spoke, hints of trepidation clinging to her words, she shouldered the burden of guilt before continuing, "However, there's something we must consider."

"Like hell there's anything to consider!"

Ryuko snarled at her sister's explanation, "We save Orihime then kick our mom's ass! It's that simple!"

"Even before Ragyo Kiryuin cast Absolute Domination, our blades failed inflicting any damage."

Satsuki felt Isshin Kurosaki's attention, the perturbed expression causing his mouth to twitch downwards more than enough to unsettle Junketsu. It seemed it was aware - whether from intuition or experience - what she was planning to announce. Yet he refused to interrupt despite his experience on the subject, which only served to steady her nerves, reducing the guilt gnawing upon her consciousness, "Our mother claimed Shinra Koketsu's control over



Life Fibers was absolute. And I'm inclined to agree. The moment Absolute Domination becomes active, our Kamui are rendered powerless. Humanity was devoured by their clothing in a matter of seconds."

"What are you saying?"

Junketsu's heels *clacked* as she faced Ichigo, "Assuming everything could be solved by separating Orihime Inoue from Shinra Koketsu would be short-sighted. Which is why we should consider leaving her within the ultimate Kamui and focus our efforts on defeating my mother."

"You can't be serious!"

She didn't react when Ichigo grabbed Junketsu. Neither did she respond when her Kamui reacted towards the unintended harshness, conveying a sense of confusion Ichigo undoubtedly heard. And Ichigo wasn't the only one taking fault in her decision. Ryuko was also upset, perhaps not to the same extent. But Satsuki expected such an outburst. As she allowed Ichigo to vent his frustrations, she felt, rather than heard, the desperation in his voice, "We can't leave Orihime in that thing!"

"And what will you do?"

Her tone hardened, carrying the burdensome weight of her decision, "Tessai Tsukabishi might have freed our Kamui but look upwards! Humanity remains trapped! At the mercy of my mother! Given an alternative, I would rescue Orihime Inoue! If such a strategy existed, I would discard my callous decision without a second thought! But we don't have time to consider alternatives! Humanity's survival depends upon stopping my mother! So, ask yourself this, Ichigo! How many lives are you willing to sacrifice *hoping* Orihime Inoue's separation from Shinra Koketsu will reverse the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet?"

"I get what you're saying."

The admission weighed heavily on Ichigo's mind. A harsh silence blanketed the courtyard as his hands trembled, tightening around Junketsu. Despite everything Satsuki said, he couldn't blame her. Not after realizing the same thing, "And you're right. Saving Orihime might not fix everything. Shinra Koketsu is unlike anything I've fought. Who know what might happen if I'm wrong. Ragyo's power is something else entirely. That maybe, instead of stopping her plans, pulling Orihime out of Shinra Koketsu will only make things worse."

Junketsu slipped from his fingers as he stared at the ground, unable to look at Satsuki, Ryuko or even his dad, "But there *has* to be another way! I just know it! There has to be a way to stop Ragyo Kiryuin without hurting Orihime!"

"I'm sorry, Ichigo."

Even as the apology left her mouth, Satsuki doubted its authenticity. For weeks, since her near-death experience during the Great Culture and Sports Festival, she believed she overcame her arrogance. The blind pride that enabled her to sacrifice every student under her control for the slightest advantage against Ragyo Kiryuin. But listening to her clone speak with such familiar vernacular - professing beliefs she, herself, would have repeated a month ago - threw that into doubt. Had she really changed if using Orihime Inoue was the first strategy that came to mind?

Dwelling on that disturbing admission, aware of the stifling silence blanketed Honnouji Academy, her scowl softened, "But it's likely the only way to undo my mother's work is to have someone wear Shinra Koketsu."

"You want one of us to wear that thing?"

" ***I don't like this plan, Ryuko,***" Senketsu bristled at the thought of Ryuko wearing clothing other than himself. Why was she considering something so insulting? He was her favorite outfit! But even so, he couldn't allow his jealousy towards something so gaudy stop Ryuko from saving the world, "***But Satsuki's right. If it means stopping***

***Ragyo Kiryuin, I suppose I could accept you wearing other clothes... this one time."***

"Hold off on the guilt trip, Senketsu, until *after* we pull Ragyo out of the damn thing!"

Ryuko hissed under her breath. She didn't *want* to wear Shinra Koketsu! Even without knowing it was made by Nui Harime and Orihime was trapped inside, the ugly outfit rubbed her the wrong way. But what really *pissed* her off was knowing Satsuki was right. She couldn't think of another way to save everyone - and the planet - from Life Fibers. And the thought of leaving Orihime in that thing - trapped with only her bitch of a mom for company - caused her blood to boil.

Angrily kicking the ground as she tried thinking of a way to undo Ragyo Kiryuin's stupid plan without wearing Shinra Koketsu, Ryuko blinked when something came to mind, "Hang on a sec!"

She frowned before pointing a finger at Ichigo's dad, "Didn't you help Hat-and-Clogs make Mugetsu!?"

"You're misinformed, Ryuko. Contrary to Kisuke's humility and willingness to share credit, he was the one who stitched Mugetsu from scratch," Isshin felt the mental block - the 'gift' from the Original Life Fiber - when he tried going into more detail about Mugetsu. How she wasn't the first Kamui under his belt. That honor belonged to Junketsu, "All I did was give him some of Ichigo's Life Fibers."

"But you know how to make one, right? That means you know how to take apart Shinra Koketsu!"

Ryuko was standing face-to-face with Isshin, demonstrating the nearly two foot difference between their heights. Growling when Ichigo's dad didn't answer her question, she grabbed his shihakusho and shouted, "C'mon! Say something!"

"It's not that simple."

The multicolored undertone shining within his silver hair simultaneously dimmed and brightened as Ryuko's grip tightened. He could see the desperation in her eyes. Despite everything she was still only a teenager. Barely older than Ichigo. Not for the first time, he wished nothing more than to destroy the Original Life Fiber. Cut apart that creature until not even shreds of Life Fibers remained, "Even with Senketsu's impressive strength, which is greater than Mugetsu's, your Scissor Blade won't be able to slice through Shinra Koketsu."

" **Hey!**"

"Hmm... if your Kamui are ineffective, what about another avenue?"

Tessai rubbed his chin, unaware of Mugetsu's reaction towards the perceived insult, "I might be able to translocate Ragyo Kiryuin from Shinra Koketsu using Kukanten'i. It's risky and could have unintended consequences, but it should work."

"Do you think it'll be that easy?"

With a sickening *crack* Heinkel popped her dislocated shoulder into place. Blood stained her cassock as she marched towards Ryuko and the others, dripping in oozing rivers from the regenerating gash cutting from neck to shoulder. Her mouth twisted downward into a snarl, half-cracked glasses reflecting the crimson-tinted moonlight, she scoffed, derision dripping from every word, "I witnessed the inhuman hatred in that monster's eyes. Viewed the absolute loathing when our plan succeeded. Ragyo Kiryuin might not be physically wounded but her pride, that which she cherishes above all else, has been shattered. Her arrogance - her misplaced sense of superiority - caused her to subconsciously lower her guard. A mistake she won't repeat twice."

The bible in her hand snapped shut, "So we should work quickly. Because the first thing she'll do upon returning to this forsaken place is slaughter the man who embarrassed her."

"Damn it!"

" ***She's right,***" Senketsu gave the Kamui equivalent of a concerned frown at the paladin's blunt explanation, "***Ragyo Kiryuin isn't the sort of person to allow even the slightest insult go unpunished.***"

"I know that, Senketsu," Ryuko waved her arm, almost smacking Ichigo in the face with the Scissor Blade, "I'm just really pissed off! How the hell are we going to kick my mom's ass if she's always one step ahead of us!?"

"Then we must proceed without delay!"

Satsuki found no fault in Heinkel Wolfe's criticism. Nor the paladin's blunt method of addressing the issues at stake. She knew better than anyone - aside from Isshin Kurosaki and the Grand Couturier - how her mother responded to perceived insults. How she reacted towards the slightest embarrassment. Years of acting loyal, watching her mother destroy her enemies legally or otherwise, gave weight to the paladin's observation.

Junketsu's heel *clacked* against the ground as she faced Heinkel Wolfe, momentarily matching Ichigo's eyes along the way. She knew his feelings towards her decision hadn't changed over the last minute. His silence spoke volumes, far more than words could convey. But their insurmountable differences could wait until Ragyo Kiryuin lay defeated, stripped of Shinra Koketsu, "What is the range of your teleportation?"

"Several kilometers."

The cigarette between Heinkel's teeth burned with a deep reddish-orange glow, "I take it you have a plan?"

"When I fought my mother alongside Sosuke Aizen, I noticed her attention wavering. I did not consider the information pertinent at the time. But in retrospect, her behavior suggested she was sensing

Orihime Inoue's spiritual pressure," Satsuki glowered as her tone sharpened. With the fate of the world resting upon their shoulders, the pressure to achieve victory was tremendous. But it was a burden she bore without complaint, "Yet even with Shinra Koketsu boosting her power, she was caught off guard by Tessai Tsukabishi! Only acknowledging his presence when it was too late!"

Ichigo stiffened as he realized *what* Satsuki was implying, "She couldn't sense his spiritual pressure..."

"Retreat into Honnou City and wait for my signal!"

If Satsuki heard Ichigo, her reaction was buried beneath the knowledge Ragyo Kiryuin could return at any second, "The moment my mother lowers her guard is when you'll strike. We shall hold her attention as long as necessary!"

Tessai glowered thoughtfully, his massive frame silhouetted against the moon, before nodding. Latching a calloused hand onto Heinkel's shoulder, whose discontent muttering exposed her disdain towards the shinigami's form of high-speed movement, he noticed Isshin's troubled expression before disappearing in a *swish* of speed.

" ***What's wrong, Ichigo?***" Mugetsu followed Tessai's retreat, which was slower than *her* speed, before looking upwards, "***Your blood pressure increased after Satsuki announced her plan.***"

"Something about the way Ragyo used Absolute Domination doesn't feel right."

Ryuko looped her arm through the Scissor Blade, "What? You think she was planning something else?"

"I don't know," Ichigo admitted as something flickered across his mind, "Maybe it's nothing. But if Shinra Koketsu controls Life Fibers as much as Ragyo claimed, why did she need to activate Absolute Domination?"

Satsuki noticed Ryuko's reaction in the deafening silence that followed Ichigo's question. The unadulterated surprise and frustration was readily apparent. And a single, piercing glare at Isshin Kurosaki exposed the man's knowledge on the subject. All but admitting he knew the answer. His inability to speak, the muteness that prevented him from exposing anything regarding the Original Life Fiber, said enough. For the answer to Ichigo's question was painfully obvious.

Her fingers clenched Bakuzan, knuckles bleeding white.

There was another *swish* when Yoruichi Shihoin appeared in a flicker of blurred speed, sweat trickling down her face and blood oozing from the corners of her mouth. Collapsing onto her knees as Inumuta and Sanageyama let go of her shoulders, amber eyes narrowed as she yanked one of the remaining anti-Life Fiber needles piercing her thigh in a spray of visceral blood, she grinned bitterly, "Damn, looks like we missed the fun."

"Yoru -"

Isshin's head snapped backwards when Yoruichi punched him squarely in the nose. Satisfied with the sound of cartilage breaking - even knowing the injury would heal in a matter of seconds - she grabbed the needle lodged above her left knee and *pulled*, "I take it Ragyo Kiryuin's not here?"

"My nose!"

She rolled her eyes at the childish posturing. Why the hell was Isshin's complaining about his nose? He was completely fine. In fact, *her* fingers stung. Yanking the last needle from her leg without so much as a grunt, Yoruichi hissed under her breath. She was annoyed the cowardly bastard ran away before she could break every bone in his body. But then again, Aizen releasing his Bankai had caught them off guard, "Anyone mind explaining what happened? Where's Orihime?"

"And why did my Goku Uniform suddenly go stiff as a board?"

Sanageyama grumbled as he flicked his Blade Regalia's popped collar. But the awkward silence hanging over the courtyard like a wet blanket caused his mouth to snap shut. God damn it, was he *blind* ? Now that he wasn't complaining about his relatively minor problem, he could sense the anxiety rolling off Ichigo. The guy's muscles and tense breathing screamed of someone experienced major depression. Which only meant one thing, "Oh... shit."

"My apologies, Lady Satsuki."

Inumuta ignored Sanageyama's embarrassing behavior as he unzipped the case holding his laptop, "Due to the severity of the situation, I didn't have time to properly explain anything to Yoruichi Shihoin and Sanageyama."

"There's no need to apologize," Satsuki furrowed her brow. She wasn't perturbed by Sanageyama's apparent rudeness. One only had to know the self-blinded teenager - to have fought besides him - to realize his question was born from ignorance rather than genuine acrimony, "But am I to assume you discovered something crucial to defeating Ragyo Kiryuin within the Underground Server Farm?"

"As a matter of fact, I did."

His fingers blurred into motion as he typed commands fast enough to render Mugetsu dizzy. Tired eyes showing initial traces of exhaustion moved back and forth, reading the information scrolling across the screen, "When I connected with the Life Fiber generator, I took the liberty of installing a particular program into Honnouji Academy's mainframe. A little 'gift' that returned my administrator privileges to the surveillance network. So, I'm already aware of Shinra Koketsu's completion. *And* Orihime Inoue's current predicament."

"So, you used a virus to hack into the academy's system?"



Isshin scratched his chin. He wasn't stupid. Sure, the Soul Society was a few years behind the World of the Living when it came to recent advances in technology. But as a certified and trained doctor running a small, family-owned clinic, he'd been forced to expand his horizons. Learn new things with a lack of passion Ragyo used to playfully mock alongside Masaki.

"... something along those lines."

Inumuta wasn't *too* insulted by Isshin Kurosaki's mistake. As a matter of fact, he was impressed the man deduced something in the first place, "In any case, Shinra Koketsu multiplied Ragyo Kiryuin's spiritual pressure to unfathomable levels. And Absolute Domination rendered our most powerful assets - your Kamui and hardened Life Fiber weapons - useless. As you demonstrated earlier, Lady Satsuki, attempting to fight your mother while she wears Shinra Koketsu is tantamount to suicide."

"However, it might have a weakness we can exploit."

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as the data scrolling down the screen of his laptop changed, overlaying a hollow image of Shinra Koketsu next to Junketsu, "Despite its origins, Shinra Koketsu *is* a Kamui. It requires synchronization between its Life Fibers and Ragyo Kiryuin's to function properly. If we can disrupt that connection, removing her from Shinra Koketsu should theoretically be possible."

"Then our course is set!"

Satsuki marched towards Inumuta, her heels *clacking* with every purposeful stride. Disrupting her mother's connection with Shinra Koketsu would be difficult, if not impossible. Ragyo Kiryuin was arrogant. Confident in her superiority over humanity. Willing to slaughter thousands of innocent lives to achieve her objectives without shedding a tear or experiencing the slightest guilt. But she wasn't *foolish*, "While Tessai Tsukabishi waits in the shadows of

Honnouji Academy, we shall begin working towards an alternate strategy!"

"Inumuta!"

She slammed Bakuzan between her feet, "While Ichigo and Ryuko assist Isshin Kurosaki in occupying my mother when she returns, you will activate EXCELSUS! Take every weapon off stand-by! Don't concern yourself with the safety protocols or damage to the academy! You will wait for my signal, at which point you will unleash everything on Ragyo Kiryuin!"

"Her power might be unfathomable! Her control over Life Fibers unbreakable," Satsuki snarled, her voice rising with every word, "But nothing is invincible!"

"Alright!"

Ryuko grinned savagely at the first piece of good news all night, "Sounds like a half-assed plan to me! So, what's the first -"

She *froze* when Ichigo's dad flew across the courtyard, half of his chest gone and blood spewing from his mouth. What the hell!? Pivoting around with the Scissor Blade around arcing over her shoulder, Ryuko froze, a strangled gasp escaping her throat at the multicolored light burning her eyes. Unable to speak when Ragyo Kiryuin teleported behind them, covering the distance before she realized her mom moved, she leapt backwards, determined to put as much distance between her and the bitch.

"Now..."

Ragyo paid little attention to Ryuko's behavior. Nor did she particular care that Ichigo and Satsuki reciprocated the tactical action. Lowering her arm, flickers of energy still clinging to her fingers, maroon eyes settled upon Yoruichi Shihoin, the shinigami's injuries befitting someone who fought Yuu. The shinigami was an acquaintance of Kisuke Urahara. But it was apparent her

confrontation with Yuu took a drastic toll on her body. Still, she couldn't allow *anyone* associated with that shopkeeper to survive. Sighing gently, her expression remained unchanged when the impact of Isshin's mangled body slamming into Tokyo reached her ears.

It was unfortunate she had to chastise Isshin. Heaven knows her *mécontentement* had nothing to do with the man. But he *needed* to be punished for his transgressions against the Original Life Fiber.

She smiled. A cold and cruel expression that sent shivers racing through each Kamui as she looked around, searching for the man who *dared* embarrass her. Unsurprised to discover the shinigami was no longer present, a problem easily solved, she chuckled, the regal sound conveying her *superiority* as Shinra Koketsu's divine light illuminated the darkest shadows.

"... where were we?"

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...

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"How long?"

Hououmaru's jaw tightened when Yuu remained silent, "How long have you been planning to betray Lady Ragyo!?"

" *Betrayal* isn't the word I'd use."

Yuu could tell, quite clearly, Hououmaru was incensed with his actions. It was evident from the hitching of her breath, how the trench knife poised inches from his neck trembled. She was testing his reflexes. Determining how long it would take him to pull the trigger if she decided to throw caution to the wind. It was smart. Worthy of the commander of Xcution. But not quite good enough. Without giving any leeway, he pressed the Carnifex harder against her raiment, "That would imply loyalty. Obedience. On the contrary,

I've never felt the desire to obey Ragyo Kiryuin's orders outside of my own self-interests."

"Even if that's *remotely* true," Hououmaru counted the milliseconds it took Yuu's finger to tighten around the trigger when she purposely twisted her trench knife, "Your Lâche Raiment should have cleansed your mind of impure thoughts."

"There's quite a few holes in that theory..."

He feigned ignorance towards the purple-tinted electricity roiling across Hououmaru's raiment. The subtle changes in her posture, how her heels *clacked* against the floor as the circled each other, was difficult to miss. For a moment, long enough to whistle, he watched Ryuko talk to Isshin Shiba on one of the many security feeds, the emotion in her voice and passion implying something very important, "Such as my treacherous disposition. My betrayal of Revocs. And this gun pointed at the weak point of your armor."

The corner of Hououmaru's mouth twitched, "How is your discourteous disposition intact?"

"I'm *sure* you've wondered why I preferred never wearing my raiment."

With an arrogant chuckle, the humidity in the room causing sweat to trickle down the back of his neck, Yuu stepped sideways, placing his back to the stairs. Despite her self-proclaimed ability to compartmentalize, Hououmaru wasn't taking his treachery too well. She was angry. Prone to lashing out given proper motivations. In other words, bound to make mistakes at the drop of a hat, "It was perplexing - I believe that was Ragyo's term - how someone with my impeccable record preferred normal clothes to one of the Grand Couturier's works of art."

"Of course, *you* chastised my insubordination. Writing disciplinary notices for breaking the dress code," Yuu locked his elbow, the Anti-

Life Fiber weapon shifting towards Hououmaru's throat, "Threatening special training with the Grand Couturier."

"Well, that's because I discovered my raiment's dirty little secret about a month after accepting Ragyo's offer of employment."

His finger tightened around the trigger, "Or, from my perspective, after she threatened me into working for her."

Blood gushed through the air when Hououmaru swung downwards, carving deep into his shoulder. Teeth clenched as the obsidian blade acted as a conduit, drawing the electricity from her raiment into his body, Yuu avoided her following slash - aimed at cutting his jugular, by leaning backwards. Six deafening *bangs* echoed throughout the control center he fired the entire clip, ejecting the Anti-Life Fiber needles faster than Hououmaru's reflexives could compensate. But he underestimated the effects of several thousand volts throwing off his aim.

Allowing her to twist sideways, avoiding the needles by the skin of her teeth.

"Électrocution Marche."

Yuu grunted when Hououmaru smashed her knee into his stomach. The concussive force rippled throughout his body, almost breaking several ribs and causing blood to spew from his mouth. But he used the shockwave resulting from Hououmaru's attack to his advantage. He allowed the Carnifex to slip from his fingers, the spent weapon clattering to the floor as he leapt backwards, landing across the room in a kneeling crouch.

"You already know this, but I'm someone who prefers fighting in a cowardly, yet somewhat fair, fashion."

The door leading into the corridor slammed shut with a loud *bang*, cutting off his escape. For a moment Yuu stared at the two inches of reinforced steel separating him from the relative freedom of Honnouji

Academy - the metal interwoven with Anti-Life Life materials. A survey of the lock next to the door implied Hououmaru overrode his authorization, meaning any attempt to bypass the security measures would activate the anti-intruder defenses. Eventually his frown, more from surprise than frustration, shifted into a grin, "Blackmail, kidnapping, extortion and sneak attacks. There's nothing I won't do to win. That's my best quality. The thing that Ragyo found useful time and time again."

"But you already knew that."

He clapped his hands, the mocking sound of slapping leather echoing obnoxiously, "Which begs the question why I'm betraying, as you said, Ragyo Kiryuin. Perhaps the most powerful woman in the world. Who could kill me in the blink of an -"

"You're as loquacious as ever, Yuu."

Electricity crackled around Hououmaru's raiment as she stepped away from EXCELSUS. The starch grenades littering the floor - released by Yuu in the split second before she almost broke his ribs - short-circuited around her feet, wisps of smoke rising from the disabled explosives, "Don't presume I'm blind towards your machinations. You could have escaped this room before the anti-intruder defenses activated. That you chose to stay, and aren't resorting to your normal contingency plans, suggests an ulterior motive."

"Let's just say..."

A deep, almost bitter sigh, carried through the room when Yuu separated his hands, razor-sharp wires dangling between his fingers, "I didn't appreciate Ragyo's *colorful* threats towards my brothers and sisters."

Hououmaru didn't flinch when hundreds of Life Fiber threads spun from Yuu's raiment. She stared dispassionately, palming the bloody trench knife in her fingers as the lethally-sharp wires screamed

towards her position, slicing apart everything in their path. Despite his penchant for subterfuge, for concealing his plans underneath long-winded speeches, her former employee's prowess couldn't be underestimated. A lesser individual, someone lacking Lady Ragyo's confidence, would be terrified, Yuu's mastery of Ayatori making their chances of survival next to zero.

Electricity sparked between her fingers, coiling around the dark purple armor.

A traitor would *flee* from the repercussions of their actions.

"Électrocution Glissando!"

The crimson shimmer of Life Fibers reflected off her visor as she danced *through* the razor-sharp wires. With surgical precision honed over years of intense training, pushing herself to be an asset for Lady Ragyo, she severed the threads. Slicing them into harmless strands of unraveling Life Fiber while Yuu watched, faux shock plastered across his face as she prepared to end his treacherous existence.

Which was why she wasn't surprised when the youth came to his senses. Moving beyond the reach of her knife using the same maneuver that achieved phenomenal success during the Milan Fashion Week. When Lady Ragyo deemed it necessary to inspire several competing textile companies in the Western European market to acquiesce to their demands. Something Yuu required less than four hours to obtain, "Your notion of blackmail is ludicrous."

Her heel smashed into Yuu's stomach, sending the teenager crashing into the wall, "That you feign ignorance why Lady Ragyo traveled to your otherwise banal orphanage is..."

An ear-splitting explosion rippled through the wall between them before she could finish. Ten pounds of modified nudist explosives - obtained from Osaka and repurposed over the last few hours - tore through several inches of Anti-Life Fiber plating. Snarling when Yuu

vanished into the smoke, fleeing outside like a coward, electricity crackled over her armor as she gave pursuit. With the trench knife held in a reverse grip - *glowing* from the amount of electricity coursing through the conducting metal - Hououmaru sprinted after Yuu, amber eyes noticing the flash bombs littering the floor at the last second.

"... insulting."

Her raiment compensated for the flashes of light, turning her visor opaque before the first detonation *cracked* through the corridor. Yuu's tactic was obvious to the casual observer. And obnoxiously apparent to someone who trained the youth. Unfortunately, allowing Yuu time to recuperate, to reach his destination where he undoubtedly prepared countless traps to limit the effectiveness of her Écusson Raiment, was out of the question.

"Your score on the Fibres de vie Résistant à l'Examen d'Entrée was the second highest that year. Only three percent less than Riruka's."

She flicked her wrist, lightning *crackling* down the corridor as the trench knife left her fingers, "Lady Ragyo saw potential in you, Yuu Akiyama. You should have felt *honored* ."

"Honored?"

Yuu ducked underneath the trench knife, ignoring the dull *whump* when it pierced the door at the end of the corridor, "Now that, Hououmaru, is insulting. We both know there's nothing honorable about Ragyo Kiryuin."

A fist smashed into the underside of his chin. His neck snapped backwards when Hououmaru closed the distance using her raiment's superior speed, bypassing the laser tripwires, mines concealed underneath off-colored tiles and the delayed starch grenades scattered outside the control center. The thousands of volts of electricity generated by her raiment caused every muscle in his body to simultaneously contract and relax. Blood spewed from his mouth,



splattering through the darkened subbasement as Hououmaru grabbed his face and *pushed* .

"But you repaid her generosity with betrayal!"

Hououmaru slammed Yuu through the door. She shattered the reinforced steel - meant to contain anything below a Three-Star Goku Uniform - without stopping, allowing Yuu enough time to understand her annoyance before the back of his head slammed against concrete. It was finished. Yuu was brilliant, but she'd observed his tactics for years. Watching his plans and strategies with a discerning eye. Allowing the youth to slump onto the ground, she callously noted they were standing in the emergency stairwell - one of the only ways to head to the main campus - before removing her half-buried trench knife from the wall.

"Tell me, Yuu. Did you plan for *this* ?"

Electricity crackled around her knife when the teenager dragged himself off the ground. Without hesitation, she kicked her humbled former employee, sending him crashing across the stairwell. As Yuu grasped the railing, blood dripping from his mouth, she scoffed, "You don't need to answer the question. Because you're going to die for betraying Lady Ragyo."

"That's... funny..."

Yuu's laughter was interspaced with violent bouts of coughing as his grip around the railing - or rather the nearly invisible carbon fiber rope *tied* to the railing - tightened. In the brief moment of time it took Hououmaru's eyes to adjust to the darkness, her disbelief *priceless*, his shoulder was wrenched from its socket. Yet he held onto the rope, ignoring the excruciating pain as he ascended upwards, but not without giving his opponent one final piece of advice.

"I planned this from the start."

He ducked when Hououmaru threw her trench knife, the impromptu projectile missing his heart by an uncomfortably small distance. Releasing the rope once he reached the top of the stairwell, only a single door between him and Honnouji Academy's first-floor classrooms, Yuu cupped a hand around his mouth before cautiously leaning over the railing, "Oh, by the way, I recommend staying perfectly still, Hououmaru! The explosives planted under the floor are motion-sensitive!"

The detonator that fell from his sleeve, which fell into his hand, instantly caught Hououmaru's attention. Holding the device over his head, purposely showing the switch resting beneath his thumb, Yuu smirked, "And one more thing! These particular explosives are quite special. They're both tamper-proof *and* resistant to electrical currents. Attempting to disarm them with your Écusson Raiment will give you a one-way ticket to the Soul Society."

"That's impossible!"

Hououmaru noticed the off-colored tiles underneath her heels. The edges of the replaced tiles were cracked, showing Yuu's amateurish camouflage. Glancing over her shoulder towards the exit, her eyes narrowed at the laser tripwires crisscrossing the corridor. As her jaw clenched, fingers trembling at the *embarrassment* of falling for his trap, she seethed at what Yuu claimed, "A trap designed to counter my raiment?"

The inanity of his boast boggled her mind, "Absurd. Laughable, even by your standards. These explosives couldn't have been commissioned by Nudist Beach. For Olivier's organization had no knowledge of my raiment until the Great Culture and Sports Festival. And Lady Ragyo would NEVER authorize the requisition of such dangerous armaments. If you had even *considered* outsourcing such work, she would have -"

"I requisitioned them from Ragyo Kiryuin three weeks ago."

Yuu thumbed the detonator as Hououmaru's bluff devolved into a strangled gasp, "About the same time Yoruichi Shihoin hunted me halfway across the country. She was good. Almost caught me outside Tokyo. Of course, I managed to escape. Although not quite unscathed. Her lightning really did a number on my raiment."

He jabbed a thumb against his olive-green jacket, "But that was the perfect excuse to ask Ragyo Kiryuin for explosive traps suited for taking *you* down.

"I misjudged you, Yuu."

Hououmaru seethed at the teenager's pedantic speech. Every moment she was forced to listen to Yuu's arrogance only further enflamed her frustrations, "I believed you were working with the naked apes. Feeding them information as a deep-cover operative considering your past relationship with Alexander Anderson. Faking loyalty to Lady Ragyo. Disrupting enough of their operations to avoid suspicion. But I was mistaken. Your betrayal wasn't motivated by self-righteousness like Souichiro. Nor an antiquated sense of honor and guilt like Ginjo."

Electricity crackled between her trembling fingers as she restrained herself, *knowing* Yuu wasn't bluffing about the explosives, "This is nothing more than petty revenge!"

"It's also selfish and pathetic."

A faint beep surrounded the enraged woman as Yuu primed the explosives, taking them off standby. Flipping the detonator through the air, allowing the woman to watch it arc over the railing, he caught it between his fingers, "But there's nothing inherently wrong with seeking vengeance. Especially when your target never sees it coming."

"And what will your revenge accomplish!?"

Hououmaru dropped any pretense of control. Her shoulders trembled, armor crackling under the pressure of her clenching fingers. The agony from her fractured was nothing compared to Yuu's arrogance and notions of superiority. And she *refused* to allow a pig in human clothing, someone willing to throw away Lady Ragyo's generosity, embarrass her any longer!

"Shinra Koketsu is complete," spittle flew from her mouth as she spat the words, "Killing me won't stop the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. It won't save your brothers and sisters. But you already knew that, didn't you? *Of course*, you did. Because if you cared about those orphans as something besides an excuse to justify your actions, you would have betrayed Lady Ragyo before it was too late to change anything!"

"You're absolutely right."

Time slowed to a crawl as Yuu leaned over the railing, the barest traces of a smirk on his face, "I suppose, in the end, I'm just too much of a coward."

The shrill beeping filling the stairwell grew deafening when he depressed the trigger. Tossing the detonator into the air as the explosives packed with enough Anti-Life Fiber components to give the Grand Couturier a bloody nose detonated, Yuu witnessed Hououmaru's horrified expression before turning around. As the flames rushed up the stairs, weakening the support structures, he whistled jauntily, exiting through the door into Honnouji Academy with his former employer's screams fading into the background.

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" ***This isn't working.***"

Mugetsu huffed at the rainbow light floating above Honnouji Academy. The confidence radiating from Ragyo Kiryuin was

palpable, almost nauseating. And Shinra Koketsu's arrogance wasn't much better, ***"She took a Getsuga Tenshou without flinching. And I'm fairly certain she knows we're stalling for time."***

"That doesn't matter."

Ichigo scowled between deep breaths as the blood trailing down his face, dripping thickly onto the ground next to his knee, reduced to a small trickle. The last few minutes hadn't gone well. Instead of using Absolute Domination from the start, Ragyo decided to toy with them, "We just need to keep her busy! It's as simple as that!"

***" What if she stops holding back?"***

Mugetsu ignored the fluttering nervousness in her Life Fiber. She couldn't afford getting distracted, not when the fate of the planet - and humanity - rested in their hands, ***"Ragyo tore through Ryuko and Senketsu like they were nothing. I didn't even see what happened! If we're not careful, she'll do the same to us!"***

"If we don't keep her busy, everyone will die! Mako... Chad... Uryu. Yuzu and Karin. They'll all die when Ragyo's finished with the planet!"

With an exhausted grunt, Ichigo hardened his stance. Tournesol and Bakuzan shimmered in the moonlight as he glared at Ragyo Kiryuin. Despite Mugetsu's incredible power, he knew defeating the woman was impossible. But that didn't mean he would give up trying, "So, it might hurt Mugetsu, but we need to keep fighting. We *have* to hold Ragyo Kiryuin's attention until Tessai's ready!"

"Do you intend to stand down there all night, Ichigo?"

He instinctively responded to the multicolored light gathering around Ragyo's outstretched hands. The dilation of Shinra Koketsu's symmetrical eyes *shouting* what the woman planned to do. Without thinking, he leapt backwards, pushing Mugetsu beyond her limits. In a burst of speed that strained their Life Fibers, sending a twinge of

pain through his heart, he flashed across Honnou City. Moving around ruined buildings and pockmarked streets. Leaping upwards once Honnouji Academy was firmly between him and the nightmarish light of Absolute Domination.

If they couldn't see Shinra Koketsu, then maybe the effects of Absolute Domination wouldn't reach -

"Why do you insist on retreating?"

Ichigo's heart skipped a beat when a manicured hand grasped his face, holding him tightly enough that his neck almost *snapped* . Holding Isshin's son in one hand - effortlessly blocking Tournesol with the other - Ragyo found herself subconsciously grinned. She could punish Ichigo in a manner reminiscent of Isshin's. Something that would teach him a valuable lesson about respecting one's elders. But she couldn't blame his rebellious behavior. Who knew what sort of slanderous lies Isshin stitched into Ichigo over the years.

"Are you afraid of Absolute Domination?"

She couldn't deny Mugetsu was powerful. The Kamui's strength was already adequately demonstrated. Proven during his confrontation with her experiment. But Shinra Koketsu stood beyond the abstract human concept known as 'strength.'

"Understandable."

The raw emotions swirling beneath Ichigo's stoic façade was amusing. Enough that she released Isshin's son without provocation. Allowing him to retreat without saying a word, sweat dripping down his face from close proximity to Shinra Koketsu, "Those who rebel against the Original Life Fiber must be punished. Your actions, misguided by Isshin's nonsense they may be, cannot be ignored. And so, you instinctively retreat at the slightest danger. Pushing your Kamui to her limit whenever I get too close. Against anyone else, such a strategy would have worked."

She closed her eyes and smiled, "But while your Kamui's speed is impressive..."

Her fingers caressed Mugetsu, tracing patterns across the terrified Kamui, "To me, you might as well not be moving at -"

"NIBAN GENKAI!"

Ryuko swung the Scissor Blade against Shinra Koketsu with all the strength she could muster. And didn't *stop* swinging until the burning wave of spiritual energy smashed into Honnou City, creating an explosion visible for miles. Crouched above Ragyo Kiryuin, sweat trickling down her face while Senketsu muttered about the strain on their Life Fibers, she glowered at Ragyo's spiritual pressure.

"Damn it!"

Senketsu's heels *clacked* as she flipped backwards, spitting out a glob of blood before landing next to Ichigo. Taking the opportunity to catch her breath, Ryuko noticed the fading burns covering Mugetsu, the Kamui *infuriated* about something, before quietly muttering, "Sorry about that, Ichigo."

**" *Next time look before you swing the Scissor Blade!* "**

"I already said I'm sorry!"

Ryuko snapped at Mugetsu before the Kamui finished speaking, "I would have been here sooner, but that last cheap shot almost knocked me out!"

**" *It's fortunate Ragyo Kiryuin was holding back,* " Senketsu muttered discontentedly at the conflagration. He could feel Ragyo Kiryuin's presence within the flames. It was as powerful as ever, which sent a shiver through his Life Fibers, *"I'm not sure we could have handled any more of Shinra Koketsu's power. That garment is truly terrifying, Ryuko."***

"She's toying with us," Ichigo couldn't shake the memory of Ragyo touching Mugetsu, "She knows we're stalling for time."

"That's just *great* !"

Ryuko wanted nothing more than to kick her mom's ass. Even knowing Shinra Koketsu was powerful, she wanted to rescue Orihime, tear apart the ugly outfit before beating Ragyo to a bloody pulp for all the crap she's pulled. Snorting under her breath when her bitch of a mom's spiritual pressure increased, she flipped the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip, growling as everything turned multicolored, "Damn it! I guess she's done screwing around!"

"You sound disappointed, Ryuko."

Ragyo sighed at the flames enveloping Shinra Koketsu. She couldn't deny Senketsu was powerful. Proving himself the physically strongest Kamui. Yet Ryuko seemed to lack a working imagination. Niban - and Ichiban - Genkai were some of the *worst* names she'd heard in years. The unique abilities of a Kamui required appropriate names, something signifying their superiority. A moniker of their divineness. Ichigo knew that lesson, although she was conflicted whether he copied Isshin. Even Satsuki, despite her *many* faults and failures, appropriated an appellation for Junketsu worthy of the Kamui.

But it appeared Ryuko inherited Souichiro's atrocious naming sense.

With a twitch of her finger, she dispersed the residual flames, "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were stalling."

It was slightly bothersome she was using more than a modicum of Shinra Koketsu's potential against Ichigo and Ryuko. And for a moment, the Ultimate Kamui agreed. Expressing its distaste through a manner which eluded everyone present. But she couldn't deny they've grown stronger under Isshin's tutelage. But even their newfound power meant nothing against Shinra Koketsu. It would be *simple* ending this charade before Ichigo or Ryuko understood what



happened. Slaughtering them in a fraction of a second. Sending them careening towards the earth with their bodies torn asunder beneath her divine strength.

But waiting for Satsuki's desperation to reach fruition required finesse.

Her daughter had something in mind, a strategy involving that shinigami and the paladin from Iscariot.

And drawing them out of hiding required more... *proactive* measures.

"In any case, this plan of yours..."

Shinra Koketsu's eyes flared to their full width as she flew towards the teenagers, *shattering* the atmosphere in her wake, "... will unequivocally fail!"

"Go to hell, you bitch!"

The Scissor Blade transformed into Decapitation Mode as Ryuko dashed forward. Senketsu's heels *clacked* as she brushed aside her mom's spiritual pressure. It didn't matter if Shinra Koketsu was unbeatable! She fought freaking Alucard! Got the crap beaten out of her by that shinigami! And kicked Nui Harime's ass without breaking a sweat! Compared to them, a few punches were nothing!

"And take your ugly outfit with you!"

Life Fibers snapping into place and spiritual energy *roaring* from her back, she swung the Scissor Blade intent on slicing Ragyo in half, "NIBAN GENKAI!"

Only for two fingers to catch the Scissor Blade.

"Getsuga..."

Ragyo smirked at the declaration echoing with a familiar reverberation. Tightening her hold upon the Scissor Blade before flicking the weapon, releasing an eruption of spiritual pressure that sent her daughter tumbling away, she turned around, waiting patiently for Ichigo to close the last few, unbearably long feet.

"... TENSHOU!"

" *Je ne pense pas.*"

An explosion of cerulean light ricocheted from her fingers when she stopped the technique. Catching Tournesol between her finger and thumb with the same amount of effort one might use against an ant, "Although I'll give you credit."

The ear-splitting screech filling her ears made it virtually impossible to hear Mugetsu's reaction. Nor could she understand the short phrase silently passing through Ichigo's lips. But she did notice the Kamui trembling around his body. Her Life Fibers instinctively quivering at the overwhelming power of Shinra Koketsu. And that was disappointing. She presumed they would have matured beyond such fragile states of mind. After all, nothing in their repertoire - no, nothing in existence - could scratch even the weakest Life Fiber on Shinra Koketsu.

"Your teamwork was *impressionnant* ."

The Getsuga Tenshou writhed impotently as her grip upon Tournesol tightened. For an agonizingly *interesting* moment, as Ryuko recovered from her embarrassing tumble and rushed back into the fray, she considered merely shattering the technique. Disrupting the Getsuga Tenshou would make a poignant statement to Isshin's son. One demonstrating the gulf between Mugetsu and Shinra Koketsu. But as a couturier whose garments covered the world, treating Ichigo as another pig in human clothing would be insulting. Spitting in Isshin's face.

She grabbed Ichigo's wrist, laughter welling deep within her throat. Pulling the surprised teenager off balance, Ragyo pivoted sideways, dragging him forward.

And redirected the Getsuga Tenshou at Ryuko.

"RYUKO!"

"Now's *not* the time to lose focus, Ichigo."

The sound of her fist smashing against Ichigo's face, his head snapping backwards with a look of disbelief in his eyes, was cathartic. Exhilarating. Eliciting almost as much pleasure as watching Ryuko desperately attempting to counter the Getsuga Tenshou screaming towards her position. *Smirking* when her daughter failed as expected, her agonizing screams drowned out by the explosion, she turned back to Isshin's son.

"There's no reason to worry about Ryuko."

She trailed her fingers along Shinra Koketsu's sleeve, basking in the sensation of its Life Fibers while Ichigo appeared conflicted. Torn between watching her every move - wondering if she would attack if his guard fell - and helping her daughter. It was depressing, to a small extent. The knowledge his own technique severely injured Ryuko must be *eating* at Ichigo's conscious. But, like all teenagers, he automatically assumed the worst. Ryuko's presence hadn't diminished in the slightest. It remained strong. Persistent. Stubborn, much like her older sister.

Her smile broadened when Ichigo overcame his shock, turning downright *sadistic* at the energy thrumming through Mugetsu's Life Fibers.

"Because you'll soon be joining her."

A single finger was all she needed to stop Bakuzan, scattering the energy collected upon the appropriated weapon. Reveling in the

excitement stemming from his desperation, she caught Tournesol upon the tip of her finger. Her skin slightly dented by the hardened Life Fiber weapon. With her laughter reaching a crescendo at Ichigo's despair, carrying a regality befitting someone blessed by the Original Life Fiber, she gently pushed against the sword, sending Ichigo skidding backwards, "Surely you realize by now..."

When the determined youth rushed back into the fray, she raised two fingers, deflecting every strike before closing her eyes, "That resisting Shinra Koketsu is pointless?"

"I don't care how strong Shinra Koketsu is!"

Ichigo pushed himself *harder*, forcing more power out of Mugetsu despite the strain on their Life Fibers, "I will stop you! I will save Orihime and everyone else!"

"And how do you intend to do that?"

The question trailed off her tongue, fading into nothing more than an errant thought when the obstinate teenager vanished in a flicker of movement. His speed might be impressive, but she could see Mugetsu's Life Fibers shifting. Watch every muscle tighten. *Feel* the nervousness underlying his confidence. The desperation to win relentlessly driving his actions to the point of suicide. So she *laughed*, allowing her amusement to make itself known, before catching his swords. The identically-colored blades sliding between her fingers alongside a flurry of sapphire sparks.

Only for a strangled snarl to tear itself from her throat when Ichigo *stepped* on Shinra Koketsu. Using the divine garment as a pedestal to pull himself free.

"How dare you!"

Ichigo was thrown backwards when Ragyo Kiryuin's spiritual energy flared. Erupting from Shinra Koketsu in a violent miasma that was

almost *solid* . Damn it! What the hell was going on? Why was she suddenly so *pissed* off?

" ***Ichigo!***"

Blood gushed through the darkness when a blast of kaleidoscopic spiritual energy tore through his shoulder. As the wound regenerated, Ichigo leaned sideways, strands of orange hair falling away as the spiritual energy detonated against Tokyo Bay. Releasing an explosion that stretched higher than Honnouji Academy.

"To think you'd treat this sacred garment with such audacity," Ragyo was beyond disappointed. Mere words, syllables created by a species destined for nothingness, couldn't accurately capture her frustration, "It seems Isshin never taught you proper manners."

"You keep talking about my old man. Every time I try something new, or somehow piss you off, you bring him into the conversation," Ichigo swallowed the lump in his throat, ignoring how his shoulder *throbbed* despite the injury having already regenerated, "And I get it. You go way back. Maybe before he got married. And maybe you felt scorned or something when he married my mom. But you want to know something, Ragyo?"

He tracked Ragyo Kiryuin's reaction, watching her eyes slowly narrow, "Until coming to Honnouji Academy, I don't remember him ever talking about you."

"Hmm... I suppose that's *my* fault."

The aftermath of the Getsuga Tenshou faded into the background as Ragyo's expression softened. She couldn't blame Ichigo for his father's mistakes. And while his speech was decided to get underneath her skin, she heard worse from better people, "Isshin and I didn't exactly part on amiable terms. We both made mistakes. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, nine years had passed. Of course, I tried keeping in touch. But your father can be rather stubborn. It wasn't until your mother's funeral that we finally

spoke. I expressed my deepest condolences for his loss while chastising his incompetence."

"What!?"

"It was only fair he shared the blame," Ragyo's smirk turned predatory at Ichigo's horrified expression, "After all, he was the reason your mother -"

"YOU BITCH!"

The dull *thump* of the Scissor Blade slamming into Shinra Koketsu was matched only by her daughter's string of foul words. With amusement pulling at the corners of her mouth, she grabbed Ryuko by the throat. It was disappointing watching her daughter struggle, the wet gurgle passing through her clenched teeth indicating the last remaining evidence of Ryuko's connection to the pigs in human clothing. As her fingers tightened in response to her daughter's defiance, piercing Senketsu's armor like paper, she sighed. Annoyed by her daughter's lack of forethought, something Satsuki possessed in abundance.

Why on earth would Ryuko believe she wasn't paying attention to her spiritual pressure?

Rivulets of blood trailed down her fingers, oozing from the puncture wounds in Ryuko's neck, "You should know better than to think your Kamui could scratch Shinra Koketsu."

"Fuck off!"

Her amusement faded when Ryuko kicked Shinra Koketsu. Desperation when facing defeat was *no* excuse for blasphemy. It was shameful witnessing her daughter behaving like a pig in human clothing. She assumed Souichiro, despite his treachery and arrogance, instilled into Ryuko appreciation for one's clothing. That humans - and Life Fiber hybrids - are servants of the Original Life

Fiber. The former destined to become nourishment and the latter working to ensure the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet came to pass.

Judging from Senketsu's neatly-pressed Life Fibers, Ryuko understood the first lesson.

"That's no way to speak to your mother."

Blood splattered across Shinra Koketsu as her daughter lurched forward, mouth agape and eyes imperceptibly trembling. As the foreign substance vanished into the garment, absorbed by its ravenous Life Fibers, twisted her wrist, further driving her fist into Ryuko's stomach, "But I'm proud of your perseverance."

Without warning, and certainly without allowing Ryuko another opportunity to tarnish Shinra Koketsu with her filthy heels, she uncurled her fingers, resting the palm of her hand against her daughter's stomach. Ryuko's desperation was refreshing. But she couldn't allow exhilaration nor pleasure blind her from reality. Her daughter was stalling while Satsuki unleashed one final gambit. A plan destined to failed. And so, with more passion than perhaps necessary, she pushed a minuscule amount of Shinra Koketsu's power through her fingers.

"To recover your strength so quickly after Absolute Domination is nothing short of miraculous," Ragyo grinned when Ryuko crashed into Ichigo, smoke wafting from the regenerating burns adorning Senketsu, "I'm *honestly* impressed."

Ryuko dislodged herself from Ichigo, stumbling onto her feet as the Scissor Blade transformed into Decapitation Mode. Painful or not, she refused to give Ragyo Kiryuin the pleasure of knowing her attacks hurt like a bitch, "Heh... I guess that means your stupid outfit ain't all it's cracked up to be."

"Oh Ryuko..."

Her knees buckled underneath Shinra Koketsu's spiritual pressure, the sudden weight almost causing the Scissor Blade to slip from her fingers. Struggling alongside Ichigo against the overwhelming pressure, Ryuko *sarled* when her mom appeared inches away, "You've thrown everything at Shinra Koketsu. Exceeded my wildest expectations."

Cupping her daughter's chin, Ragyo smirked at Ryuko's defiance, "And what have you accomplished besides embarrassing yourself?"

"GETSUGA -"

Ichigo stumbled midstride, blood spewing from his mouth when Shinra Koketsu responded to Ragyo's subconscious commands. Before he took a single step, Tournesol enveloped with spiritual energy, one of its eyes transformed. Shifting into a spiked appendage that stabbed *through* his stomach. Coughing as Ragyo ignored his injury, smirking when Shinra Koketsu retracted with a sickening squelch of Life Fibers on blood, he forced himself forward. Brushing aside the uncomfortable sensation, his knuckles bleeding white beneath Mugetsu as he swung upwards.

"TENSHOU!"

"Have you forgotten, Ichigo?"

Ragyo didn't bother hiding her amusement. The excitement radiating through her Life Fibers as Ryuko's expression changed from defiance to horror to frustration, As Ichigo collapsed towards the ground like an unstrung marionette, blood gushing from the wound nearly cutting his body at the waist, she smiled, "Shinra Koketsu is the master of all Life Fibers."

"So, unless Senketsu's ascended to his fashion week apparel sometime during the last few minutes," she watched Ryuko gather every last scrap of available power. Her Kamui glowing crimson, spiritual pressure increasing to impressive levels, "I think we're just about done."



**" Ryuko! Move!"**

It happened too quickly. Even with Senketsu shouting in her ears, Ryuko gasped when something sliced through her body. Convulsing as her left arm fell away. Eyes trembling while her mouth opened and closed, she fell backwards, vision blurring as everything inverted.

"What... the... fuck?"

An indifferent sigh encompassed Ragyo's reaction to her daughter crashing onto the No-Star Slums. The smoke rising from the impact eliciting mild disappointment. Was this the extent of Ryuko's strength? Despite common sense and decades of research, she'd half-expected Senketsu to spontaneously ascend into his fashion week apparel. Reaching a level of strength requiring more than the barest essence of Shinra Koketsu's power.

"Oh?"

With some restraint, she turned away from Ryuko, lips curling upwards, "I was wondering when she'd arrive."

The purple light twinkling on the horizon, silhouetted against the Original Life Fiber and growing brighter by the second, earned her undivided attention. For so long, since learning of her existence, she'd hoped to meet the Life Fiber hybrid working for her former husband's organization. The woman who eluded the Grand Couturier on two occasions. Who wore the most *intéressant* Kamui - Danketsu. A person of some respectable stature, who'd proven herself against Xcution without fail, deserved a proper welcome.

She feigned surprise when the woman dodged Shinra Koketsu, avoiding her attacks by the slightest margins. Her opponent was talented. Or, at the very least, experienced. Something attributed to Olivier Armstrong's peculiar method of leadership. And that was why she paused in her efforts when the woman made a ninety degree turn, amethyst energy blasting from Danketsu. Purposely lowering

her guard, giving the woman an opening to close the distance between them.

To swing her blade - a weapon of inferior quality to the Scissor Blades and Tournesol - at Shinra Koketsu.

"Youkou..."

A silver eyebrow quirked when the woman flickered out of existence. Oh? According to the Grand Couturier, Danketsu's speed wasn't impressive. Faster than Senketsu but inferior to Junketsu and Mugetsu's. But it appeared dearest Nui's report on the Kamui was outdated. *Painfully so*. And as the woman appeared behind Shinra Koketsu, energy flooding Danketsu's Life Fibers, her lips curled into a smirk. There was still plenty of time to demonstrate her superiority. Avoiding the energy straining along the Genji Blade's edge would require minimal effort.

But she saw no reason to deny the woman the fleeting sensation of victory.

It would make her despair all the more satisfying.

"... Genshou!"

A crackle of displaced air - the *clap* of thunder as the vacuum left by her Youkou Genshou vanished - accompanied the crimson flames engulfing Ragyo Kiryuin. But Kinue Kinagase retreated almost instantly, bearing her Kamui's frustration and animalistic annoyance. She fell backwards, falling towards Honnou City before abruptly turning, shifting from Genkai to Funsha in an explosion of amethyst. As the surface of Tokyo Bay parted in her wake, she glanced over her shoulder at the slowly dying flames surrounding the Kiryuin matriarch.

"This won't be easy, Danketsu."

Bangs of purple-tinted hair whipped around her face. So, that was Shinra Koketsu? She'd figured the so-called ultimate Kamui would be powerful. A woman of Ragyo Kiryuin's stature wouldn't settle for anything less. Yet something didn't feel right. There was a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, a nagging sensation as she looked over her shoulder towards the matriarch. Even if Shinra Koketsu was stronger than Danketsu, she'd expected Ragyo to block the Genji Blade. It might be inferior to the Sword Scissors, but it could still cut through Life Fibers.

But Ragyo Kiryuin didn't bother moving. In fact, she purposely lowered her guard. *Allowing* the Genji Blade to strike Shinra Koketsu.

"Her spiritual pressure hasn't changed," the scent of salt water rapidly faded when she reached Tokyo, flying above the battle-torn landscape, passing above the shredded remnants of Ragyo's COVERS, "Destroying Shinra Koketsu might be difficult."

***" Like hell I'm going to let YOU give up! Use all my power! Take whatever you need! But you WILL destroy that thing! I want to see that rainbow bitch's face when we tear Shinra Koketsu from her body!"***

"A direct approach won't work," Kinue shouldered Danketsu's frustration as she tried contacting Olivier. She couldn't blame the Kamui for the visceral emotions bleeding through their connection. Twisting what should have been mild annoyance into suppressed loathing, "Ragyo overpowered Ichigo and Ryuko. She defeated Mugetsu and Senketsu. What makes you think we stand a chance against Shinra Koketsu?"

***" I'm nothing like those two!"***

"This isn't the time for posturing, Danketsu," Kinue grimaced at the static on the radio, "Unless we find Shinra Koketsu's weakness, Ragyo Kiryuin will tear us apart."

Danketsu scoffed at her wearer's self-deprecation. But she couldn't deny Kinue had a point. And that frustrated her more than anything else. Including the blanket of Life Fibers covering the planet, ***"You're right. It pisses me off, but attacking that ugly piece of scrap Life Fibers without a plan is suicidal. We'll have less of a chance cutting off Ragyo Kiryuin's head than Senketsu does of growing a fucking -"***

"Your Kamui is quite fascinating."

Kinue's blood froze at the voice whispering her ear. Without thinking, she twisted in the opposite direction. Danketsu's jets *blasted* with renewed fervor as she tracked the Needle Blade grasped in Ragyo Kiryuin's fingers, the polished edge coming within an *inch* of her throat. And as the matriarch's other hand reached out - intent on clasping around her face, Danketsu shifted back into Genkai, giving her the freedom of mobility to duck beneath the outstretched limb.

"Danketsu, was it?"

The pulse of spiritual pressure emanating from the Life Fiber hybrid piqued her interest. Smiling at the flash of purple light, Ragyo observed the woman's thigh-high boots were replaced by pleated hakama and matching heels. Her fingers caressed the smooth handle of the Needle Blade as Danketsu shifted advanced configurations. A staggered, breathless laugh escaped her lips at the purple undertone in the woman's hair, the coloration indication the maturity and strength of her Life Fibers.

"Such an extravagant and elegant design."

Her eyes shimmered with subdued anticipation at the crimson energy enveloping the inferior blade in the woman's hand, "Although the name could use some work."

The abandoned city harboring the naked apes and Isshin's allies *trembled* when she deflected the Genji Blade. Purple light danced across the Needle Blade's edge. Sparks illuminated her visage,

highlighting every curve of her smirk. And displaying Kinue Kinagase's clenched jaw. Her slightly bared lips and unflattering grimace. As their weapons clashed again and again, releasing shockwaves of pressure, shattering every window left intact by the previous battles, Ragyo chuckled, "From its flattering appearance, my former husband used Junketsu's dress patterns as the basis of Danketsu's design."

**" *What the fuck is she implying?* "**

"But enough about Souichiro."

She grabbed the Genji Blade as Kinue swung downwards, "I'm more interested in *you* ."

Her finger and thumb clasped around the weapon's edge, pulling Kinue off balance, "How did a naked ape such as yourself ascend to the divineness of Life Fibers?"

A cursory examination only deepened her curiosity. Driving the incessant desire to understand Kinue Kinagase's existence. She was far too old to have been subjected to the Life Fiber experiments which bore fruit with Ryuko and Ichigo. Yet the woman's Life Fibers were matured. Inferior only to her own and Isshin's, a fact that elicited a twitch of annoyance. How did this woman - a naked ape professing her former husband's absurd philosophy - ascend beyond humanity? It couldn't have been Souichiro. His knowledge concerning the procedure was limited.

That only left *Isshin*, but she doubted his personal involvement. He possessed neither the temperament nor inclination for such things. And yet, Ragyo found herself drawn towards the tattoo between the woman's breasts. An intricate pattern of overlaying shapes that radiated a nearly imperceptible, yet *familiar*, energy.

"That bastard..."

The Needle Blade sliced through Kinue Kinagase before the woman blinked.

While the extensive wound regenerated, amethyst-colored Life Fibers knitting together at an appreciable speed, Ragyo experienced an emotion she considered irrelevant since adorning herself with Shinra Koketsu. *Frustration*. She'd known about Danketsu's origins for some time, despite Satsuki's efforts to eliminate Kinue Kinagase's arrival from Honnouji Academy's surveillance system. Even with the knowledge stolen from Revocs and Junketsu's dress patterns, Souichiro could *never* have created Danketsu without assistance. He lacked imagination, using *her* inventions to create mockeries and knockoffs. *Insulting* everything she'd achieved.

The Sword Scissors were based upon the Needle Blades.

Danketsu copied from Junketsu.

But as her finger traced the tattoo between the woman's breasts, Ragyo's lips curled into a cold and monstrous smirk.

She released the Needle Blade, distracting Kinue Kinagase long enough for her fingers to wrap around the woman's throat. As her nails pierced Danketsu, digging into the flesh under the Kamui, Ragyo chuckled. Now *this* was interesting! And unexpected. The woman and Danketsu were stitched together, their Life Fibers interlinked at the deepest levels. Even with regeneration, attempting to separate them would lead to exsanguination, putting her original plans on hold. But now it made sense! Why Danketsu resembled Junketsu beyond Souichiro copying the former's dress patterns!

"Did Isshin tell you anything?"

"I have... no idea... what you're... talking about," Kinue choked when Ragyo tightened her grip.

"Hmm, I'm not surprised."

Not for the first time, Ragyo questioned Isshin's judgment. Why he chose a naked ape - a woman possessing neither redeeming qualities nor temperament - for such an honor made no sense. She couldn't understand the reasoning behind his decision. Surely his daughters would have made better prospects. Their Life Fiber resistance was abnormally high compared to most of humanity. Yet the results spoke for themselves. Unworthy in her mind of the divine gift or not, Kinue Kinagase's existence was a resounding success. The woman *was* a genuine hybrid, which meant killing her was out of the question.

"But putting that aside for the moment."

Her grip tightened considerably around Kinue's throat, "Did you enjoy unraveling the Life Fiber wards throughout my home?"

She didn't miss the Kamui's reaction when Shinra Koketsu unfolded to its full, majestic volume. Its eyes burning brightly as she shattered the woman's ability to resist, expressing her irritation in the most prudent method possible - by *thrusting* the Needle Blade through Kinue Kinagase's stomach, "Don't think I'm unaware what you did!"

Blood coated her fingers as she stabbed the woman again... and again... and again, "You helped that contemptible shinigami!"

Ragyo skewered Kinue one final time before pulling sideways, cutting the woman nearly in half, "And you had the *audacity* to raise your blade against the Original Life Fiber!"

A breathless chuckle passed between her lips as she released Kinue, allowing the clothed nudist to fall towards the ground. It was disheartening she couldn't kill the woman. If anyone else had broken into her home, trespassed upon the Original Life Fiber's sanctum before striking the holy creature, she never would have bothered waiting for their arrival. They would have died the moment she noticed their presence, limbs severed and organs ruptured. Their eyes widening during those last few seconds, watching what was left of their body fall in the opposite direction.

"However, I'm not without sympathy, Miss Kinagase."

With a flick of her wrist, she removed the blood coating the Needle Blade. Another motion sent a wave of pressure slicing towards Kinue, who finished regenerating quickly enough to avoid wasting any more of her valuable time, "After all, you're nothing more than Isshin's pawn."

Spiritual pressure caressed Shinra Koketsu when the clothed nudist's inferior weapon struggled against the Needle Blade. In the span of five seconds, long enough to notice Ryuko and Ichigo's recovery, she countered more than a dozen strikes. Her arm blurred from the rapidity of the woman's assault. Each clash emitted a burst of spiritual energy that illuminated the surrounding darkness, overwhelming the deep crimson radiating from the blanket of Life Fibers covering the planet.

"The man loved keeping secrets," a restrained counterattack sent Kinue soaring towards the ground, "From me! From Ichigo! And from you naked apes! Without him, Danketsu would be nothing more than an inanimate uniform! Devoid of life and meaning!"

**" *What the hell is she talking about!?* "**

Kinue flinched at Danketsu's hatred towards Ragyo Kiryuin. The turbulent emotions were beginning to cloud her judgment. It was getting difficult separating Danketsu's thoughts from her own, "And why should I care?"

She exhaled softly, a cloud of mist leaving her parted lips as the Genji Blade *flared* with energy. Spinning the weapon around her fingers before grasping its hilt with both hands, crimson and purple shadows danced across her face, "Danketsu is my Kamui. She's the only piece of clothing I'll ever wear. Even if Isshin had something to do with her creation, nothing will change my mind."

"A passionate speech but hardly worth -"



Ragyo frowned when several flashes of blinding light detonated inches from her face.

Kinue *moved* before the flash bombs left her fingers. She flew towards Ragyo Kiryuin as the accompanying smoke grenades exploded, enveloping the woman in a cloud of acrid smoke interfering with her ability to sense spiritual pressure. One of Kisuke Urahara's inventions. Ducking beneath the matriarch's outstretched arm, twisting around the Needle Blade carving inches from Danketsu's right eye, she pushed *everything* into the Genji Blade, "Because WE don't care! Youkou..."

Their voices resonated together, her determination and Danketsu's excitement synchronizing into a single *roar*, "... GENKOU!"

Only for nothing to happen.

"Forgive me. For a moment, it slipped my mind you weren't at Honnouji Academy."

Ragyo dismissed the Needle Blade as Kinue staggered away, disbelief etched upon the clothed nudist's face, "Shinra Koketsu has mastery over everything in existence. From beginning to end, humanity has been molded by Life Fibers. Their evolution controlled by the Original Life Fiber for a single, divine purpose. By possessing the sacred power which granted your species the intellectual capacity - no, the *honor* - to serve in the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet, Shinra Koketsu's superiority cannot be questioned. Absolute Domination. Ichigo assumed it was limited to stripping Life Fibers of their power."

"But it's *more* than that!"

Her laughter deepened, "Absolute Domination is superiority over EVERYTHING! Not just Life Fibers! Nothing in existence can scratch the divine garment!"

" ***What!?***"

"And another thing..."

Multicolored light flared around Shinra Koketsu, "You gave quite the performance, but I could have rendered your Life Fibers powerless whenever I wanted."

Kinue screamed when every nerve in her body burned with the most excruciating pain imaginable. Blood trickled from her nose as Danketsu convulsed, their Life Fibers seizing under the blinding light enveloping Shinra Koketsu. She couldn't think - couldn't breath - as something in her chest snapped. The pain immediately vanished, replaced by a feeling of complete emptiness when amethyst light *exploded* from Danketsu, sending the Kamui into blissful unconsciousness.

"I *should* kill you."

Ragyo caught the clothed nudist once Absolute Domination stripped every scrap of spiritual energy from her Life Fibers. "It's the only sensible punishment."

Hoisting the barely conscious woman by the wrist, she noted Danketsu's normal appearance. Beneath its crass and vulgar mannerisms, the Kamui was a purple and cerulean version of Junketsu down to the collar, tasseled epaulets and the three bands on her left sleeve. There was no questioning it. Her former husband couldn't create anything original, "But watching you wallow in despair. Forced to realize your foolish defiance against the Original Life Fiber amounted to nothing in the end. That's simply too tempting to pass -"

"Shut the hell up!"

Seras Victoria shouted at the top of her lungs as she shattered Ragyo Kiryuin's nose. Blood-red eyes narrowed viciously when the woman's face *caved* underneath her fist, cartilage and bone disintegrating into a visceral explosion of blood.

"S-Seras?"

"Don't worry about me, Kinue!"

She kicked against Shinra Koketsu wrapping her remaining arm around Kinue's waist. Worried when the woman collapsed limply without another word, disturbed by the eldest Kinagase sibling's weak pulse and blood pressure, Seras didn't give Ragyo Kiryuin another second of her time. She blasted in the opposite direction of the matriarch, shadows coiling around her body as the landscape changed to Tokyo Bay, the remnants of a massive COVERS slowly disintegrating over the bridge, before shifting once more to Honnou City. The artificial island covered with craters, pockmarked by recent battles.

Glancing over her shoulder when she landed in the most obscure location possible - all but *certain* Ragyo Kiryuin was behind them - Seras gently laid Kinue on the ground, careful not to further damage her Kamui, "What happened? What did Ragyo Kiryuin do to you?"

"It's Absolute Domination!"

Ryuko leaned against the nearest wall, breath ragged and sweat dripping down her face, when Senketsu returned to normal. Damn it! She couldn't believe Absolute Domination's range was so goddamn large! Stabbing the Scissor Blade between her sneakers, she looked at Kinue before snarling, "We can't scratch Shinra Koketsu but that bitch can shut down our Life Fibers!"

"There must be something we can do! Anything!"

"We're stalling for time," Ryuko winced when she tried sensing Ichigo's spiritual pressure only to find *nothing*, "Satsuki has a plan to pull that bitch out of Shinra Koketsu. But Ragyo Kiryuin knows that! She knows we can't do SHIT to Shinra Koketsu!"

"Running away, are we?"

Copious amounts of blood spewed onto the ground as Ragyo purposely - and with *great* satisfaction - thrust her arm through the vampire's heart. But she wasn't smiling. There was no enjoyment to be derived from the cathartic action against Vlad's protégé. Not only had Seras Victoria trespassed within the sacrosanct sanctum of the Original Life Fiber, she somehow *harmed* her. While it was nothing more than a bloody nose, realizing with some degree of embarrassment that the vampire wasn't bothered by Absolute Domination, that the annoying creature achieved what neither Kamui nor Isshin could, necessitated a reevaluation of her priorities.

"Although I suppose congratulations are in order."

She didn't bother holding back against the vampire. Not anymore. Not when Seras Victoria proved a *threat*. Without preamble, accompanied only by her annoyance, Shinra Koketsu's eyes flared. Spiritual pressure exploded from the ultimate Kamui, disintegrating everything in her vicinity underneath the nearly tangible presence. Uncaring that Ryuko was caught in the eruption, Ragyo squeezed the vampire's heart, eliciting an agonized gurgle, "Against all odds, you accomplished what Isshin could not. And that, I'm afraid, has made you quite the problem. For *many* reasons."

"But I'm not one to pontificate."

Shinra Koketsu rustled as enough spiritual energy to turn Honnou City into a smoking crater coalesced around her fingers, "So, with that being said, I bid you *adieu* ."

**" *I find your usage of French rather insulting, Madame Kiryuin...* "**

"What!?"

A claw formed of writhing shadows, undulating and warping until it resembled something monstrous, latched onto Shinra Koketsu. With crimson eyes glowing sinisterly, Seras Victoria took advantage of Ragyo Kiryuin's surprise. Pulling herself forward, blood *dripping* from

the ragged hole in her chest, she reached out, grabbing the matriarch's throat with her remaining hand, "How does it feel, you bitch? How does it feel knowing your stupid outfit can't beat a single vampire? I'm sure you're absolutely pissed off!"

Ragyo snarled at the vampire's underhanded insult. How dare this undead creature speak to her with such flagrant disrespect! Lashing out, she disintegrated Seras Victoria's lower half of her body into a fine, red mist. A wave of concussive force erupted from Shinra Koketsu as shimmering kaleidoscopic light, slamming into the vampire before carving a trench towards Tokyo Bay.

And yet the vampire - nothing more than ragged flesh - continued resisting.

"Enough!"

She tore off Seras Victoria's remaining arm, the limb disintegrating in her grasp, "You DARE think to -"

**" *Underestimating Ma chère isn't good for your health.*"**

"What are..."

The inhuman warbling in the voice sent a disgusted shiver down her spine. And the divine light surrounding Shinra Koketsu, more than enough to wipe Seras Victoria from the face of existence, diminished when something emerged from the vampire. A formless clump of burning darkness taking shape over the young woman's shoulder. Flesh and blood growing out of the shadows.

**" *And dropping your guard in the middle of combat is... well... downright dangerous.*"**

Her heart stopped at the crimson bullet twirling between the *thing's* fingers.

" ***Un cadeau,***" Pip Bernadotte didn't bother waiting for Ragyo Kiryuin to give a witty retort. As more of his soul emerged from Seras, forming just enough of his body to experience the chilled autumn air, he *thrust* the bullet into the woman's heart, "***To you, from one Monsieur Kinagase.***"

## After the Love has Gone

*There are several things I wished were in the final arc of Bleach. While some Bankai were revealed, others were not. And I would have preferred a complete list of all Bakudo and Hado, including their effects. That would have been nice to read. It certainly would have given me more material to put into my story instead of reusing Kido or trying to create techniques on my own. Because Japanese is not my primary, or secondary language. Still, the information in the Light Novels has been illuminating, even if some of it is contradictory to my story. But I did strike gold through pure coincidence concerning Kugo Ginjo's background.*

*Anyway, sorry for the delay. I hope you enjoy the chapter.*

*And if you have any comments, questions or concerns, feel free to send me a PM. I'll be more than happy to answer your questions.*

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*12 Years Ago - Nudist Beach Headquarters*

*" So, what exactly am I looking at?"*

*Isshin Matoi grumbled at the question, "Something I've been designing for almost eight months. A weapon capable of standing toe-to-toe with Ragyo Kiryuin."*

*" Well, I'll be damned."*

*Batou propped an arm against the bulletproof glass separating the control room from the experimental chamber, "You finally created a Kamui. I suppose this means Olivier will stop complaining about our budget for a while. Raiding all those Life Fiber transports wasn't cheap."*

*" Unfortunately, my research into replicating Junketsu has reached an impasse."*

*The continuous failures at reproducing his former wife's Kamui - the culmination of Life Fiber research - weighed heavily on Isshin's slouched shoulders. Something he concealed by folding his hands in front of his mouth. It didn't make sense. He understood with surgical precision the underlying processes for weaving Life Fibers into a Kamui. The data on Junketsu's dress patterns supplied everything required to replicate the Kamui from scratch. Yet nothing worked. Every uniform he created was perfectly stitched from hem to collar. And yet none of them possessed Junketsu's spark of life.*

*They were inert, nothing more than scraps of clothing made from Life Fibers.*

*He sighed wearily, half-paying attention to the information scrolling down the monitor inches from his face. As talented as he may be, his manipulation of Life Fibers was amateurish compared to Ragyo's or Isshin Kurosaki's. Nothing he created held a candle to their work. What he couldn't accomplish after more than a year of hard work and sweat, pushing what he knew about Life Fibers to the breaking point, his former wife created in a matter of hours.*

*" I've contacted Isshin for assistance on the matter," his uncovered eye narrowed when the secondary security features disengaged with a faint hiss, "Providing he doesn't change his mind, he'll arrive sometime next week."*

*" Isshin, huh?"*

*Batou found it strange, for more than one reason, to hear Isshin would be driving all the way down to Osaka. Leaving the relative peace and quiet of Karakura Town to involve himself with their war. After what Ragyo did to Ichigo, and everything else that happened during that horrific summer, he wouldn't blame the guy for retiring to a normal life, "I heard through the grapevine that Masaki had twins. Look, I'm not a married man, so I'm probably speaking out of my ass.*



*But I'm surprised the guy would leave Masaki alone with three kids just to help with our problems."*

*" It took some effort to convince Isshin," Isshin swiveled his chair around, arthritic-looking fingers reaching towards the nearby cane, "Hopefully, it won't take more than a few hours of his time."*

*" Couldn't this have waited until morning?"*

*The clothed nudist yawned loudly as he shook the cobwebs from his mind. Rushing through headquarters at three in the morning wasn't fun. Especially when the place was so freaking big he got lost twice on the way over, "If Olivier were here, she'd respectfully kick your ass."*

*" And I suppose you wouldn't have helped her?"*

*Isshin gave his beard another thoughtful stroke, the artificial hair radiating an aura of eccentric genius. Creating the nearly foolproof disguise concealing his movements from Ragyo for the foreseeable future hadn't been easy. It had taken time to acclimate to the sudden lack of depth perception. And the steep slouch in his posture was quite painful. But these things were necessary sacrifices to keep Ragyo off his trail as long as possible. Not just for him, but also for Ryuko. If Ragyo discovered the infant she discarded as a failure without a second thought had survived...*

*" In any case, behold!"*

*Without further delay, he tapped his gnarled cane against the window. As the container in the other room opened, showing a single crimson bullet suspended within a solidified bleach-starch matrix, he declared, "I call it the 'Adhesive Bullet!'"*

*" Adhesive Bullet?"*

*This was a bullet? It looked like a bullet, but the odd design - a disassembled brass jacket with Life Fibers visible through the cracks -*

*stuck out like a sore thumb to Batou, "Alright, so how does it work? The name doesn't really spoil the surprise."*

*" Life Fibers communicate through bioelectrical impulses, allowing them to exchange information at speeds thousands of times faster than the human nervous system."*

*Isshin tapped his cane against the window a second time, "The Adhesive Bullet interferes with their communication. This synchronization, if you would be so bold. The moment it makes contact, it forcibly desynchronizes the target's Life Fibers! Rendering them helpless! And if they somehow survive, any abilities they may have, including regeneration of tissue, would temporary cease operating!"*

*" Damn," Batou whistled. He knew Aikuro and Kinue were researching Anti-Life Fiber technology but this took the race by a large margin, "You made this bullet to take down Ragyo?"*

*" When dealing with someone as powerful as Ragyo Kiryuin, it's best to err on the side of caution," Isshin stared at his reflection in the glass, the glow from the Adhesive Bullet dancing across his face, "She currently views Nudist Beach as nothing more than a minor obstacle to Revocs. Insects to be crushed at her leisure. But if that changed, if she discovered you and Olivier survived, I doubt she wouldn't use everything at her disposal to crush us. Even Junketsu."*

*" Junketsu?"*

*The name rolled off Batou's tongue with some disgust. He'd seen the legendary Kamui a couple of times back when he worked for Revocs. Before Ragyo proved she was nothing more than an insane megalomaniac. Motoko thought the thing had been cute. He, on the other hand, found the sight of a white schoolgirl uniform moving under its own power, those ringed eyes on the collar swiveling back and forth, unnerving, "Shit. Ragyo's powerful enough on her own. There's no telling how much stronger she'll get by wearing Junketsu."*

*" Kinue ran simulations using the information on Junketsu's dress patterns," Isshin stared at the Adhesive Bullet. His eye followed the stitched he spent days weaving from scratch. The threading that injured his fingers, "If Ragyo decides to wear Junketsu, our anti-Life Fiber weapons will have no effect on her Life Fibers. For all intents and purposes, without another Kamui or this bullet, she'd be unstoppable."*

*" That's not good."*

*As cathartic as it would be to curse, Batou kept his temper under control. Destroying Junketsu and depriving Ragyo of her greatest weapon was important. But he wasn't foolish. Revocs had one of the greatest security systems on the planet. Motion sensors, facial recognition software tied into the global database and fingerprint identification systems. If Ragyo hadn't transferred Junketsu to a different location, breaking into the Life Fiber research facility beneath Revocs without getting killed would have been difficult but not impossible.*

*" If we can't destroy Junketsu, our best bet is hitting Ragyo hard and fast. Before she realizes we have an ace up our sleeves."*

*Suppressing another yawn, Batou walked towards the door, flipping the collar of his jacket along the way, "I'll speak to Olivier. See if she can pull together a strike team. Because from the looks of that bullet, we're going to need a hell of a lot more Life Fibers."*

*" Normal Life Fibers aren't sufficient."*

*Batou almost choked on a yawn at the unexpected answer. The hell? How could Life Fibers be insufficient!? The damn things were used in Kamui, for crying out loud! Turning around to speak his mind, he felt the atmosphere grow stifled when Isshin continued without missing a beat, "The Adhesive Bullet was created from ultra-hardened Life Fibers more powerful than anything you've encountered. Unfortunately for my research, I could only gather a*

*handful of these Life Fibers. And they were all used creating this single bullet."*

*"Damn it," the former ranger cursed under his breath. That complicated things. A lot. Ragyo was powerful enough to dodge high-velocity rounds at close range. She was also intelligent enough to realize when someone was trying to draw her attention. Or lull her into a false sense of security, "So, we only have one shot? I can't even begin to imagine the strategy we'll need to hit her with the damn thing."*

*"You have a point."*

*Isshin felt a fraction of his former passion, the scientific curiosity which had driven him into researching everything surrounding Life Fibers without worrying about the consequences or ethical issues, rise to the surface. It was an odd experience after years of failure and setbacks. Of watching fellow nudists getting killed on missions. Or not coming back at all, "The Adhesive Bullet is guaranteed to strike down Ragyo Kiryuin. However, hitting her will be quite difficult."*

*"At the very least she won't make it easy," Batou felt his old injuries ache at the thought of getting anywhere close to Ragyo, "We'll need to catch her by surprise. But that won't be as simple as taking down her middle managers. It would have to be one hell of a distraction."*

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Ragyo lurched when the abomination thrust its arm into her chest.

"W-What!?"

Her eyes quivered at torrents of blood sprayed through the air, coating the ground surrounding Shinra Koketsu in crimson visceral. Gasping at the sensation of the foreign object, Ragyo ignored the bitter taste of copper. She brushed aside the pain spreading from her

heart, the sudden weakness plaguing her Life Fibers. What had this *creature* done!? How could anything scratch Shinra Koketsu, let alone penetrate the sacred garment? Vampire or not, Absolute Domination should have rendered her powerless. Even the creature's annoying progenitor was no match for Shinra Koketsu. So how -

She *stiffened* at the familiar presence intermingling with her Life Fibers.

"Where did you get this!?"

Without a second thought, inconsiderate of the ramifications that could arise from such hasty actions, she tossed what remained of Seras Victoria off her arm. The vampire impacted the ground with a wet *thud*, blood and shadows intermingling beneath her ragged flesh as she gasped for breath, undead lungs desperately seeking sustenance from the air. But Ragyo didn't notice of the vampire's torturous existence. As Seras Victoria laid upon the ground, agony coursing through what constituted her physical form, she clutched the hole in Shinra Koketsu directly over her heart. Kaleidoscopic light radiated in ominous shafts between her fingers, *oozing* across the manicured digits desperately holding the damaged garment together.

" *Cela n'a pas d'importance !*"

A noncommittal grunt escaped her lips, twisting into a snarl when she noticed the vampire regenerating. How did her Souichiro, a pathetic man who couldn't realize his inferiority, steal some of the Original Life Fiber? She made sure he *never* entered the Forbidden Room unsupervised. And he wasn't nearly half as clever as he pretended. If it wasn't for Isshin's constant protection, Souichiro would have died long before his organization became an annoyance.

Flecks of blood dripped onto the ground as Shinra Koketsu's eyes flared to their fullest extent. The pain coursing through her body was torturous, but nothing compared to what she had planned for this

abomination, "So please, give my regards to dearest Vlad when you \_."

All conscious thought stopped when agony - pure and unrelenting - coursed through her Life Fibers. Her fingers clutched the gaping wound in Shinra Koketsu as a hollowness impossible to comprehend defined her existence. A scream threatened to tear its way through her clenched teeth before she clamped down upon the absurd reaction. Pain or not, she refused to give the vampire *any* satisfaction! But as she grew accustomed to the pain, at least enough to raise a trembling finger at Seras Victoria, Ragyo *gasped*, falling onto her hands and knees when Shinra Koketsu's divine essence abruptly *vanished* .

Her fingers carved through the concrete like sand, tearing jagged divots into the material. Sweat trickled down her cheeks, dripping from her chin as she tried scrounging enough energy to move. What had that vile creature done to her!? No amount of anti-Life Fiber technology, even her former husband's, could weaken Shinra Koketsu! Yet, to her growing terror, she noticed the ultimate Kamui's coloration fading away. She watched with bathed breath as the radiance permeating the majestic garment - a sign of its divine origin - dimming until there was nothing but a pale facsimile of the ultimate Kamui adorning her body.

"You... miserable... abomination!"

Ragyo punched the ground, splitting open the knuckles on her right hand. As the darkness composing the vampire's physical form finished regenerating, leaving Seras Victoria panting for breath, she forced every remaining scrap of power from her Life Fibers. Pushing the agony stabbing at her souls to new heights. All to accomplish *one* thing.

"How... dare... you..."

The words slurred together as the Needle Blade appeared in her clenched fingers. Strands of silver hair framed her face as she

stumbled off the ground, forcing her burning Life Fibers to respond. Taking control of her body despite the excruciating pain making every movement unbearable, a venomous curse left from her throat when her attention drifted towards the stains blemishing Shinra Koketsu, covering the divine garment with splotches of dirt.

"YOU ARE NOT WORTHY OF TOUCHING -"

She was interrupted with extreme prejudice when a fist smashed against her mouth.

Ragyo tasted copper as her jaw shattered. The bitter, metallic liquid spewed from her gasping lips, splattering through the air alongside the deafening roar of Senketsu's spiritual energy. Staggering away from her daughter, she grasped her bloodied face. *Merde* ! How did Ryuko escape her notice!? As blood trickled down her chin, dripping onto Shinra Koketsu without abandon, her confusion twisted into monstrous hatred.

"Ryuko!"

Her daughter's arrogance was astounding! She could hear the Kamui whispering false platitudes and reassurances into Ryuko's ears, filling her daughter's mind with visions of grandeur impossible to achieve. Souichiro's blasphemous weapon may have weakened Shinra Koketsu, but she wasn't *deaf* . Hearing such foolishness from Kamui, such misplaced bravado, was insulting!

But it was the Ryuko's condescension that granted her the strength to push aside the excruciating pain coursing through her Life Fibers. To draw upon what power remained in Shinra Koketsu, channeling its divine essence down her fingers into the Needle Blade, "How dare you lay your filthy hands on -"

Drops of foreign blood splattered across Senketsu when Ryuko responded the only way she knew how - uppercutting her mom in the middle of her sentence. Shutting down the bitch's annoying speech with the satisfying *crunch* of Kamui against bone. Not stopping

despite her punch literally lifting Ragyo Kiryuin off the ground, Ryuko quickly followed with a second haymaker, sending the insane woman crashing back to the ground.

"Don't you EVER shut up!?"

Ryuko honestly couldn't care less whether her mom answered the question. Because if Ragyo Kiryuin thought she was going to stand around and let her bitch about her problems, then she had another thing coming!

The moment her bitch of a mom's face slammed into the ground, Ryuko rushed forward. As Ragyo rolled back onto her feet with a seriously pissed look on her blooded face, spiritual energy flooded Senketsu. And when Ragyo Kiryuin swung the Needle Blade so damn slowly she thought the bitch was messing around, Ryuko leaned out of harm's way and clenched her fingers into a fist.

"Because it's SERIOUSLY starting to piss me off!"

She grunted as Ragyo crashed through one building after another, leaving a trail of destruction across Honnou City. After dealing with her mom's arrogance for weeks and that undead bastard's broken powers, landing a good, solid punch was almost enough to make her grin. *Almost* . Because just three seconds later, enough time to make sure Seras was alright, Ryuko felt something caress her Life Fibers.

" ***Ryuko!***"

"Don't worry, Senketsu! I got this!"

Her heels *clacked* as she flickered back and forth, avoiding the Needle Blade while grinning at the twitch forming above Ragyo's left eye.

"What's wrong, Ragyo?"



With a light chuckle, she decided to kick things up another notch. Screwing with the bitch was fun, but she couldn't afford wasting time. Not when Orihime was trapped within Shinra Koketsu!

"For a know-it-all bitch, you're not that smart!"

The expression on her mom's face when she caught the Needle Blade, grabbing the rainbow weapon between her fingers without looking, was priceless. As the accompanying explosion cratered the ground beneath her heels, Ryuko tightened her hold, Senketsu barely shaking from the strain, "Because it doesn't take a genius to realize Senketsu's the most badass Kamui in the world! A cheap knock-off like Shinra Koketsu can't compare to the real thing!"

Ragyo snarled at the blasphemous proclamation, "You insolent, little \_."

A quick *yank* on the Needle Blade pulled her mom forward, allowing her the leverage to knee the bitch in the stomach.

"So, take your stupid outfit..."

Ryuko pivoted with a hollow *clack* .

"... and your bullshit speeches..."

Her heels dug into the ground as crimson energy *blasted* from Senketsu. Smiling at the sudden change in fortune, Ryuko felt Senketsu's encouragement as she reared back her arm and punched Ragyo in the stomach. Every scrap of Senketsu's available power rushed through her Life Fibers into Shinra Koketsu, leaving an ugly tear across the so-called ultimate Kamui before she *pushed* a little harder.

Sending the bitch flying across the No-Star Slums until she reached the city limits.

And then kept *going* .

"... and go straight to Hell!"

" ***Stay focused, Ryuko,***" Senketsu watched Ragyo Kiryuin bounce across Tokyo Bay with a mixture of satisfaction and nervousness. He'd known his creator was brilliant, but something capable of desynchronizing Shinra Koketsu was terrifying, ***"Ragyo Kiryuin might be weakened, but there's no telling how much longer that will last. Also, you should restrain your punches a little more. It would be bad if we accidentally hurt Orihime."***

Ryuko clicked her teeth. She *knew* Orihime was somewhere inside Shinra Koketsu! There was no way she'd forget something so important! Why else would she leave the Scissor Blade with Kinue? It wasn't because she wanted to personally beat her bitch of a mom senseless!

"Don't worry, Senketsu," she cracked her knuckles at the thought, "As long as we aim for her ugly face, that won't be a problem!"

Ragyo's eyes snapped open when Shinra Koketsu touched Tokyo Bay.

In a fraction of a second, she righted herself, spiritual energy trailing from Shinra Koketsu, enveloping the ultimate Kamui within its kaleidoscopic radiance. Hovering above the stilled waters, blood continued trickling from her broken nose as she snarled at the fast-approaching presence. *Merde* ! Did her daughter think it would be this easy? Ryuko might have the edge at the moment, but *she* had decades of experience dealing with those unwilling to devote themselves to the Original Life Fiber. With anger fueling her strength, she gathered every scrap of strength remaining in Shinra Koketsu, the ultimate Kamui glowing with a faint, yet familiar, multicolored light as she confronted her petulant daughter.

"You insolent, little brat!"

She made little effort concealing the venom in her voice. As a mother, she was proud Ryuko's Life Fibers matured to such an

extent. Recovering so quickly after Absolute Domination suggested strength befitting her daughter. But as a servant of the Original Life Fiber, she was infuriated beyond comprehension!

Her arm *quivered* upon catching Ryuko's haphazardly-thrown punch. Manicured fingers grasped the Kamui-covered fist with infuriated fervor. She dug into the exquisite fabric adorning Ryuko's undeserving flesh while the accompanying eruption of clashing spiritual energies evaporating the water beneath her feet.

"Congratulations, Ryuko," blood dribbled from her split lips, mixing with the copious amount pouring from her nose, as she struggled against her daughter's strength, "You've landed a few punches. Managed to tarnish Shinra Koketsu. But your foolish rebellion ends here!"

It was time she ended this pointless charade. Her condescension towards Ichigo and Ryuko, her refusal to consider their attempts at stopping the Original Life Fiber anything more than pathetic, enabled her former husband to get one last laugh. And that, above all else, including Isshin's refusal to reciprocate her feelings, was frustrating. That Souichiro of all the naked apes blemished Shinra Koketsu was an insult she would not tolerate. And now that her pride was effectively shattered, any ignorance pertaining to her daughters discarded, she needed to focus on destroying everything refusing to succumb to the Original Life Fiber.

Starting with Ryuko.

"If not for Ichigo, how far would you have come?"

Ragyo discarded any remaining attachments for her flesh and blood with a single, cathartic punch, "Without Isshin's guidance, you would be nothing! A petulant, angry little girl seeking the unobtainable!"

"You think I give a shit!?"

Despite the fist lodged against her cheek, just another act of 'tough love' by her dear old mom, Ryuko grinned. Even with blood oozing from her nose and the taste of copper filling her mouth, she took Ragyo's comment in stride. Because she heard *worse* from Satsuki.

"So, what if Ichigo helped Senketsu and me!?"

She *grinned* with a mouthful of blood before grabbing Ragyo's wrist. Squeezing it *just* hard enough to get her attention. And once she was sure her mom couldn't leave until they were done talking - like a *normal* family - she slowly twisted the arm away from her face, "And maybe you're right. Ichigo's dad gave me some pointers on Senketsu."

"But you want to know something?"

With a quick twist, she wrenched Ragyo's arm out of its socket. As her mom dealt with the relatively minor discomfort, Ryuko spat blood onto Shinra Koketsu before using the ultimate Kamui as a stepping stone. Bringing them face to face, "You like to talk about how pathetic I am..."

Feigning a punch before twisting at the very last second, she grasped Shinra Koketsu's hood before slamming her knee into Ragyo's face.

"... but *you're* the one who can't get over a guy who hates your freakin' guts!"

Ragyo hovered on the edge of unconsciousness when her head snapped backwards. Blood pushed through her teeth, spewing from her mouth in copious spurts. Her eyes quivered when the landscape abruptly inverted, the ruined remains of Honnou City twisting with the blanket of Life Fibers enveloping the planet into an abhorrent tapestry. The Needle Blade trembled in her fingers at Ryuko's arrogance. Yet she suppressed such petty frustrations for her daughter with a strangled snarl. She wanted nothing more than to teach Ryuko a valuable lesson on respecting one's elders. To wipe

the smirk off her daughter's face before destroying everything she cared about, starting with Satsuki and those naked apes.

But overplaying her hand so early wouldn't be *wise* .

Until Shinra Koketsu fully recovered, she needed to bide her time. Senketsu was powerful. She couldn't deny that fact. At the moment, the Kamui's strength exceeded her own, granting Ryuko the false sense of superiority dictating her actions. Yet even with Isshin's positive influence, her daughter was still the same short-tempered girl who foolishly -

A familiar crackle and hiss of burning ozone ended her train of thought.

Kaleidoscopic light enveloped Shinra Koketsu, encompassing the ultimate Kamui from hood to hem, as she pivoted, Ryuko's sanctimonious behavior momentarily forgotten. Yet the Needle Blade shimmered alongside her mounting confusion when she found *nothing* . The skies as empty as her tolerance for anyone daring to interfere with the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet.

She heard the subtle fluttering of clothing far too late.

The spiritually-concealing cloak Kisuke loaned Satsuki dissolved when Yoruichi stretched her leg upwards, electrical energy surging around the limb in lethal torrents. Surrounded by tattered fabric glistening in the crimson-tinted moonlight, she twisted sharply before driving her heel into the back of Ragyo's neck.

"SHUNKO: RAIJIN TONBOKIRI!"

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"Damn..."

The curse hovered overhead while awareness slowly returned to his senses. As the cavity in his chest regenerated, the tattered remnants of his shihakusho weaving back together, Isshin

picked himself off the ground. Kneeling on the ground, surprised at the lack of smugness and arrogance, he winced when a sharp pain stabbed down his spine. Damn, Ragyo hadn't held anything back in that punch. He couldn't remember the last time he felt anything like *this* .

Wiping the blood trailing from the edge of his mouth, his heart plummeted when Ragyo's presence vanished. But his concern that Ragyo found him - and was determined to finish what she started - deepened when Ichigo's spiritual pressure skyrocketed.

From his vantage point in the No-Star Slums, he watched his son streak through the sky towards Ragyo.

His hand clenched when Ragyo danced around Tournesol, purposely allowing the weapon within an inch of Shinra Koketsu before moving out of range. And she had every right to act that way.

Because Shinra Koketsu was something that couldn't be described as 'powerful' or 'overwhelming.'

With his expression shifting between concern and worry, Isshin ignored Shinra Koketsu's disturbing presence. Despite its horrendous origins, the ultimate Kamui was a masterpiece in every sense of the word. But as long as Ragyo didn't feel the need to unleash Absolute Domination, it was merely invincible. Adjusting the sword strapped to his obi, he involuntarily stiffened at the supersonic *bang* of Ryuko joining the battle, the ear-splitting screech of the Scissor Blade against Ragyo's hand sending multicolored shockwaves rippling through the air.

Briefly reaching for his tachi as Ragyo's laughter echoed through his Life Fibers before stopping, her enjoyment at Ichigo and Ryuko's

despair palpable, shadows framed his face when he turned around, giving the woman one final tense glare before walking away.

"I'm sorry, Ichigo."

He meant every word. He truly was sorry. And once things were finished, he would apologize to Ichigo. Putting an end to Ragyo's madness was his problem. It had been his responsibility to stop Ragyo from the moment he realized the woman he'd known for years, Masaki's friend and Ichigo's godmother, was gone. Transformed into a monstrous caricature of her former self by the Original Life Fiber. It *sickened* him to stand in the shadows while Ichigo and Ryuko fought Ragyo.

If she was still here, Masaki would never forgive him for placing Ichigo's life in jeopardy.

And he couldn't blame her.

What kind of father watched his son fight his battles? His fingers trembled until he clenched them into a fist. What sort of parent was he to let Ichigo fight Ragyo, who was his problem and nobody else's? That he was *contemplating* the question proved his failure as a parent. That he wasn't rushing to save Ryuko from the 'love tap' that sent her crashing into Honnou City, an arm nearly severed and blood streaming from her chest, weighed on his conscience. But despite Ragyo's laughter echoing in the deepest recesses of his mind, despite the scream from his son, he kept walking.

Never faltering even as the lump in his throat grew.

Ragyo *needed* to be stopped. If the Celestial Cocoon Seed Plant reached its climax, humanity would become nothing more than food for Life Fibers. The World of the Living would be torn apart. Nudist Beach, Ichigo and Ryuko's friends and even Satsuki, they'd be killed in the explosion alongside countless souls in the Soul Society. Forcing himself to continue when his son slammed into Honnou City, leaving a trail of destruction covering half of the island, Isshin

ignored the constant twitching of his fingers, that his hand was slowly moving closer to the blade sheathed at his waist.

He needed to trust Ichigo.

His son had enough experience to make Ragyo's job difficult, at least while she was holding back. And Ichigo was motivated. He was fighting Ragyo to save Orihime - to save everyone from Life Fibers. After everything else failed, Ichigo was banking his hopes on Satsuki's last-minute plan. And he couldn't blame his son. If Satsuki's plan worked, if Tessai separated Ragyo from Shinra Koketsu, stopping the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet would be possible.

But he knew better.

Shinra Koketsu transcended everything. As long as Orihime remained trapped within the ultimate Kamui, nothing could separate Ragyo from Shinra Koketsu. Even the Hogyoku created from the Original Life Fiber was nothing more than a pale imitation of its shadow. If Tessai tried using Kukanten'i, she'd kill him in a heartbeat. Leaving her in an annoyed mood. And thanks to the mental block woven onto his soul, he couldn't warn him. With the Original Life Fiber awake and *angry*, attempting anyone more than vague insinuations would cause his throat to close.

Even thinking about passing along a coded message was causing him to forget how to write.

Still, there was *something* he could still do.

He'd noticed her presence the moment Ichigo and Satsuki headed towards Honnouji Academy. A weakening, but nevertheless alive, spiritual pressure. Something Ragyo, in her infinite wisdom, believed was dead. Without a sound, he carefully leapt across the twisted remains of a metal billboard, sandals *clapping* against cracked concrete. Grunting just loudly enough to announce his arrival, he approached the Life Fiber clone sitting on the ground, her golden hair shifting listlessly in the wind.



"I'm surprised you're still around."

The clone didn't answer. Not that he expected anything different. Ragyo hadn't been lying about giving her free will. But that only helped to leave a bitter taste in his mouth. Allowing her 'experiment' to know she was nothing more than a replacement for the original Satsuki was immeasurable cruel, even by his standards. He doubted Ragyo created the clone for any other reason besides testing Ichigo or Ryuko's strength. Putting on his best, friendly smile, he waited until Ragyo moved to the opposite side of Honnou City, giving him some breathing room, before shaking his head.

"Ichigo sure did a number on you."

The clone's remaining hand twitched. Yet she didn't respond. Her vacant eyes stared into the distance, disheveled golden hair lying against the contours of her face. With every cautious step closing the distance between them, Isshin realized the depths of *what* Nui and Ururu created. Ragyo was right, this wasn't an ordinary Life Fiber clone. She was significantly higher quality than the second-hand imitations fighting Ichigo's friends and Nudist Beach. And while her clothing was nothing more than an insentient replica of Junketsu, it was created from pure Life Fibers. Granting the outfit stitched onto her skin a tremendous amount of power.

"Although, I heard you gave him some trouble."

Isshin scratched his cheek. It didn't take the Grand Couturier to tell the clone was grievously injured. The bruises blemishing her ashen gray yet otherwise normal skin were bad enough on their own. But the damage to her left arm was concerning. Everything beyond the upper bicep was gone. Emerald ichor spilled from the wound, pouring onto the ground around her feet. And her posture, the slight laboring of her breath when her eyes swiveled in his direction, suggested the wound was quite painful.

"Still, while you both might have consented to the fight, I'll need to punish Ichigo for his reckless behavior," he rubbed his stubble-free

chin, "No matter what, a man should never lay his hands upon a woman."

"Why are you here, Isshin Kurosaki?"

The clone raised her voice at the man's insistence. Her mouth tightened into a suspicious grimace. When another Getsuga Tenshou tore through the heavens, showing the lengths Ichigo Kurosaki was willing to take his foolish resistance against Lady Ragyo, she tensed when Isshin Kurosaki grumbled incoherently, his answer bereft of seriousness, "What's wrong with wanting to make sure you were alright?"

"Don't patronize me!"

She snapped at Isshin Kurosaki, spittle flying from her clenched teeth. Contrary to the man's expectations, she wasn't naïve enough to believe his magnanimous behavior was anything but a farce. A being of his stature wouldn't behave so foolishly without ulterior reasons. Someone equal to Lady Ragyo, who could destroy the Grand Couturier without effort, wouldn't debase himself by greeting a failed experiment with anything resembling geniality.

"Why would *you*," the pronoun slipped between her teeth alongside a ragged gasp. Burying the excruciating pain of her Life Fibers unraveling, she glared at the elder man, focusing the brunt of her anger and frustration upon his faux affability, "Concern yourself with my well-being?"

Her remaining hand trembled, masking the agony from her deteriorating Life Fibers. She clenched her jaw with as much strength as remained in her body, brushing aside the sensation of her left arm slowly unraveling. Lady Ragyo created her for a single purpose - to defeat Ichigo Kurosaki. But she knew from the first moments of awareness, with the Grand Couturiers standing over her prone form, that she wasn't Satsuki Kiryuin. The memories so vivid in her mind, the conversations with Ichigo and Ryuko Matoi that evoked burning passion, weren't her own. Everything about her life -

her existence - were lies. Yet she had carried that burned without question nor complaint, waiting for the opportunity to unleash the entirety of her divine strength against Ichigo Kurosaki.

For it was only through defeating Mugetsu would she prove herself superior to Satsuki Kiryuin!

The various presences encompassing Honnou City mixed into a kaleidoscopic tapestry as she averted her gaze. Her lips, stained with the substance running through her veins, pinched into a tight frown at Isshin Kurosaki's silence, "Mugetsu's strength exceeded my wildest expectations. For a brief moment, ephemeral as my hopes, I was clashing blades with a Kamui who had fought the Grand Couturier. Who had defeated Satsuki Kiryuin not once, but twice. But that still wasn't enough. In the end, I never stood a chance. Despite my best efforts, I was nothing more than a stepping stone for Ichigo."

"But then Satsuki Kiryuin decided to show mercy."

She laughed bitterly at the painful memory burned into her Life Fibers. The immeasurably cruel expression in those cold, sapphire eyes drawing another dry chuckle, "Instead of striking me down, she stayed her hand. She *chose* to let me live. Perhaps I wasn't worthy of her attention. Or maybe... maybe she knew what I ignored. That my existence meant nothing to Lady Ragyo."

Emerald eyes dimmed as Satsuki Kiryuin's words echoed in the deepest recesses of her consciousness. The bands of shifting green narrowed before she closed her eyes, blood-covered lips curling into a smirk.

"And yet I'm grateful."

"Huh? Really?"

Isshin blinked in surprise, "For what?"

The clone didn't flinch when another inch of her arm frayed apart. She couldn't comprehend Isshin Kurosaki's concern with her well-being. Nor did his consternation make the slightest sense. She was nothing more than a failed replica of Satsuki Kiryuin. An hour ago, while the thoughts of destroying Mugetsu brought endless pleasure born from anticipation, she would have sneered at such defeatism. But that didn't matter. Not anymore. She was dying. And nothing would change that.

"It doesn't matter."

Another sigh escaped her lips when the weight of her arm, the few inches remaining in the wake of Ichigo Kurosaki's attack, vanished. It seemed she'd overestimated the resiliency of her Life Fibers. She had hoped to watch Ichigo and Ryuko Matoi's confrontation with Lady Ragyo, to witness first-hand the divine glory of Shinra Koketsu, but it appeared such things were not meant to pass, "Give my regards to Ichigo if he -"

"Alright! That's enough!"

Isshin interrupted the clone halfway through her depressing comment. While he would never physically strike a woman, Ragyo notwithstanding, he could expression his displeasure in other, more creative fashions, "The Satsuki I know would never admit defeat! She wouldn't take losing to Ichigo lying down! Instead of wallowing in self-pity, she'd fight until her last breath!"

He paused, allowing the point to sink in, before pointing a finger at the clone, "And stop with this nonsense about dying! Sure, your Life Fibers are damaged. But take it from someone who knows a thing or two. You're not going to fall apart in the next minute."

A moment passed before Honnou City trembled, thanks to Ragyo redirecting his son's Getsuga Tenshou towards Ryuko. Yet he grimaced, but not at that. It was obvious his statement got through to the clone. He was many things, an overbearing father, a former shinigami captain and head of the Shiba Clan, and the only person

capable of stopping Ragyo. Or, at least, before she wore Shinra Koketsu. But it was the *first* thing he took most pride in. Underneath her fervent loyalty to Ragyo, the clone was simply a scared and confused teenager who just realized everything she knew was a lie.

And as a father, that didn't sit well with him. The clone wasn't Satsuki, and her body made from Life Fibers, but that didn't make her any less human.

Pivoting when everything turned a brilliant shade of sapphire, he watched Ragyo manhandle Ichigo, her smirk visible even from this distance, "Would it hurt Ragyo to hold back a little more? She doesn't need to brag about Shinra Koketsu."

"Isshin Kurosaki, you are the most credible threat to Lady Ragyo."

The clone forced herself to stand. Her heels *clacked* sharply upon the ground. Despite his strange train of thought, Isshin Kurosaki was correct. She wasn't Satsuki Kiryuin, the memories woven into her Life Fibers were artificial, but allowing the prospect of her impending death hold sway over her final moments was pathetic. Holding her shoulder with the remnants of

her dwindling strength, blood seeped between her fingers, trickling down her arm as she glowered at the man, "Staying your hand for years does not make sense! Why haven't you -"

"Enough about me! Let's take a look at your arm!"

"What?"

"Hmm... this is Nui's handiwork all right. I'd recognize her stitch patterns anywhere," Isshin mulled under his breath, ignored the clone's confusion when he grabbed her hand, turning the wrist over several times, "I might not be a couturier, but I can tell she put a lot of time and effort into creating you. But your Life Fibers lack maturity, which explains why your arm hasn't regenerated."

His grip tightened around the clone's wrist, holding her steady long enough to place his other hand on her shoulder. Tracing a pattern across the edge of the wound, he grunted as small threads shimmering with kaleidoscopic energy emerging from his fingers. With the clone's emerald eyes quivering, whether from shock or astonishment, the Life Fibers stitched through flesh and clothing. As his fingers followed the contours of her shoulder, multicolored threads pulled the wound closed, weaving cross-patterns until the last trace of green light vanished.

"That should do it."

Isshin double-checked the stitching before nodding, pleased with the overall success. He might be a little rusty, but something of this quality was second nature, "It's not much, but I've stabilized your Life Fibers. If you want, I could make you a new arm."

"No, this is more than adequate."

The clone pulled away from Isshin Kurosaki before the man could further damage her pride. That he prevented her death in exchange for nothing, with no ulterior motive discernable behind his amiable expression, evoked suspicion. If Lady Ragyo had saved her life, she would have questioned the reasoning behind such a magnanimous decision. But if he believed this meager act of generosity swayed her thoughts, he was more of a naïve fool than Ichigo.

"But a single act of kindness changes nothing."

A trace of Satsuki Kiryuin's passion accompanied the furrowing of her brows. The wounds blemishing her ashen gray skin faded as she glared at the elder man, emerald light shimmering in her eyes while Honnou City trembled, shifting dangerous upon Tokyo Bay when Ichigo and Ryuko slammed into the No-Star Slums, "Do not assume I'm blind to your deceit, Isshin Kurosaki! I might not be Satsuki Kiryuin. And perhaps Lady Ragyo believed I would perish fighting Ichigo. But if you think I'd betray Life Fibers for something as insignificant as my life, you -"

"Of course not!"

Isshin huffed at the unwarranted suspicion aimed in his direction. It was insulting she thought so little of his generosity! Clone or not, she was still Satsuki. Forcing her to do anything was out of the question. He'd have an easier time convincing Ragyo to betray the Original Life Fibers, "You're free to do whatever you want!"

"Humph," she glared at the enigmatic being. It didn't matter if Isshin Kurosaki was lying. If he so chose, he could end her existence in a heartbeat. The difference between their powers was unfathomable, equivalent to the bottomless canyon between his strength and Shinra Koketsu's.

"I'm serious!"

He didn't receive an answer when the clone turned around, disappearing into the surrounding darkness without another word. Leaving him standing in the middle of the rubble with his hands raised awkwardly in front of his body. Before long, as Kinue's presence prickled on the edge of his mind, he rubbed his neck. Things were worse than expected. He hadn't missed Aizen releasing his Bankai. The Original Life Fiber's anger at his audacity couldn't be defined in human terms. It was only a matter of time before the creature made its way to Honnouji Academy.

And there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"You know, Shinra Koketsu is better than anything I've ever made."

The pitter-patter of footsteps, slow and methodical, accompanied the rhythmic scrapping of metal against concrete. Folding his arms together, the tachi strapped to his waist the furthest thing from his mind, he looked over his shoulder when Nui Harime shambled into view, her dress tattered around the edges and tears staining her cheeks. Forcing himself to grin despite Nui's vacant expression, he didn't give the Scissor Blade dragging against the ground a second thought.

"But don't tell Danketsu. She'll throw a fit if she finds out I said that."

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The blood trickling from Yoruichi Shihoin's wounds evaporated beneath the intense spiritual energy pouring from her body. Crackling rings of electrical energy tinted crimson by the Life Fibers enveloping the World of the Living formed into structures bearing uncanny resemblances to the Tenshiheisō. Every muscle in her leg *screamed* in agonizing pain, the wounds from Yuu Akiyama's tactics interfering with her concentration. Yet as Kisuke's spiritually-concealing cloak disintegrated into bits and pieces, she steeled her resolve and twisted sharply before driving her heel into the back of Ragyo Kiryuin's neck.

"SHUNKO: RAIJIN TONBOKIRI!"

An explosion enveloped Ragyo Kiryuin as the electrical energy surged forward, seeking to pierce through Shinra Koketsu. And for a moment, alongside the dull *thump* of displaced air and accompanying thunderclap, the ultimate Kamui resisted the overwhelming technique. The dress patterns and stitching - envisioned by the Original Life Fiber and made real by Nui Harime and Ururu - deflected her Shunko, sending arcs of electricity crackling through the skies over Honnou City, one of which came within inches of electrocuting Ryuko.

Then, with a sound more akin to shattering glass, Shinra Koketsu crumpled underneath her heel.

Ragyo gasped wordlessly as she lurched forward. Her eyes widened in disbelief at the impossible sensation of Shinra Koketsu faltering against the shinigami. She felt her neck snapping when Yoruichi Shihoin pirouetted, driving the heel of her boot further into the ultimate Kamui, before immeasurable and excruciating pain redefined her existence. Gurgling thickly in the back of her throat as



electrical energy coursed through Shinra Koketsu leaving streaks of burns across the divine garments billowing fabric, the world twisted into palettes of crimson and white as she slammed into the ground, the final echoes of the blasphemous shinigami's animalistic roar accompanying her descent.

"Damn... her..."

Her consciousness flickered in the ensuing silence, the only sound coming from the decrepit buildings collapsing underneath their own weight. Each breath spewed blood, blemishing the ground with her life's essence.

"How... *dare*... she..."

Maroon eyes snapped open when a voice filled her mind. Encompassing everything that was - and ever shall be - Ragyo Kiryuin. With her teeth bared into a sneer, she pushed off the ground, the dirt blemishing Shinra Koketsu flowing off the divine garment like oil upon water. As her fingers carved divots into the landscape, she basked in the pleasure of the ultimate Kamui repairing itself. Life Fibers restitched themselves, weaving in a cross-wise fashion that removed the sacrilegious damage in a matter of seconds. But even so, her hatred towards the shinigami only deepened.

Blasphemy against the Shinra Koketsu - no, against *all* Life Fibers - was unforgivable!

Without a single curse, Ragyo vanished, moving across Honnou City at speeds beyond Mugetsu's capabilities. Reappearing underneath Ryuko's hovering form with only the slightest fluttering of fabric announcing her presence, a guttural growl reverberated in the back of her throat upon sensing Yoruichi Shihoin's presence fading into the distance.

"A *lâche*, are you?"

If the impertinent shinigami thought, even for a moment, she had *permission* to leave, Ragyo was prepared to prove her wrong. Without further dramatics, she raised her hand, manicured fingers curled into clawed. Shinra Koketsu was still recovering from that vampire's cowardly tactics. But dealing with an opponent of Yoruichi Shihoin's capabilities would be child's play. As she prepared to destroy the shinigami, the divine garment responding to her deep-seated loathing in a way only someone intimately connected to the Original Life Fiber could understand, Ragyo's brow furrowed in annoyance.

Before vanishing in a flicker of movement, avoiding her daughter's obnoxiously straightforward ambush.

"There you are, Ryuko."

Ragyo watched her daughter arrive with mild disappointment. Her eyes flickered across every square inch of Senketsu, memorizing the Kamui's matured Life Fibers and complimenting her former husband's ability to mimic superior clothing. Waiting an imperceptible fraction of time for Ryuko to recover, to regain whatever composure was lost after missing with her first embarrassing attack, she chuckled, a smirk pulling on the corners of her mouth. Yet buried underneath her growing elation, she felt *sorry* for Ryuko. A few minutes ago, that kick would have caused quite a bit of damage. Perhaps enough to blemish Shinra Koketsu. But as her impatient daughter rushed forward, spiritual energy streaming from Senketsu and the ground shattering in her wake, she closed her eyes.

"You had your opportunity."

And promptly *caught* Ryuko's fist.

"What the!?"

"But I'm afraid you wasted it," Shinra Koketsu rustled slightly as the energy coursing through Senketsu dissipated. Squeezing her daughter's fingers, eliciting a snarling wince, Ragyo leaned forward,

"Was beating me senseless worthy sacrificing humanity to Life Fibers? If so, I severely underestimated your loyalty to Life Fibers."

"Shut the fuck up!"

With a defiant roar, Ryuko slammed her knee into Ragyo's stomach. She was sick and tired of listen to the bitch spew garbage about Life Fibers. Especially when it was crap that didn't make any sense! But she *froze* when a deathly cold hand touched her stomach, fingers plucking at Senketsu's suspender before her foot left the ground.

"What's wrong, Ryuko?"

Ragyo smirked as multicolored energy coalesced underneath her hand, "Did you think I would do nothing while you attacked? Lumière Divine."

Her daughter's screams were like a symphony. While she didn't possess anything close to Shinra Koketsu's undiluted strength, the point-blank attack was more than enough to get the point across. That despite their relationship, rebellion against the Original Life Fiber would *not* be tolerated! And yet, the sight of Ryuko crashing to the ground, smoke wafted from her body while the last traces of energy faded into the heavens, was disappointing. Every second wasted against her daughter brought Shinra Koketsu closer to completion. But the pinnacle of her abilities - Absolute Domination - remained tantalizingly out of reach.

It was *vexing* .

"Although, as your mother, I was impressed by your ingenuity."

The sight of blood dribbling down her daughter's chin was cathartic. And the Kamui's reaction when it spontaneously reverted from Senkou made her heart quiver. Strutting across the decimated landscape as Ryuko propped an arm against the ground, Ragyo clenched her fingers, summoning the Needle Blade in a flash of light, before stabbing the weapon through her daughter's forearm.

"FUCK!"

"However, the effects from that audacious weapon are only temporary," she basked in her daughter's misery. With the clothed nudist unconscious and the abomination of a vampire out of commission, Ichigo and Isshin were the only beings capable of standing against Shinra Koketsu. Of course, there were *other* annoyances scattered throughout the area. But she would deal with them in due time.

"It was painful experiencing my Life Fibers tearing themselves apart. I'll concede that much," Ragyo met her daughter's snarling visage, an expression countered by the Kamui's fearful gaze. On its own, the Needle Blade didn't possess the capability to completely cut through Life Fibers. But it could still inflict excruciating agony, which was *perfect* for a daughter so belligerent, "Yet you had the nerve to lay your hands upon Shinra Koketsu!? To tarnish this divine garment with your -"

"Hado Number Four - Byakurai!"

Ragyo paused when a bolt of lightning pierced her throat, leaving a smoking hole of seared flesh and burning Life Fibers. Her mouth opened for a moment before closing, the curse on the tip of her tongue remaining unspoken. As blood spewed from the wound, she turned around, staring over her shoulder at the figure perched upon one of the few remaining buildings.

"You've learned a new trick, Satsuki."

Satsuki's scowl deepened into a glower as she lowered her finger, tendrils of lightning crackling around the digit. Unbothered by Ragyo Kiryuin's regeneration, leaving the woman no worse for wear, she thrust Bakuzan between her legs, the hollow *crack* reverberating sharply, "Are you surprised, Ragyo Kiryuin?"

" *À peine* ."

The silence was deafening as Ragyo considered her daughter's question. For a moment, she analyzed the wording for deeper meaning, searching for the truth, before tearing the Needle Blade from Ryuko with a dismissive scoff. Did Satsuki take her for a fool? She couldn't deny her daughter's strength. Any human capable of wearing Junketsu's fashion week apparel was worthy of recognition. But without Junketsu Shinzui, her eldest daughter was simply forcing herself into the obedient Kamui.

It was only the obvious nature of Satsuki's ulterior motives that stayed her hand.

"You were always resourceful," she flicked the Needle Blade, removing Ryuko's blood from the weapon, "Even before forcing yourself into Junketsu, you sought every single advantage against Revocs. However, I'm rather curious. *Who* taught you that technique?"

"Does it matter?"

Satsuki furrowed her brow, "It would be presumptuous to assume shinigami techniques are sacrosanct. Human or not, anyone possessing proper motivation, ability and the determination to understand their inherent complexities can learn Kido."

"You don't say..."

Ragyo honestly didn't care if Satsuki learned these so-called Kido from Kisuke Urahara. Or even that abominable shinigami. She already experienced a wide variety of the techniques in Karakura Town, "But as I've already told Ryuko, your window of opportunity has closed. Unless you've miraculously regained the ability to wear Junketsu Shinzui, you'll die without making any difference."

"What the freaking hell's going on?"

" ***I don't know, Ryuko,***" Senketsu tore his eye away from Ragyo Kiryuin, the woman's presence causing his Life Fibers to break out in

goosebumps, "***But we should move before she remembers we're still here!***"

"Got it!"

Ryuko didn't know what the hell was going on. In fact, she was freaking confused! But Senketsu had a point! Without waiting for her bitch of a mom, she jumped backwards, vanishing alongside a faint, nearly imperceptible, *clack* of her heels. As she reappeared, panting slightly and pissed she left the Scissor Blade with Kinue, she snarled at Ragyo Kiryuin's annoying smirk, "But something's bugging me, Senketsu. Why the hell is Ragyo -"

"Hold your tongue, Ryuko!"

Satsuki interrupted Ryuko's question before it finished leaving her mouth. Briefly, and cautiously, shifting her focus from Ragyo Kiryuin, she made sure the point was well established before adding, "We cannot afford to waste time discussing unimportant matters!"

With a flex of her knees, she leapt from the building. The concrete façade, already heavily damaged and on the verge of collapse, shattered in her wake. Junketsu's heels *clacked* sharply against platforms of spiritual energy as she flicked her thumb against Bakuzan's guard, drawing the hardened Life Fiber weapon in a single, constrained motion. Discarding the sheath over her shoulder, Satsuki tucked Bakuzan against her waist as she landed in front of Ragyo Kiryuin, the elder woman presenting only the barest semblance of a defense.

"Hado Number Seventy Eight - Zangerin!"

Spiritual energy arced from Bakuzan as she swung the hardened Life Fiber weapon towards the only chink in Ragyo Kiryuin's stance. But she never expected the woman to allow her attack to touch Shinra Koketsu. While Ragyo swung the Needle Blade at speeds faster than the human eye could follow, deflecting Zangerin into the nearest building, where it exploded in a titanic eruption of light and

energy, she flashed forward, Junketsu's heels *clacked* with every step. Bakuzan shimmered darkly in the crimson-tinted moonlight as she broke through the elder woman's guard.

Only for her eyes to widen when the Needle Blade changed direction faster than anticipated.

"What!?"

The exclamation slipped from Ragyo's tongue when Bakuzan intercepted her attack. Shocked was etched upon her features at her daughter's strength. Impossible! Junketsu hadn't even transformed into her fashion week apparel, let alone Zenkan. Yet Satsuki was countering Shinra Koketsu?

"Surprised, Ragyo Kiryuin?"

Satsuki grinned despite the immense strain placed upon her body. With Bakuzan quivering against the Needle Blade, orange sparks dancing from the point of contact, she matched her mother's shock with subdued confidence, "Junketsu already stood against *you*, someone cursed by the Original Life Fiber, once before. Even though I'm unable to wear Shinzui, what makes you think such a feat cannot be replicated?"

Twisting her wrists, she allowed the Needle Blade to scrape against Bakuzan, releasing a cataclysmic eruption of spiritual energy when the weapon slammed into the ground. Unperturbed by the dust obscuring her view, nor bothered by the shattered pavement that made it difficult to move, she waited until the last second before leaping backwards, avoiding the dozens of strikes transforming the Needle Blade into a multicolored blur.

"I've changed my mind, Satsuki."

A thought prickled in the depths of her consciousness when the Needle Blade nicked Satsuki's arm. The notion that something was *suspicious* about her daughter's newfound strength caused her

eyebrow to twitch. Even weakened, Shinra Koketsu should be more than sufficient for dealing with Junketsu. Especially since Satsuki deigned to arrogantly face the divine garment in the Kamui's base configuration. Yet she was troubled, an emotion that only deepened as she dealt her impertinent daughter a staggering blow to the stomach, forcing the air from her lungs.

*When* had Satsuki learned Kido?

As Satsuki recovered quicker than expected, she flipped the Needle Blade into a reverse grip. Slamming the handle into the underside of Satsuki's chin, blood and spittle spewing from her daughter's mouth, Ragyo scoffed under her breath. Exasperated by the conundrum. She didn't doubt Satsuki could learn the techniques. No, she knew her daughter *very well* . After confronting that blasphemous shinigami in Karakura Town and the variety of supernatural spells at his fingertips, she anticipated Satsuki might have learned the same techniques over the last few weeks.

Presumably from Kisuke Urahara.

But her daughter hadn't cast a single Kido in Karakura Town. Despite their usefulness, the repertoire of techniques witnessed during their skirmish were Junketsu's. From Tenrai Kagai to fashion week apparel, *everything* originated from the Kamui's Life Fibers.

The Needle Blade fought for dominance against Bakuzan an immeasurable number of times, each confrontation releasing an explosion of spiritual pressure. Their forms blurred into a cacophony of colors as the number of wounds adorning her eldest daughter increased, the mere *proximity* of Shinra Koketsu sharpening her attacks to surgical precision.

"Still, I'm *curieux* ."

She caught Satsuki's foot when it snapped upwards, the spiritual energy coursing through Junketsu detonating harmlessly against her



hand, "If Kido are as powerful as you claim, why didn't you use them in Karakura Town?"

"Such a question confesses your ignorance!"

With noticeable effort, Satsuki twisted Ragyo's superior strength to her advantage. Spinning tightly, Bakuzan tucked against her back, she pushed off the ground and smashed her other foot against the woman's neck, releasing an explosion that *cratered* the ground next to Ragyo Kiryuin. And during that imperceptible moment, when the matriarch's surprise caused the immeasurable powerful grip upon Junketsu to weaken, she slipped free, heels *clacking* as she darted backwards.

"In battle, one mustn't preemptively reveal their hands!"

An ephemeral wind tore through the ruined landscape when Satsuki raised her hand. Wincing sharply from the damage accrued fighting her mother, blood trailed from the corner of her mouth as several golden ropes coalesced behind Junketsu, "Bakudo Number Sixty Three - Sajō Sabaku!"

"Oh really?"

Ragyo moved before the spiritual ropes finished snaking around her daughter. She closed the distance between herself and Satsuki in a single, graceful step, announcing her arrival by shattering the golden bonds seeking to tarnish Shinra Koketsu. Matching her daughter's surprised gaze with veiled contempt, she thrust the Needle Blade forward, puncturing Junketsu before Satsuki registered her presence. Blood trailed from the wound purposely inflicted upon Satsuki's shoulder, cutting deeply enough into the ligaments that her daughter would be writhing in agony for *weeks*, before Bakuzan swung downwards, intercepting her next attack.

Sparks danced between their respective weapons as Satsuki pushed aside the excruciating pain.

The ground underneath their feet *shattered* from the ephemeral weight of their combined spiritual pressures, disintegrating further with every exchange of blades.

"How long can you keep this up, Satsuki?"

She didn't expect an answer to her question. Not when Satsuki was using every scrap of Junketsu's strength to withstand Shinra Koketsu. Yet experiencing the implausible scenario of her eldest daughter, a failure in every regard, matching the ultimate Kamui, despite its weakened condition, felt like a dream. Her daughter was *human* . A pig in human clothing limited by the weakness of her flesh. Who couldn't grow stronger. Who would eventually wither and die.

Yet she was resisting Shinra Koketsu using nothing more than Junketsu's basic configuration!

It defied logic!

How could Junketsu match Shinra Koketsu?

Her mouth imperceptibly twitched at the abhorrent thought as an invisible wave of pressure exploded from Shinra Koketsu, sending her petulant daughter skidding backwards through the ruins. A purposefully shallow swing of the Needle Blade, timed to coincide with the divine garment, carved through Junketsu, leaving a bloody streak across Satsuki's stomach.

"Your resilience is admirable..."

Another exchange of blows left a thin, but rapidly regenerating cut upon Shinra Koketsu's sleeve, which was reciprocated several-fold.

"... but in the end, you're nothing but a spoiled brat!"

A choked and undignified gasp pierced the ensuing silence when she grabbed Satsuki's throat. But she wasn't satisfied with such

meager forms of torture. Watching her daughter slowly suffocate, the hand grasping at Shinra Koketsu weakening until the final electrical impulses in her brain faded, wasn't enough. After years of plotting against Life Fibers, spending every waking moment anticipating the Original Life Fiber's death, she wanted Satsuki conscious when she tore Junketsu from her undeserving body. The physical trauma of having the Kamui separated from her skin - and the painful exsanguination that followed - was the proper punishment for *daring* to think, even for a fleeting moment, she was her equal!

"Now that your impudence has *finally* ended..."

The Needle Blade impacted the ground with a dull *thud* as she prepared to remove the Kamui adorning her failure of a daughter, "I believe it's time Junketsu returned to her rightful -"

Her heart stopped upon touching Junketsu.

Without hesitation, she tightened her grip around Satsuki's throat. Snarling between clenched teeth, she dragged a finger down Junketsu, nearly recoiling at the disgusting sensation of the inferior threading. This *wasn't* Junketsu! This piece of second-rate clothing was nothing more than a mockery of the Kamui! A fake designed by someone unfamiliar with the deeper intricacies of Life Fibers! Enraged by the pathetic deception, blood dribbled down her daughter's chin as she choked the last breath from Satsuki's lungs, "Where is Junketsu?"

"Oh? You thought I was wearing Junketsu?"

Blood trickled from Satsuki's mouth as she grinned, "That's quite fascinating, Ragyo Kiryuin."

Those *words* .

That contemptible tone.

Ragyo gasped, and she found herself unbothered by the embarrassing sound. Her eyes widened at the revelation, maroon irises constricting to pinpoints from shock. Ignoring the laughter grating against her consciousness, she glanced towards Ryuko, seeking her daughter's reaction. This was impossible! And yet the terrified expression she expected, the impotent anger and frustration, was nonexistent. Instead of fear, her daughter appeared confused. Bewildered.

And staring at someone roughly half a foot taller than Satsuki.

"You *connard* !"

Her teeth clenched. Manicured fingers quivered around the flesh adorned by an *illusion* of Junketsu. Without waiting for the inevitable retort, kaleidoscopic energy surrounded Shinra Koketsu as her grip tightened. Digging into taut muscles and bones. Yet to her frustration, the hallucination endured her attempt to break its neck. The impertinent smirk, blood staining its teeth crimson, broadening as it raised Bakuzan, the midnight black sword shimmering like a mirage.

"Shatter, Kyouka Suigetsu."

A phantasmal breeze washed across Shinra Koketsu when the illusion of her daughter *shattered* into nothingness. Replacing the lithe form adorned by Junketsu with the shinigami she'd assumed was devoured by the Original Life Fiber.

"It appears my hypothesis was correct."

Sosuke Aizen returned the Kiryuin matriarch's restrained hatred with an amiable smile. He treated her disdain towards his existence - towards the Hokyoku - with a discernable lack of worry. Despite the copious amount of blood spilling to the ground, he was pleased. Although the upper half of his uniform had been destroyed fighting the Original Life Fiber, leaving the Hokyoku inert for the time being, things had progressed beyond his wildest expectations.

"The Adhesive Bullet synchronized with your Life Fibers. Preventing you from wielding Absolute Domination."

His zanpakuto clattered to the ground. With Ragyo Kiryuin's frustration growing by the second, he chuckled, "But on its own, that wouldn't be enough for Kyouka Suigetsu's Perfect Hypnosis to take effect. It required *your* cooperation. After all, a woman of your intuition should have sensed the subtle difference between my spiritual pressure and Satsuki Kiryuin's despite Kyouka Suigetsu's control. As her mother, the intrinsic nuances differentiating our speeches patterns should have drawn your suspicions."

"Or, if you were truly a servant of the Original Life Fiber, touching what you believed to be Junketsu shouldn't have been necessary to realize it was an illusion."

"You..."

The word devolved into a snarl as spiritual pressure erupted from Shinra Koketsu, the divine garment fluttering chaotically beneath the supernatural weight pressing down upon Honnou City. Yet she *forced* herself to ignore the shinigami's arrogance. Did he think she would fall for his tricks a second time? His illusions were powerful, but experience demonstrated their ephemeral nature. Tearing the Needle Blade from the ground without caring about the resulting eruption of power, spiritual energy enveloped the weapon as her fingers curled through its hollow handle.

"... insect!"

Shinra Koketsu's eyes widened as she raised the Needle Blade, the weapon *burning* in the moonlight, " *Couronne de -*"

"By the way, when did you assume I resealed my zanpakuto?"

Ragyo gasped when the illusion shattered, leaving her fingers grasping at nothing but air. Her breath hitching when a hand pressed against Shinra Koketsu, defiling the divine garment without

consequence, she noticed Sosuke Aizen's contemptible smirk as glowing cracks spread down his arm.

"Hado Number Ninety Six - Ittō Kasō."

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"But don't tell Danketsu. She'll throw a fit if she finds out I said that."

The ensuing awkward silence was interrupted by an ear-splitting *thump* when Danketsu shifted around Kinue, propelling both woman and Kamui across Tokyo Bay. Purposely turning his back on Nui, Isshin raised a hand to his forehead and stared at the crimson flames surrounding Ragyo. He took in the overwhelming power and intense heat, wincing at the spiritual energy radiating across Honnou City, before tensing at the amusement coursing through his Life Fibers, carrying a sadistic weight that was unmistakable. There was no question about it. Danketsu was probably complaining, but retreating was the best choice Kinue could make against something as monstrously unstoppable as Shinra Koketsu.

Catching only the faintest wisps of the ultimate Kamui's unfathomable spiritual pressure when Ragyo *vanished*, stepping across the vast distance between Kinue and herself faster than he could follow, Isshin frowned at the unexpected breeze tickling his neck.

"Whoa!"

With a measured step, he spun around the Scissor Blade. Allowing the weapon to harmlessly slice through the air. Blinking at the lack of explosions, or any release of spiritual pressure as the sword slammed into the ground, his eyes widened when Nui pivoted, using her smaller stature to thrust the Scissor Blade towards his heart.

"Hey!"

He disappeared in a flicker of movement, nimbly stepping across the ruined landscape. Stopping once he was *sure* Nui was out of range, Isshin grumbled at the soft pitter-patter growing louder by the second.

"You should be careful with that thing."

The ground *shattered* when Isshin caught the Scissor Blade. Claspings the weapon between his fingers with the effortlessness of tying one's shoes. As amethyst energy spilled from the sword, emitting waves of spiritual pressure that buckled - and then destroyed - the pavement beneath his feet, Isshin twisted his wrist. With a clockwise pivot, he released the Scissor Blade, allowing Nui to continue forward in an embarrassing stumble, her face hitting the ground with a sickening *thud* .

"I'll admit you're stronger than expected," Isshin grimaced at the blood dripping from Nui's chin. For a moment, he considered asking if she was alright. But he frowned, banishing the thought. Instead, he watched Nui stagger back onto her feet, shoulders trembling and spiritual pressure erupting chaotically from her Life Fibers, before raising a finger, "But it will be a cold day in Hell before Isshin Kurosaki gets his ass kicked by a teenager!"

"SHUT UP!"

Nui *screamed* at the top of her lungs, "It's all YOUR fault!"

"Huh? My fault?"

The accusation threw Isshin through a loop, "If you're still upset about the Scissor Blade, I *did* leave a note."

"Y-You..."

Nui snarled at the stupidity spewing from Isshin Kurosaki's mouth. She couldn't understand why someone as strong as Lady Ragyo - stronger than anyone working for the naked apes or that miserable

shopkeeper - would bring up something so annoying! It was infuriating! With her boots scraping against the ground, disheveled blonde hair falling in limp bangs over her eyes, the Scissor Blade transformed into a lethal blur when she rushed the older man, intent on carving chunks of Life Fibers from his body, "What's different about Ichigo!? What makes HIM so SPECIAL!?"

The scraping of polished metal upon wood screeched in the darkness when Isshin unsheathed his sword, drawing the weapon lengthwise across his body. Without moving, he countered the Scissor Blade in a flutter of kaleidoscopic sparks. Aware of the power behind Nui's attack - and the ground cratering beneath his sandals - Isshin deflected the hardened Life Fiber weapon. Using a single finger for guidance, he parried the Scissor Blade. Redirecting the sword without taking advantage of the countless openings in Nui's stance. She might be trying to separate his head from his shoulders, but Nui seemed... *off* .

Her attacks lacked their normal finesse and artistic flair.

Almost as if -

"Mon-Mignon Prêt-à-Porter!"

Isshin blinked at the dozens of clones surrounding Nui, each sporting the same angry expression as the original. And then he found a pink boot lodging itself firmly against his face.

"Ouch!"

The attack didn't hurt. And his nose was perfectly fine. But getting kicked in the face *after* proclaiming himself unbeatable was embarrassing. Something Ichigo and Ryuko would *never* let him live down! With a guttural grunt, he threw the clone over his shoulder. As the surprised replica crashed into another three clones, causing all four to transform into scraps of Life Fibers, he twisted around the sharpened fingernails clawing towards his heart. He avoided the



clone trying to snap his neck, taking advantage of the opening it provided to disappear in a flicker of speed.

"Hmm... not bad."

Nui trembled when her beautiful doppelgangers exploded, raining Life Fibers onto the ground like confetti, "W-What?"

"Ichigo certainly can't make clones from Life Fibers."

Isshin plucked the offensive threads from the glowing silver hair that had once been rugged and handsome black. Rubbing his fingers against the purple Life Fibers, he hummed at the underlying maturity. Olivier was fortunate Ragyo never located Nudist Beach's headquarters despite her best efforts. Even if they possessed only a fraction of the original's strength, a few clones would have slaughtered everyone besides Kinue. Turning the underground fortress into a slaughterhouse. And he was certain Ragyo wouldn't have passed on the opportunity to witness Nudist Beach's destruction with her own eyes.

"But you see a little tense," he flicked away the errant threads before turning his attention to the petrified Grand Couturier, "Are you sure you want to keep fighting?"

Nui *blinked* when Isshin Kurosaki vanished. Her pupils dilated at the unmistakable fluttering of fabric, perfectly-stitched threading swaying in the wind. Without caring about appearances or embarrassment, she ran from the overwhelming presence that resembled Lady Ragyo's. She ignored the impossibility of hiding from someone like Isshin Kurosaki. Every thought in her mind was focused on *survival* . Yet she lurched forward when her boot slipped against the rubble, twisting in a divot that would have broken a pig in human clothing's ankle.

"S-Stay back!"

The Scissor Blade trembled in her shaking fingers as she scampered backwards. Her knuckles bled white, holding onto the purple sword pointing at the man, "D-Don't come any closer!"

For a moment, in the time it took to carefully maneuver around Nui, Isshin listened to the nightmarish symphony of Ragyo's spiritual pressure. The monstrous presence emanating from Shinra Koketsu was intermingled with her Life Fibers, synchronizing wearer and clothing behind anything achievable by Kamui. Torn from his thoughts upon landing behind the Grand Couturier, he watched the terrified teenager before sheepishly rubbing his neck.

"Sorry about that!"

He sheathed his sword in one swift, well-practiced motion, "I shouldn't have mentioned Danketsu. That was thoughtless of me."

"W-What?"

"I mean, Ragyo was probably going to tell you the secret behind Kamui when you turned eighteen," Isshin forced a sly, purposeful enigmatic, smirk despite Ragyo's spiritual pressure possessing a disturbing sharpness. She really wasn't holding back against Kinue. Not that he expected anything different from someone with her vision and sense of ownership. Danketsu was her own Kamui. Unique and special. With a blunt manner of speech completely opposite to Junketsu's shy politeness. But Ragyo likely viewed the Kamui as nothing more than an imperfect replica of Junketsu.

A nauseating sensation rippled through his Life Fibers when Shinra Koketsu's presence utterly encompassed Honnou City and the surrounding landscape.

"Stitching a Kamui requires a lot more effort than creating Goku Uniforms," he scratched his nose. Something wasn't right. Absolute Domination was active. He could feel the technique permeating his Life Fibers with existential dread. And from Kinue and Danketsu's vanishing spiritual pressures, Ragyo achieved the impossible.

Something he'd sought for more than a decade. Yet his strength remained intact. His Life Fibers unaffected by Absolute Domination despite *feeling* Shinra Koketsu's unflinching gaze.

Either Ragyo was focused on taunting Kinue in some roundabout method of tarnishing Danketsu or she didn't see anyone, including himself, as threats to Shinra Koketsu.

"Now that's unexpected."

He whistled when Seras punched Ragyo in the face. But the subsequent hatred - directly specifically on the vampire retreating in his direction - was nothing compared to the venomous anger burning in the back of his mind. The orange-yellow monstrosity looming over the outskirts of Tokyo was unmistakable. Hundreds upon hundreds of meters of Life Fibers bristling with energy absorbed over millennia. Its inhuman spiritual pressure, the true extent impossible for humans to comprehend, powerful enough to brush aside Aizen's Bankai.

And it was *angry* .

"Jeez, give a guy a break," he grumbled when the Original Life Fiber briefly - and seemingly unintentionally - turned its gaze in his direction.

"It's going to take some careful planning to stop that thing," Isshin rubbed his chin, the lack of stubble making the familiar posture awkward, "I won't have time to teach you the secret behind weaving Kamui."

"W-Why are you doing this?"

The question left Nui's throat as a faint, nearly imperceptible, whisper. She didn't understand. Try as she might, she couldn't find the energy to care about Isshin Kurosaki mocking the Original Life Fiber. That he was purposely taunting her about her constant, never-ending failure to weave Life Fibers into the most sacred of clothing.

With a soft clatter, as Lady Ragyo hunted the disgusting vampire and clothed naked ape, the Scissor Blade slipped from her fingers.

"A-Amu's not coming back."

Tears trailed down her cheeks with every hitched breath, "S-She's gone. And Ryuko doesn't want to be family. She'd rather die with the naked apes. Even Lady Ragyo..."

Nui's voice audibly cracked at the notion of speaking about Lady Ragyo so wrongly, so *rudely*. Her pink dress, tattered and frayed from several hours of inattentiveness, crinkled as she tucked her knees against her chest and sobbed. Tears dripped from her chin, staining the layered fabric of her favorite dress with every hitched breath, "B-But why? Did I do something wrong? When Ryuko's stupid dad hurt my eye, Lady Ragyo tried everything to fix it. S-She even thought about asking *you* for help. B-But after she stopped Ryuko from harming Shinra Koketsu, she didn't even ask if I was alright."

"I-I thought she loved me."

Her shoulders lurched alongside a sob as she stared at Isshin Kurosaki, "Why did Lady Ragyo abandon me?"

"I don't know."

The lie slipped from his mouth with far too much ease. Even when Ragyo's spiritual pressure went haywire and Absolute Domination disappeared alongside a sensation that could best be described as shredding fabrics, something that *should* have gained his attention, it took considerable effort to hide the sickening guilt welling in his stomach, "Ragyo might be a busy woman but that doesn't excuse her negligence. It's every parent's solemn duty to raise fine, upstanding children. To protect them no matter the cost."

He folded his arms, "It's why I've never blamed Ichigo for what happened to Masaki."

"It wasn't anyone's fault she died," Isshin remembered Masaki's funeral. It had been small. Only a few of Masaki's friends. Nobody associated with Nudist Beach. But Ragyo appeared before the procession, arriving at the church without any of her normal guards. Attending the funeral from start to finish despite everything she did to Ichigo. And for a moment, he had believed she was genuinely upset.

But during their brief exchange at Masaki's grave, he'd realized her sorrow was nothing more than a well-crafted façade. Beneath the genuine concern, Ragyo had been ecstatic about Masaki's passing. But he pretended otherwise, choosing to feign ignorance while berating himself for assuming anything changed.

For assuming, perhaps naively, Masaki scarring her body loosened the Original Life Fiber's grasp.

"If I blamed Ichigo, Masaki would get mad at me."

He remembered every word of that conversation clear as day. Yuzu and Karin were sleeping upstairs. And Masaki somehow convinced him into letting her take Ichigo outside despite her worsening condition, "The woman I fell in love with, the same woman who always berated my nonsense, died protecting our son."

His smirk widened as he turned away from Nui, staring at the flashes of crimson in the distance, "Every time I see Ichigo's perpetual scowl, or his anger at having an early curfew. Or when he attacks his defenseless father for mentioning his lack of a girlfriend, I see the boy the woman I loved more than life itself gave her life to protect."

"Why didn't you kill me?"

Nui found it impossible to continue crying. Nothing made sense anymore. She should have been horrified Lady Ragyo was losing to Ryuko. It was impossible for Kamui to stand against the divine power of Shinra Koketsu. But something happened to her *chef-d'oeuvre*, turning its beautiful threading into nothing more than scraps of fabric. Resting her forehead onto her knees, she couldn't find the energy to

look at Isshin Kurosaki, "I-I was going to kill them. I had everything planned out."

"That was practically a lifetime ago!"

Isshin mulled the unexpected confession while explosions continued illuminating Honnou City, "If I held grudges against every person who came after my family, I'd never get anything done. But if it makes you feel any better, you got a lot closer than most people."

"W-Why?"

Tears welled in Nui's eyes as her voice audibly cracked, "Why are you like this? You care more about those stupid naked apes than Lady Ragyo! W-Why didn't you kill me? Why are you so *nice* to me!?"

"... that's a tough question."

It really wasn't that difficult a question. And it took Isshin considerable effort not to grimace, "Maybe it's because you were trying to impress Ragyo. She isn't the most understanding woman. But I'm sure she was upset when she found out you -"

"Hey!"

Ichigo appeared in a flicker of moment, already stomping towards his old man before the dust settled. Clenching the obnoxiously clean shihakusho that felt exactly like Life Fibers, he ignored the Grand Couturier and Mugetsu's annoyed muttering, "I don't have time for any of your confusing nonsense. So, just tell me what you know, alright!?"

"And what makes you think I know anything?"

Isshin reared his head backwards before *slamming* it against Ichigo's forehead. As his delinquent son refused to budge, he jabbed a finger against Mugetsu, "Do I look omnipotent and all-knowing?"

"Yes! Because you've known about everything that's happened so far!"

Ichigo grumbled at the exhausted look in his old man's eyes. Sure, he could understand his dad had secrets about Ragyo Kiryuin and the Original Life Fiber. And maybe some of them were better left unsaid. At least until he was good and ready to hear them. But with Ragyo's spiritual recovering from whatever Seras did - and Ryuko throwing Senketsu's full power at her mom - waiting around for something to happen wasn't an option.

"You have your secrets. Fine. I get that," he smacked away the finger jabbing Mugetsu, "But whatever happened to Ragyo isn't permanent! So, tell me one thing. How long until she's strong enough to use Absolute Domination?"

"It's hard to say," Isshin wanted to give Ichigo *something* useful. But everything and anything related to Shinra Koketsu caused his mind to blank, "But -"

"Three minutes."

The quiet whisper cut through the tension like a pair of scissors, "I don't know why, but Lady Ragyo's strength won't return for another three minutes."

Ichigo's eyes widened at the unexpected answer, "What?"

"Three minutes," Nui repeated herself in the same, emotionless tone as she stared at the ground, "Something's interfering with Lady Ragyo and Shinra Koketsu's Life Fibers. I can hear them screaming in pain. She won't be able to use Absolute Domination for another two minutes and forty seconds."

**" *Ichigo, this is too good to be true.* "**

An angry shiver rippled through Mugetsu at Nui Harime's advice. The Grand Couturier might be docile, but she remembered the

psychopath tearing out Ichigo's heart. Not to mention stabbing them through the back, all with a smile on her face, ***"We can't trust her to tell the truth! This is the same monster who killed Mako! She's probably luring us into a trap for Ragyo Kiryuin!"***

"You might be right, Mugetsu," Ichigo frowned at the Kamui's frustration towards Nui Harime, "But we don't have a choice. Even if she's lying, this might be our only chance to save Orihime and destroy Shinra Koketsu."

***" But how do you intend to destroy Shinra Koketsu?"***

Mugetsu 'blinked' at Nui Harime before an annoyed growl coursed through her Life Fibers, ***"Senketsu might be stronger than Shinra Koketsu but that won't last much longer. And I'd rather not have any more holes ripped into my threading. Do you have a plan?"***

"No, but I'll think of something."

Ichigo reflexively grabbed Tournesol when Ragyo Kiryuin was engulfed within an enormous explosion of lightning, "Shinra Koketsu's powerful. But without Absolute Domination it's not invincible. If we can cut it, we might have a shot at stopping Ragyo."

"And just how do you intend to do that, Ichigo?"

Isshin grabbed his wayward son in a perfectly-performed headlock. He tucked his forearm against Ichigo's throat before pulling backwards, causing Mugetsu to emit a shriek unbecoming of Kamui. While Ichigo struggled against his superior physical strength, he scoffed with audible disappointment, "You've fought Satsuki, right? Then you know cutting Kamui is easier said than done! Even if you cut Ragyo down the middle, she'll regenerate before you realize the ground was spinning beneath your feet!"

***" Ichigo! He's crinkling my Life Fibers!"***



Somehow managing to break free of the chokehold, Ichigo gasped for breath before kneeing his old man in the groin, "What the hell are you saying? If Tournesol won't cut it, then how do I -"

His eyes widened at the answer.

"I'm borrowing this!"

Despite the appearance of incapacitating pain, Isshin was rendered speechless when Ichigo reached out and, without any hesitation, ripped the sword from his waist. What sort of juvenile delinquent would steal a cherished family heirloom? Pointing a finger at Nui, who'd been silent for almost a minute, he opened his mouth only for Ichigo to promptly cut him off.

"Don't even bother asking why I took your sword instead of the Scissor Blade."

Ichigo took three steps before scowling over his shoulder, "Because if you weren't busy worrying about nonsense, you'd realize Nui left twenty seconds ago!"

As his old man *finally* realized Nui Harime disappeared sometime after informing them about Shinra Koketsu, Ichigo pushed off the ground. Vaulting several meters into the air before vanishing in a flicker of speed. With Mugetsu tightening protectively when Aizen's spiritual pressure appeared out of nowhere, blasting through Honnou City and overwhelming Ryuko and the others, his eyes narrowed when a familiar pillar of crimson fire stabbed upwards into the sky.

"Aizen... what the hell's going on?"

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...

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Aizen moved before the crimson flames encircled Ragyo Kiryuin.

The world dissolved into shifting colors as he retreated from the erupting conflagration. Retreating from the spiritual explosion enveloping the Kiryuin matriarch as her screams reached his ears, the treacherous captain's expression tensed at the blood dripping from his elbow. Copious amounts of the crimson liquid pooled around his feet, the scent of burnt flesh almost repugnant to one's senses.

"How unfortunate."

He gave the charred flesh on his left arm another cursory glance, the pain uncomfortable yet manageable, "Even with ample preparation, it appears Itto Kase requires a physical catalyst to reach full power."

With faint traces of a smile pulling on his mouth, Aizen observed the crimson flames jutting into the heavens, reaching beyond even the pinnacle of Honnouji Academy. While his own experiences with the Hado were discomfiting, perhaps even slightly painful, watching the upwelling of spiritual energy piqued his curiosity. It was because of that interesting Adhesive Bullet that Ragyo Kiryuin couldn't ignore his attacks, which meant the amount of damage inflicted depended upon her spiritual pressure.

"I appreciate your cooperation, Ryuko Matoi."

His smirk broadened when the teenager arrived in a flash of speed not too dissimilar to a Quincy's hirenkyaku, "If you had given Ragyo Kiryuin any reason to doubt reality, she would have seen through the deception. Rendering my efforts pointless."

"Whatever."

The Scissor Blade transformed into Decapitation Mode as Ryuko snarled at the flames surrounding Ragyo Kiryuin. Something about the shinigami *still* pissed her off! She would never admit it - least of all to the bastard - but hearing the guy mock Satsuki's stupid way of speaking struck a nerve. Damn! If Ichigo was here, she was certain

he'd punch the shinigami for the both of them, "Just don't do it again. Got it!?"

***" His understanding of Satsuki's mannerisms is... disturbing."***

Senketsu found the shingami's reaction unnerving. Anyone, maybe not Ryuko or Ichigo, would panic at the amount of blood pouring from what remained of their arm. And the blackened skin and muscles had to be painful. Yet Sosuke Aizen appeared ignorant, which caused goosebumps to break out across his Life Fibers, ***"Nevertheless, we can worry about his suspicious behavior later. Shinra Koketsu might be weakened but Ragyo Kiryuin's still alive. And growing stronger by the second."***

"Damn it!"

Ryuko flinched under the sweltering heat blasting against her skin. Sweat trickled down her cheeks, pooling against Senketsu much to the Kamui's frustration. The bastard was strong but she could sense her mom's presence. It was as strong as ever! Maybe even stronger! Tightening her hold on the Scissor Blade, she sneered at the arrogant grin undoubtedly plastered on the bitch's face, "What the hell is she planning?"

"Ragyo Kiryuin's biding her time."

It required an almost trivial amount of effort to interpolate Ryuko Matoi's chaotic thoughts. The teenager's mind was akin to an open book, her emotions worn on her sleeves. Something observed when he unsheathed Kyouka Suigetsu, causing her eyes to subtly widen, "From your reaction, you're concerned about my zanpakuto. A logical response, even for a Life Fiber Hybrid. However, thanks to your Kamui, you cannot succumb to Perfect Hypnosis."

Ryuko blinked owlishly at the comment before frowning, "Say what!?"

***" How is that possible?"***

She *felt* Senketsu's confusion through their connection when the bastard chuckled, "Kyouka Suigetsu functions by controlling one's senses, causing them to misinterpret information at my choosing. A frightening technique, but there is a singular drawback. Something you, and your Kamui have taken advantage of. For Perfect Hypnosis, despite its notoriety, depends on my understanding of the world. Or, to be more specific..."

"... I cannot control senses that I, myself, do not possess."

Aizen gestured towards the sweltering conflagration, "Your mother was originally human. Therefore, despite her physiology transforming into something inhuman, her senses remained that of a human's. Your Kamui, on the other hand, was never human. Since I cannot understand how it communicates, nor can I comprehend the method in which it interprets data and information, Kyouka Suigetsu cannot control your senses as long as you're synchronized with Senketsu."

"Heh... so you're saying Senketsu is better than your zanpakuto?"

Pride swelled through Ryuko's mind despite the bastard's dehumanizing insults about Senketsu. She always knew Senketsu was powerful. They kicked enough ass across the goddamn planet to earn a well-deserved vacation! But knowing her Kamui was immune to something hat-and-clogs said was unbeatable, which meant *she* was immune, simply made everything better! If Senketsu was immune to this bastard's zanpakuto, who knew what else he could do? Grinning at the thought, almost forgetting about Ragyo Kiryuin, her good mood faltered when something came to mind.

"Hey, wait a second! How the hell do you know all this?"

"An interesting question."

Aizen stabbed Kyouka Suigetsu into the roof when a familiar presence washed across Honnou City. As Ryuko Matoi tensed underneath the spiritual pressure, pupils dilating and teeth clenched,

he pointed towards the crimson flames, "But it appears we're out of time. Bakudo Number Eighty One - Danku."

The translucent barrier shimmered into existence moments before the barrage of kaleidoscopic spiritual energy pierced Itto Koso. While Ryuko Matoi braced herself, he stood unyielding despite cracks spreading across the Bakudo. A dull *crack* grated on his ears as the transparent surface cracked and splintered under the assault, pieces of spiritual energy fracturing until Ragyo Kiryuin refrained for wasting further effort.

"It appears Kido retain full effectiveness against weakened Life Fibers."

As the protective Bakudo shattered, he removed Kyouka Suigetsu from her impromptu purchase, "Nevertheless, victory cannot be achieved through Kido. Oh well, it appears I'll need to do things the hard way after all."

Ryuko noticed something different about the shinigami's zanpakuto. But before she could speak, an enormous pressure slammed against her shoulders. Leaning on the Scissor Blade as Senketsu tightened, almost *squeezing*, around her body, she snarled when the bitch's voice seemingly whispered in her ears.

" *Félicitations...* "

Ragyo was beyond furious.

The conceptual limitations of hatred couldn't encompass her disdain for the shinigami. For weeks, perhaps somewhat prematurely, she presumed nothing could match her loathing for Kisuke Urahara. The contemptible man who injured the Grand Couturier with a Bleach Bomb. Who stitched Mugetsu and crafted Tournesol. And who befouled the Original Life Fiber during the Great Culture and Sports Festival. Yet, over the last thirty-six hours, through recovering Orihime and adorning herself with Shinra Koketsu, Sosuke Aizen seemed intent on breaking that record.

"... you've successfully *pissed me off* ."

With a sweep of her arm, she dispersed the remaining flames. As she floated above the scorched crater, smoke rising from the blackened concrete and rubble, Ragyo snarled at the burns covering Shinra Koketsu. The damage was fading, but the *audacity* of the shinigami to tarnish the ultimate Kamui was unforgivable! Raising her hand towards the man, fingers almost clenched into her fist, she frowned when Ryuko turned around and fled without a single, rebellious curse.

No, not fled. *Retreated* .

Her stubborn daughter was retreating. Which meant either Ryuko finally understood the greatness of the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet and believed abandoning shinigami meant reprieve from her eventual punishment.

Or Sosuke Aizen had something up his sleeves.

"But there's nobody to blame but myself."

Taking a single, cautious step towards the shinigami, Ragyo suppressed the desire to skewer his heart. Or better yet, tear it from his chest. Her overconfidence in Shinra Koketsu's divine power enabled the shinigami to achieve this slight modicum of success. A bitter taste of victory. And allowing that to continue, even for an imperceptible moment, was intolerable, "It would have been simpler dealing with Ichigo and Ryuko before things got out of hand. Without their interference, that vampire could never have touched Shinra Koketsu. Nevertheless, worrying about the past won't accomplish anything. Because right now, the *only* thing on my mind..."

The Needle Blade appeared in a flash of light, "... is understanding what *you're* planning."

Ragyo took another step, drawing within a dozen meters of the insidious shinigami before he registered the movement. It would be

simple, almost trivial, to take advantage of the man's condition. Without proper medical treatment, he'd likely perish from exsanguination. Allowing nature to take its course was the most sensible option. It would require no effort to leave the shinigami alone. To bide her time until Shinra Koketsu recovered from her former husband's weapon.

Yet she refrained from leaving Sosuke Aizen to his own devices.

She wasn't *stupid* .

Even infuriated beyond human comprehension, she personally understood the ramifications of underestimating Sosuke Aizen. The memories of Karakura Town remained at the forefront of her mind. The man was frighteningly brilliant. Nearly as much as herself. He knew how to get underneath her skin. To manipulate a conversation until the greatest advantage twisted into a weakness. No, assuming the shinigami would die from his self-inflicted wounds was foolhardy. *Imbécile* . And considering the countless delays and setbacks suffered at the hands of those pathetic naked apes and Isshin's treachery, acting recklessly without considering potential consequences was out of the question.

"Planning, you say?"

Aizen smirked at the backhanded compliment, "An interesting declaration. But you're overestimating my capabilities, Ragyo Kiryuin. Confronting the Original Life Fiber strained my body more than expected. I'm in no position to put up more than the briefest resistance. For all intents and purposes, this battle is already over."

"Oh? Is that right?"

Her eyebrow twitched at the shinigami's audaciousness. A subtle, yet noticeable to those blessed by the Original Life Fiber, growl emanated from Shinra Koketsu when the surrounding environment wavered like a mirage, "You're certainly entitled to that opinion. But I cannot help but wonder..."

Without raising her voice, she shattered what remained of the shinigami's faltering illusions, "... how stupid you truly think I am."

The question was redundant. She *knew* Sosuke Aizen's opinion on the matter. The man's intelligence was matched only by his arrogance. And for a moment, her frustration overwhelmed common sense. With only the slightest hesitation, she pointed a finger at the shinigami, multicolored light coalescing above the talon-like fingernail. Every sound appeared to fade away as she debated the ramifications of wiping the man from existence. It would be *easy* . Perhaps effortless if his statement held validity. If he was bluffing, taking the initiative would deal with someone who befouled the Original Life Fiber on multiple occasions.

"What do you hope to accomplish?"

She allowed the gathered energy to dissipate, "Your resistance has been amusing. Yet surely someone with your *intelligence* understands the futility? The Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet cannot be stopped. So please, by all means, don't hold back. Pull out whatever tricks you have left. Continue hiding behind your zanpakuto's illusions like a coward. Because, my dear shinigami, this world, and every pig in human clothing *bred* by the Life Fibers, will perish. And there's nothing you can do to stop it."

"I suppose some might refer to such tactics as cowardly."

"Then again, most people lack sufficient imagination and persistence to consider every available option," Aizen allowed Ragyo Kiryuin to finish speaking. It was the least he could do against someone of her caliber. And considering the alternative, which involved hand-to-hand combat against the most powerful being on the World of the Living, polite conversation was quite enjoyable, "If fighting dishonorably and through underhanded tactics guarantees victory, should one not consider taking such actions?"

" *S'il vous plait...* "



Hearing Yuu Akiyama's aphorism coming from Sosuke Aizen was almost laughable, "Victory, you say?"

Kaleidoscopic light twisted around the Needle Blade as she swung downwards before the shinigami could react, "I find that notion utterly reprehensible!"

A mixture of elation and aggravation fought for dominance as she took advantage of Sosuke Aizen's arrogance. If the shinigami thought - no, believed - himself familiar with her style of fighting, who was she could prove him wrong? With a smile gracing her lips, hidden from the man when he pivoted around the Needle Blade, she purposely refrained from unleashing the spiritual energy. She graciously allowed the shinigami to formulate another countermeasure. To comprehend the ramifications of underestimating Shinra Koketsu as she pointed her other hand at his face, rainbow light already gathered upon her fingertips.

"Lumière Divine."

When the shinigami survived the subsequent explosion stretching beyond Honnou City into Tokyo Bay, Ragyo scoffed. Observing - or rather, *allowing* - Sosuke Aizen to retreat, smoke clinging to the remnants of his clothing, blood covering his burnt body, she waited long enough to give the semblance of hope before closing the distance in the blink of an eye, keeping just out of reach of his zanpakuto.

"Must I repeat myself?"

She wasn't bothered when her next attack missed, scraping the man's neck instead of severing his spine. Without that sacrilegious invention bestowing upon his unworthy body a small fraction of the Original Life Fiber's power, Sosuke Aizen was nothing more than another pig in human clothing. Strong and intelligent but *mortal*. Holding back when he vanished in a flicker of speed, darting across the landscape before reappearing on another building, Ragyo motioned to the blanket of Life Fibers enveloping the planet, "Even if

you destroyed Shinra Koketsu, the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet cannot be reversed. Despite your meticulous planning, you're only delaying the inevitable."

"Because, I assure you..."

Her fingers curled around the Needle Blade, "... this battle was over before it began."

It no longer mattered what the shinigami was planning. Despite his intellect, he was nothing more than a pathetic, heavily injured man on the cusp of death. Without his illusions or that blasphemous device, Sosuke Aizen was as mortal as Satsuki and her underlings. In the span of a single chuckle, she *moved*. No hesitation or unnecessary boasting. No arrogant promises to give the man further warning. There was only the subtle fluttering of Shinra Koketsu's sleeves as the Needle Blade carved through his stomach. Flesh and clothing parting before the divine weapon. Spiritual metal shattering into myriads of pieces against the superior blade forged from the Original Life Fiber.

"Oh?"

The twitch from the dying man's fingers drew her attention, "Don't worry. I'm not quite done with you."

Despite the exuberance coursing through her Life Fibers when both halves of the shinigami collapsed at her feet, Ragyo knew better than to presume Sosuke Aizen dead. Against such an annoying man, there was nothing wrong with being overcautious. Even a little paranoid. Pointing a finger at the dying shinigami, drawing enough of the ultimate Kamui's power to make her reaction seem excessive, she smirked before *blasting* Sosuke Aizen's corpse from existence.

Reducing the shinigami and the blasphemous Hogen to dust in the wind.

" *Adieu*, my dear shinigami."

Silence reined across Honnou City as she watched the scattered ashes disperse into the darkness. Her eyes narrowed, a grimace pulling on her lips, at Ryuko's presence just beyond her range. Without acknowledging her daughter and despite understanding such paranoia belittled Shinra Koketsu and the Original Life Fiber she carefully searched for the influence of the shinigami's zanpakuto. She might have shattered his illusions, but it was the pinnacle of stupidity to presume the man didn't have another trick up his sleeves.

Yet when more than a minute passed without any trace of the shinigami, she allowed herself to relax.

Sosuke Aizen was *dead* and -

"Every zanpakuto has two distinct releases."

Her breath hitched at the voice. Impossible! How was this possible!? Twisting vehemently towards the source of her frustration, Shinra Koketsu tightened around her body yet she didn't experience the slightest comfort as a strangled gasp escaped her throat.

" *Quelle!?* "

Aizen sidestepped Ragyo Kiryuin's astonishment. Her reaction was expected if not anticipated. Even the most powerful beings could be taken by surprise. Spiritual pressure and strength meant little without the intelligence to consider improbable events, "My apologies, Ragyo Kiryuin. Perhaps I should start from the beginning."

Pausing his introspection at the Kiryuin matriarch's sudden reluctance to attack, he raised Kyouka Suigetsu until the sword was perpendicular to the ground, "My zanpakuto allows me absolute control over the senses of anyone who witnesses its release. Even if one's aware of the illusion, escape is impossible. Or rather, *nearly* impossible. So, I suppose congratulations are in order. Thanks to your unique physiology, you were the first person to escape Perfect Hypnosis."

"I see..."

The corner of Ragyo's mouth twitched at the shinigami's arrogance. Yet despite wanting nothing more than to personally torture every fiber of his being, paying back *with interest* the insults committed against Life Fibers, she wasn't blinded by anger. Not this time. Sosuke Aizen survived. That was a fact. But it was his explanation that tempered her fury. He almost callously confessed to the existence of his zanpakuto's second release. It would have been smarter to keep such power secret. To conceal its existence until the proper moment. Yet he'd divulged the secret without regret.

But she knew better than to presume anything about Sosuke Aizen.

If the insufferable man was telling the truth...

"Your tenacious hold on life."

Her attention shifted towards the Original Life Fiber as another Needle Blade emerged from Shinra Koketsu, "How you survived against the Original Life Fiber. You've been using this second release, haven't you?"

"The real question you should ask, Ragyo Kiryuin," Aizen brushed aside the Kiryuin matriarch's spiritual pressure with practiced aplomb, "Is the true nature of my Bankai."

"And you're going to tell me, right?"

Ragyo scoffed. She wasn't naïve. A man like Sosuke Aizen, whose intellect was matched only by their arrogance, wouldn't divulge information without ulterior motives. And she didn't trust the shinigami to speak the truth, "You're awfully forthcoming. But since you're so *talkative*, tell me why I shouldn't throw caution to the wind and end your miserable existence?"

"To be perfectly honest, every second I waste stalling for time while Isshin Kurosaki formulates a counterattack allows Shinra Koketsu to

recover from the Adhesive Bullet," the subtle twitch of Ragyo Kiryuin's mouth at the blunt reminder of her recent, and rather devastating, embarrassment didn't go unnoticed. The woman might have gained control over her temper in a surprisingly short amount of time, but that just made things more interesting.

Smiling pleasantly when the ultimate Kamui responded to the woman's deep-seated disdain, several pairs of multicolored eyes glaring with intensity that eliciting a brief tremble from his fingers, Aizen shrugged at the inhuman presence, "So, explaining my Bankai would appear counterproductive. Almost foolhardy, given the circumstances."

"Playing games, are we?"

It required considerable restraint for Ragyo to resist the tantalizing desire to slice through the shinigami's throat. But instead of doing so, which given Sosuke Aizen's mysterious Bankai wouldn't accomplish anything, she settled on an annoyed sneer, "If I wanted ambiguity, I would ask dearest Nui for her opinion on next year's fashion. So, let's stop beating around the bush, shall we? The truth you're *dying* to avoid is that you survived certain death through an illusion. Tricking my senses at the very last second, which allowed you to slip through my grasp."

"That's a reasonably, well-thought response."

Aizen rotated Kyouka Suigetsu until the zanpakuto pointed at the ground, "But incorrect."

His opponent's consternation was unmistakable. And somewhat disappointing. He'd expected better from Ragyo Kiryuin, someone whose business acumen and untampered ruthlessness allowed Revocs to control the vast majority of the World of the Living's textile industries, "In the end, an illusion is nothing more than misinterpretation of data. Cowardice, as you so eloquently stated. For it takes little effort to convince one's enemies to fight amongst

themselves through visual and auditory hallucinations. Yet, as I've said, your physiology renders you immune to Perfect Hypnosis."

"So, ask yourself this, Ragyo Kiryuin. How did I avoid your attack?"

Kyouka Suigetsu slowly dissolved into shards of glass, "You watched your blade pierce my body. You heard me gasping for breath as my heart slowed to a crawl before stopping. What you experienced is *reality* . Therefore, if my Shikai is unable to alter what you perceive as 'real' and 'fake,' then it stands to reason the only solution to the question of 'how did I survive your attack' is -"

"Your Bankai."

A curse settled on Ragyo's tongue as she interrupted the shinigami with a contemptuous scoff. Bankai, what a boring name. If zanpakuto had a second release, the name should convey an equivalent weight. She was almost insulted Sosuke Aizen considered something so mundane for a name, "Aesthetics aside, you've overplayed your hand. Your zanpakuto's illusions were the only thing preventing me from ending your miserable existence. And without them, and your body in such *terrible* shape, there's little you or anyone can do to stop me."

"Oh? When did I claim I wasn't using illusions?"

Her breath hitched when the shinigami raised his *left* hand, "What!?"

"A zanpakuto's Shikai and Bankai cannot have unrelated abilities," Aizen ignored the Kiryuin matriarch's bewilderment at the sudden appearance of his missing extremity, "My Shikai creates nearly flawless illusions. Seirei-no-Makoto Kyouka Suigetsu, on the other hand, uses illusions, albeit in a different fashion. Instead of imposing an illusion on reality, it does the opposite. When I release my Bankai, reality itself turns into an illusion, molded into whatever I so wish."

"Of course, something this powerful has equally damaging drawbacks."

Aizen took advantage of Ragyo Kiryuin's astonishment to examine the recreated limb. He curled his fingers, testing the reflexes and muscle memory, before resuming their conversation without missing a beat, "For starters, it's difficult to control. Without proper preparations, the collateral damage can be catastrophic, which is partially why I didn't use it against you in Karakura Town."

Her anger at being humiliated deepened at the shinigami's remark, "*Partiellement ?*"

"It appears my Bankai cannot affect anyone already immune to Perfect Hypnosis. An Achilles heel that, in retrospect, is painfully obvious. So, it appears further congratulations are in order, Ragyo Kiryuin."

The final traces of Kyouka Suigetsu dissolved into shards of glass, leaving him free to clap his hands, "As a Life Fiber Hybrid, there's nothing my zanpakuto can do to *you* ."

"Do you take me for a fool!?"

Ragyo hadn't intended to raise her voice. But hearing the shinigami's emphasis caused her legendary self-control to falter. She knew the implications of Sosuke Aizen's words. She was not *stupid* . His Bankai might hold no power over Shinra Koketsu or herself, but if he was telling the truth, then everything *else* was fair game. He could influence the environment into whatever he wanted. He could grant himself the *facsimile* of immortality. A day ago - an *hour* ago - she would have dismissed the possibility anyone, even this arrogant bastard, could change reality.

But now?

After experiencing his Bankai?

With an angry *snap* of her wrists, the landscape erupted beneath Shinra Koketsu, "You claim you're willing to do anything to win. So, why didn't use immediately use your Bankai in Karakura Town?"

The shinigami's unflinching visage at the question didn't escape her notice, "What stayed your hand from slaughtering the naked apes and pigs in human clothing? Surely a man of your intellect would deem such inferior beings as acceptable losses? If it meant ending my life, any amount of collateral damage should have been acceptable to a sociopathic *connard* such as yourself. Unless..."

Shinra Koketsu shimmered as her lips quirked, "... you're *lying* to me."

Aizen shrugged at the woman's insinuation, his smile never faltering, "Believe what you wish, Ragyo Kiryuin. But tell me, do you know the origin of Kyouka Suigetsu?"

Her eyebrow twitched at the inane question. She was familiar with the proverb involving the reflection of the moon on water. Things that can be seen but not held. Something possessing intrinsic beauty yet is unattainable. With a snarl twisting her features, as Shinra Koketsu tightened in response to her seething rage, Ragyo stared at the pale orb hovering over Honnouji Academy.

"Seirei-no-Makoto Kyouka Suigetsu reverses what is real with what is not."

He clapped his hands a second time as Ragyo Kiryuin trembled, "However, as you've realized, its effectiveness depends on the moon. During the new moon, or any point when it's not visible, my control over Seirei-no-Makoto Kyouka Suigetsu is minimal. In contrast, when the moon is full, I can release my Bankai without worry about unanticipated casualties."

"Your pathetic warning to Ryuko..."

The loathing in Ragyo's voice was unmistakable. Her unadulterated *hatred* towards Sosuke Aizen and everything he represented caused her voice to warble, an inhuman reverberation overlaying every syllable, "My daughter was never in danger from your Bankai, was she?"



"You said it yourself, Ragyo Kiryuin, that I lied about my Bankai."

Without fanfare, Kyouka Suigetsu reappeared in Aizen's grasp. It appeared things were escalating rather quickly. After understanding the extent of her humiliation at his hands, Ragyo was prepared to throw caution to the wind. To ignore the possibility of counterattacks to ensure his death. And with Absolute Domination seconds from returning, not even his Bankai could stand against such overwhelming power, "What makes you think I started at any particular point in time?"

Ragyo ignored the shinigami's condescending arrogance when pages covered in holy scripture fluttered around Shinra Koketsu.

The Needle Blades *snapped* as she focused on Heinkel Wolfe's insignificant presence hiding in the shadows. She thrust one blade towards the paladin, purposely missing by a fraction of an inch, giving her enough momentum to stab Tessai Tsukabishi *without* taking her eyes off Sosuke Aizen.

A gasp, embarrassing coming from one such as herself, escaped her lips when the shinigami vanished.

Her eyes widened as Sosuke Aizen raised his zanpakuto, the blade dissolving once more into particles of glass, every Life Fiber stiffened at the deep, gravelly voice coming from behind Shinra Koketsu.

"KUKANTEN'!"

Reality *shattered* the moment Tessai clapped his hands together. Despite preparing for every eventuality, a side-effect of living alongside Kisuke Urahara, he was caught off-guard when the woman screamed at the top of her lungs, an ear-shattering noise reverberating with *something* that battered against his soul.

"What power!"

He found the air forced from his lungs when Shinra Koketsu billowed around Ragyo Kiryuin, emitting a wave of spiritual pressure that tore through Honnou City, destroying everything not nailed to the ground. His glasses shattered from the overwhelming presence as he grasped Heinkel Wolfe's forearm. With the paladin sweating underneath the Kiryuin matriarch's spiritual pressure, he vanished in a flash of speed, retreating hundreds of meters.

"Oh?"

As an audible *whump* of displaced air and spiritual energy slammed against his body before rushing back toward Ragyo Kiryuin, cracking the ground in escalating waves, Aizen observed the multicolored light enveloping the matriarch with rapt attention. Smiling pleasantly when one final explosion of kaleidoscopic light spilled from Shinra Koketsu before suddenly and abruptly fading, he curled two fingers on his recently restored hand, "Now, this is quite unexpected."

"D-Damn... him..."

The Needle Blade clattered to the ground as Ragyo collapsed to her knees several feet from an unconscious Orihime Inoue.

Trembling maroon eyes stared emptily at the Life Fibers enveloping the planet, masking the weakness coursing through her body. Without her precious daughter, Shinra Koketsu was nothing more than an elaborate but lifeless dress stitched from Life Fibers. Devoid of the Original Life Fiber's purpose and Absolute Domination. No! This was impossible! How could that miserable man separate Orihime from Shinra Koketsu!? It wasn't possible! Their Life Fibers had been intertwined beyond that of Kamui!

"No," disheveled silver hair brushed against her face as Shinra Koketsu's hood fell backwards, "This can't be happening!"

Her voice trembled with feigned outrage as she regained control over the situation. Despite the excruciating pain wracking her Life Fibers, even as smoke drifted from Shinra Koketsu's damaged

fabric, she kept herself focused on reversing their victory into an overwhelming slaughter. Even without the ultimate Kamui's power flooding her Life Fibers, she still possessed the strength bestowed by the Original Life Fiber. All she needed - all she *required* - was a split second. A single, defining moment to touch Orihime, to pull her daughter back into her loving embrace and -

"Kukanten'i."

The instant she reached towards her daughter, Orihime vanished in a flash of emerald light. Gasping incoherently when her unconscious daughter reappeared next to Sosuke Aizen, his insufferable smirk leaving her speechless, Ragyo stiffened when *another* presence brushed against her mind.

"GETSUGA..."

Ichigo didn't hesitate to push every last scrap of Mugetsu's power into Tournesol and his old man's sword as he descended towards Ragyo Kiryuin. With Orihime safe and out of harm's way thanks to Aizen, there was no reason to hold back. No reason to not hit Ryuko's mom with everything he had! Clenched his teeth, Mugetsu was silhouetted against the full moon as the blades crossed over his head were enveloped by blazing sapphire light.

"... JŪJISHŌ!"

# It Has to be This Way

*I suppose you can consider this an early Christmas present. It's been quite a journey for almost... wow. Four years? And while the journey's not over yet, this chapter represents a milestone. Not only because my story exceeds one million total words, ignoring drafts and outlines, but I finally accomplished one of my primary objectives when I initially started this story. So, I hope you enjoy reading this chapter as much as I did writing it.*

*If you have any comments, feel free to send me a PM.*

*And, as always, check out this story on tvtropes.*

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## Chapter 63 - It Has to be This Way

"Ichigo Kurosaki doesn't know the meaning of restraint."

Ira Gamagori felt uncharacteristically annoyed at the energy enveloping the No Star Slums. His brow furrowed when Honnou City, which already suffered extensive damage, trembled underneath the deluge. To know Kamui possessed such extraordinary strength was humbling. But where was Lady Satsuki? He was certain she would personally land the finishing blow against her mother. Unless, of course, circumstances granted Ichigo Kurosaki the opportunity. Grumbling with an overtone of annoyance, he once more raised the binoculars borrowed from Kisuke Urahara.

An adequate replacement for the pair stolen by Ichigo Kurosaki.

Ira Gamagori glowered at the roiling energy enveloping nearly half of Honnou City. His brow furrowed in rising discontent when the artificial island, which had suffered grievous and extensive damage

over the previous few minutes, trembled, sending aftershocks rippling across Tokyo Bay. To know Matoi and Ichigo Kurosaki possessed such extraordinary strength was humbling. But where was Lady Satsuki? Surely, after everything they've experienced, she wouldn't allow Ichigo to land the finishing blow against her mother? Grumbling with an overtone of annoyance, he once more raised the binoculars borrowed from Kisuke Urahara.

A replacement for the pair stolen - and then broken - by Ichigo Kurosaki.

"Yasutora Sado!"

He unintentionally raised his voice despite the respectable teenager standing barely at arm's length, "Can you pinpoint Lady Satsuki's location?"

"Hmm..."

Chad's expression didn't change despite the throbbing pain from his bruised ribs. His fight against Jackie Tristan's clone hadn't be easier. But on the other hand, thanks to Nudist Beach passing along information to Kisuke, it could have been worse. Humming at the reminder of Moe Shishigawara, he watched Ichigo's improved Getsuga Tenshou dissipate before shaking his head, "Sorry. All this spiritual pressure makes sensing anything difficult. And Aizen isn't helping. But it's quite strength, if you think about it."

Gamagori lowered the binoculars, one eyebrow quirked, "What do you mean?"

"One minute Ragyo Kiryuin was winning... and then she wasn't," Chad mulled over his words, "Something happened. It's puzzling, but something gave Ichigo and Ryuko the chance to win."

"I see your point," Gamagori conceded the argument before staring through the binoculars, hoping to witness any sign of Lady Satsuki. His spiritual prowess might be atrocious, limited to interacting with

supernatural beings, but he *had* experienced the overwhelming presence of Ragyo Kiryuin. And the sensation of his Shackle Regalia seizing around his body. Which would have left him paralyzed if not for his tempered will and implacable determination.

And how could he have missed the *other* attacks during the interim?

"Nevertheless, we should not look a gift horse in the mouth."

He lowered the binoculars once it became obvious locating Lady Satsuki would be difficult, if not impossible, from their position, "Whatever series of unfortunate events befell Ragyo Kiryuin is irrelevant. Right now, our priority is reestablishing communications with Lady Satsuki and -"

A violent burst of pinkish energy exploded in close proximity to Gamagori's face when Nonon Jakuzure cleared the skyline, sending gusts of wind across the rooftop and rustling their clothing. Yet he remained unflinching when his fellow member of the Student Council circled around the building he and Yasutora Sado stood upon. It would take more than an ample display of flight capabilities to elicit surprise from him! But his brow nevertheless furrowed at Jakuzure's showboating. He had never known her to willingly showcase her abilities with such abandon.

Frowning at the errant thrusting of her Symphony Regalia Mark III as Jakuzure pivoted erratically while gripping at something wrapped around her throat, his jaw nearly dropped when he saw what, or rather *who*, was sitting on her shoulders.

"Get the hell off, underachiever!"

Nonon didn't appreciate the underachiever's lack of respect for her betters. She *disliked* the teenager squeezing her neck while laughing like an idiot! And she hated humiliating herself in such a degrading manner! Digging her fingers between the underachiever's hands and her neck, which only caused the No-Star student to squeeze *harder*,

she resisted the temptation to turn her Symphony Regalia's weapons in the opposite direction, "That spot's reserved for Satsuki!"

"MANKASHOKU!"

Gamagori experienced the familiar twinge of annoyance pulling at his eyebrow when Mankanshoku vaulted off Jakuzure's shoulders before landing in a three-point stance that would have made the captain of the Football Club proud, "Sitting upon the shoulders of any member of the Student Council is against Honnouji Academy regulations! Explain yourself!"

"I was helping Uryu!"

Mako clapped her hands and pointed towards Nonon, completely ignoring Gamagori's imposing tone in the process, "There were so many fancy suits throwing themselves in his general direction that he didn't notice that weird clone sneaking out of the shadows! Which seemed strange since it was riding a large, fire-breathing dragon! So, I decided to help! But the clone was super tough. And then Jakuzure appeared out of nowhere!"

She bobbed her head before sliding next to the diminutive pinkette, who was visibly annoyed at being addressed so informally, "She blasted the clone to smithereens with the awesome power of her uniform! But when she ignored Uryu's appreciation for saving his life, I decided to make sure proper manners were exchanged! Just as you taught me, Gamagori! But one thing led to another and here I am!"

"Manners *are* important, Mankanshoku," Gamagori pondered the unrelenting stream of consciousness and free thought spilling from Mankanshoku before turning his growing ire upon Jakuzure, "Jakuzure! You are a member of Honnouji Academy's Student Council! If someone graciously thanks you for saving their life, you acknowledge their gesture with a sincere and heart-felt compliment! Is that understood!?"

"Hey! The four-eyed bastard was perfectly fine when I left," Nonon couldn't believe Gamagori was siding with the underachiever after *everything* they've been through, "There wasn't a scratch on -"

"Sorry I'm late."

Uryu appeared next to Gamagori accompanied by the familiar *swish* of Hirenkyaku. Once the world shifted back to focus, he suppressed the inclination to respond to the specific string of curses leaving Jakuzure's mouth, "I ran into your father on the way over."

"My father?"

Any notions of admonishing Jakuzure for her foul language and abject rudeness were brushed aside at the unexpected comment, which granted Uryu Ishida leeway to continue without interruption, "Your aunt ordered a full-scale nudist retreat. With Ichigo and Ryuko fighting Ragyo Kiryuin, she doesn't see the point of sticking around. And Aizen's arrival only made things worse. And there's the *other* problem.

"Indeed..."

Gamagori squashed the treacherous twinge of nervousness mimicking Uryu Ishida's apprehension. His brow furrowing into an irritated glower, he spared a piercing glare at the Original Life Fiber ominously hovering over the western outskirts of Tokyo, "My senses might not be as sharp as yours, but even I feel its daunting power. Defeating such a monstrous creature will be problematic."

"We can focus on that later."

Uryu swallowed the bile rising in his throat. It hadn't taken long to understand the most efficient method to avoid feeling nauseous around Ichigo, Ryuko or their Kamui was to simply not try sensing their spiritual pressure. But the Original Life Fiber was *impossible* to ignore. Its presence saturated everything. Even after focusing his senses inward, its eldritch power made his head swim, "Right now



we should rendezvous with Nudist Beach. They might have information on what happened to Ragyo Kiryuin."

"You mean, why her spiritual pressure suddenly vanished," Chad glanced towards Honnou City, "Right?"

"As much as it pains me to admit it, they shouldn't have won. Ragyo Kiryuin's power was too great," Uryu grimaced as the nausea continued spreading through his system. Turning his stomach inside out and making him lightheaded, "For all intents and purposes, she was toying with them. But after Seras and Kinue arrived, her overwhelming advantaged disappeared."

The permanent furrowed across Gamagori's brow deepened, "You believe the events are connected?"

"I don't know."

Uryu cupped his chin, "Ragyo Kiryuin was weakened. And a few minutes later her spiritual pressure dropped significantly right before Ichigo's attack. But it's too early to assume she's dead. Her presence might be gone, but something doesn't feel right."

"The possibility such a vile woman survived is troubling. Doubly given Ichigo Kurosaki's enthusiasm. But I REFUSE to abandon Lady Satsuki!"

Despite his indignation, Gamagori conceded the logic behind his aunt's decision. A strategic retreat against overwhelming force was prudent. His Goku Uniform was formidable. Under different circumstances, he would have agreed without hesitation. It was, after all, pragmatism worthy of Lady Satsuki's taciturn approval. But these *weren't* normal circumstances.

"However, assuming that's indeed the case, our priority should be ensuring Lady Satsuki's safety," he stroked his chin before turning bodily towards Uryu, "But with communications down and my

spiritual prowess woefully lacking, it's impossible to pinpoint her location."

"Hey, underachiever."

The annoyance in Nonon's voice was nearly palpable, "Hat-and-clogs claimed you can sense spiritual pressure better than four-eyes here. So, make yourself useful and find Satsuki."

"That's easy! I know exactly where Lady Satsuki's hanging out!"

Mako spun around Nonon, earning the ill-tempered teenager's frustration. Tapping a closed fist against her hand, she puffed her cheeks before pointing at Honnouji Academy, "Ryuko and Lady Satsuki are sisters! Which automatically makes them super best friends! I've seen it myself! Whenever Ichigo's not around, they talk about him! I can tell they're quite happy to talk about Ichigo, even if some of the things Ryuko says are quite embarrassing!"

Nonon's eye twitched with increasing ferocity, "Get on with it already!"

"But I could always tell whenever Ryuko was hanging out with Ichigo," Mako ignored Nonon's interruption without missing a beat, "And since Lady Satsuki is her sister, it's twice as easy to find Ryuko. Which is why unless Lady Satsuki is wearing Senketsu, she's most definitely walking down from Honnouji Academy!"

"Hmm... even with Junketsu's extraordinary power, Lady Satsuki wouldn't take such a substantial risk," Gamagori nodded alongside Mankanshoku's train of thought. While Jakuzure and Yasutora Sado seemed confused, and Uryu Ishida befuddled, he understood the underlying meaning with flawless accuracy, "Perhaps Ragyo Kiryuin truly is defeated."

"Even if she's not, Ichigo's father is powerful. Especially in her current condition," Uryu paused, frowning, before suspiciously

adding, "Not to mention Aizen. I could feel his spiritual pressure. He must have released his Bankai against Ragyo Kiryuin."

Chad stared at Honnou City before glancing upwards, "Yeah... I felt that too. But if Ragyo Kiryuin's dead, why hasn't everyone been freed?"

Gamagori craned his neck until the obnoxious blanket of Life Fibers, and the full moon above Honnouji Academy, filled his view, "Perhaps it requires time after Ragyo Kiryuin's death for the effects to reverse? But we'll have time to discuss appropriate countermeasures when Inumuta and -"

"Hey! Does anyone hear that funny noise?"

Nonon grumbled under her breath, "Hear what, underachiever?"

"That strange rumbling that sounds a lot like Ryuko's stomach whenever mom makes her mystery croquettes," Mako held a hand against her ear, "And it's getting louder."

"I can't hear anything, underachiever," Nonon snapped back, "Are you making stuff up again?"

"No... I hear it too," Chad cupped his ear, "It's almost like -"

Tokyo, and the surrounding landscape, *shook* when the Original Life Fiber transformed. Sheets of Life Fibers glowing bright enough to hurt the eyes split apart, exposing rows of fangs the size of buildings. Barely keeping himself standing while Uryu collapsed onto his hands and knees, retching onto the roof as the creature's presence washed over them, filling every nook and cranny, Chad grimaced, "What's happening?"

"And why the hell does it sound so pissed!?"

A single spot of blood trickled from Nonon's split lips as she picked herself off the roof. Keeping a perfectly annoyed expression despite

the growing trembling in her arms, she watched the Original Life Fiber *liquefy* into a sea of Life Fibers, flowing through the city and demolishing everything in their path, before ignoring them, "Damn it! It's heading for Satsuki!"

"Lady Satsuki!?"

The overbearing spiritual pressure making it difficult to move immediately fell to the wayside at Jakuzure's announcement. Lady Satsuki was in danger? He would not allow something as idiotic as the Original Life Fiber stand between him and his duty! Thus, when Mankanshoku tripped over her own feet, momentarily hovering over the edge of the building, Gamagori was prepared. With all the strength he could muster, a physical testament to his family's lineage, he grabbed her Goku Uniform before she fell into the torrential sea of Life Fibers. His brow creasing as he pulled Mankanshoku to safety, he looked away from the ecstatic girl when she wrapped her arms around his neck, choosing instead to focus on the more important matter at hand.

"That could only mean Ragyo Kiryuin is still alive!"

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"Finally..."

Ichigo vaulted away from the hurricane of spiritual energy. He breathed heavily, in panting, gasping gulps of air, when the last traces of Ragyo Kiryuin disappeared into their Getsuga Jūjishō. He didn't expect this level of exhaustion. It was worse than the first time they used Getsuga Tenshou against Sanageyama. But as sweat trickled down his face, Tournesol and his old man's sword ready for whatever might happen, he nevertheless cracked a smirk, "We finally got her, Mugetsu."

" ***Maybe.***"

Mugetsu grumbled at the dirt and dust trapped in her threading. She acknowledged the putrid smoke emanating from the impact of their Getsuga Jūjishō against Ragyo Kiryuin with a disturbed shudder, ***"I can't sense her presence. Or Shinra Koketsu's. Either she survived and went into hiding. Or we managed to finish the job."***

"You're right."

He swung Tournesol, dispelling the smoke surrounding Ragyo Kiryuin. If Mugetsu was right, and she survived their attack, he wanted to have a clear shot, "That was our best chance at taking her down. But if Ragyo Kiryuin survived, we need to be ready for anything. Even another Getsuga Jūjishō."

***"I'm still suffering from the extensive damage to my stitching,"*** she growled when Ichigo chose to ignore her long-term suffering. The patchwork fabric functioning as her eye narrowed at her wearer's betrayal. At his lack of empathy concerning what might be permanent damage to her Life Fibers, ***"But you're right. We don't have a choice if Getsuga Jijusho wasn't enough. Even if that means straining our Life -"***

"Ichigo!"

Ryuko almost barreled into Ichigo when she hit the ground and slipped. Wincing when her head bounced off the ground, she filed away Mugetsu's laughter before noticing what, or rather who, was laying in front of them.

Her mom was dead. Or as close to dead as humanly possible. She didn't know if they could actually *die* considering she, personally, had most of her body repeatedly disintegrated by that undead shinigami bitch in London. And had her leg shot off by the vampire bastard. But she noticed Shinra Koketsu was barely more than tattered scraps of Life Fibers. Hardly resembling the once annoyingly bright - and ugly - dress that had kicked their asses. Taking a tentative step closer, Scissor Blade at the ready, she realized the reason Ragyo Kiryuin

looked so damn strange was because her arm was lying in a pool of blood while the lower half of her body - legs and all - were attached by a few glowing Life Fibers.

"Is she dead?"

The question immediately sounded strange. And stupid. Glaring into her mom's empty eyes, she watched blood trickle from Ragyo's unmoving lips before asking the same question in a slightly different way, "You don't think she's going to get back up, do you?"

"I don't know."

Ichigo stared at the corpse. Defeating Ragyo Kiryuin had been too easy. Too simple. But he couldn't sense her spiritual pressure. The overwhelming presence that caused Mugetsu and Senketsu endless agitation had vanished. And she wasn't breathing. So, as far as he could tell, Ryuko's mom was dead. Yet there was sinking feeling in the back of his mind. A notion they were forgetting something important, "When I used Getsuga Jijusho, I sliced through the same part of her body. That should have prevented her Life Fibers from regenerating."

A punch to his shoulder was Ryuko's immediate answer, "Then why the hell do you sound so damn gloomy?"

He frowned when Ryuko leaned forward, her faces inches away from his own, "I'm not gloomy!"

"Yes, you are," she punched him again, just hard enough to get the point across, before pointing at Ragyo's corpse, "You always have this 'faraway' look whenever you get depressed or upset! And right now, you look like my mom's playing dead. So, unless you tell me what's wrong, I'm going to keep punching you!"

Ichigo dodged to Ryuko's right when she tried punching him in the stomach. As she recovered, a sly but smug grin pulling on her lips,

he looked around upon *finally* realizing what was bugging him, "Wait! Where's Orihime?"

"Orihime Inoue's perfectly safe, Ichigo Kurosaki."

Using Shunpo, Aizen appeared near the teenagers, slightly startling Ryuko Matoi in the process. Despite his unkempt appearance, blood staining the tattered remains of the upper portion of his uniform, he was cheerful. Almost enthusiastic. Which translated into a grin upon seeing the Ragyo Kiryuin's decimated corpse scattered across the ground, "She's unconscious but suffered no lasting consequences from her involuntary synchronization with Shinra Koketsu."

He acknowledged Tessai Tsukabishi's arrival - and warranted suspicion - with a curt but respectful smirk. There was no need for further interactions. While Kiske Urahara's associate played a role in weakening Ragyo Kiryuin, allowing the extraction of Orihime Inoue from Shinra Koketsu entirely through chance, it was Seras Victoria's eldritch nature which allowed the vampire to bypass Absolute Domination. And it was Ichigo's realization of the weakness of Life Fiber regeneration that enabled their victory, "But Ragyo Kiryuin's defeat was only the first step. To reverse the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet, we need to wait for Orihime Inoue to regain consciousness."

**" Reverse?"**

Ryuko glowered as Senketsu voiced the question on the tip of her tongue, "How the hell's that going to work? In case you haven't noticed, Ichigo tore Shinra Koketsu to shreds!"

"Satsuki Kiryuin's analysis of Shinra Koketsu's strengths and weaknesses was reasonable. Almost commendable. But she overlooked an obvious alternative."

Aizen observed Ichigo's reaction. He noted the matching suspicion in Mugetsu's expression, which was made simpler by the Kamui's constantly shifting eyes, "One cannot doubt Shinra Koketsu's power is formidable, even unbeatable. However, Absolute Domination's

radiance of influence falters beyond a radius of several kilometers. Which is just large enough for her to encompass Honnou City and the surrounding area. To spread Shinra Koketsu's signal across the World of the Living, Ragyo Kiryuin required an amplifier."

"The transmitter," Ichigo remembered the machine in the middle of Honnouji Academy's courtyard, "She sent a signal through the transmitter at the school. It was the first thing she did after using Absolute Domination. But that's not what you're getting at, is it?"

"You know better than anyone, perhaps even myself, that Orihime Inoue's abilities are capable of miraculous feats," Aizen acknowledged the teenager's responses with a smirk, "Including reversing causality through rejection of reality. But her effectiveness is limited by her pacifistic nature, something I observed after you rescued Rukia Kuchiki. However, in the hands of someone lacking that restraint, whose sole purpose is the proliferation and domination of Life Fibers, Absolute Domination achieves full effectiveness. And that is where Satsuki Kiryuin overestimated her mother's relevance. Call it what you will - Shun Shun Rikka or Absolute Domination - but they are one and same."

"Even if what you're saying is true..."

Ichigo had the sinking suspicion Aizen was holding something back, "Ragyo waited until Shinra Koketsu was finished. If Orihime could do all that, she wouldn't have waited until we were knocking on her doorstep."

"When you learned what you presumed was Bankai - or realized how to properly control your 'Hollow' powers - did you fret about failing to unleash that power? Of course not. You instinctively understood how to utilize that power."

The treacherous captain shrugged nonchalantly, "The same principle applies to Orihime Inoue."



"What you're saying is, we don't need Shinra Koketsu," Ryuko felt Senketsu's confusion, "Just Orihime?"

"The memory of her Shun Shun Rikka evolving into Absolute Domination has been stitched into her Life Fibers," Aizen's smile tightened. His knowledge concerning Life Fibers was extensive. Beyond Kisuke Urahara's in some regards. The Hogyoku was proof of that. Yet the deeper, more disturbing secrets remained elusive, "Derailing the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet will simply require Orihime Inoue channeling her spiritual energy through the transmitter. And to assuage your concerns, Ichigo Kurosaki, nothing else is necessary. If everything goes according to plan, she'll be perfectly fine, free to return to Karakura Town."

"You better hope so..."

Ryuko glared at the smug bastard. He was hiding something... or maybe he wasn't. It was hard to tell. And his obnoxious way of speaking pissed her off. But when he didn't say anything else, she collapsed to the ground, arms and legs spread as the tension washed away with a single, obnoxiously loud groan. She was *exhausted*. After two days of constant fighting, finally winning felt great. With another sigh, she stared at the full moon, blinking as bangs of dual-colored hair shifted across her eyes.

"I need a vacation," she leaned her head backwards and huffed, "A *real* vacation. Someplace where I'm not freaking blindsided by a vampire in the first five minutes!"

**" Ryuko, when we return to Karakura Town, I request a through hand washing."**

Senketsu tried ignoring the dirt caught in his Life Fibers. It had been relative easy to ignore the grime when their lives were on the line. When every moment was spent trying to survive against Shinra Koketsu's nightmarish power. But with Ragyo Kiryuin lying in literal pieces on the grounds, there was no better time to address the growing problem, **"And an ironing to smooth out my threading."**

***You might not have noticed, but since we fought Nui Harime, there's been a persistent wrinkle on my neckerchief. It's quite uncomfortable."***

"Sure, Senketsu," Ryuko scoffed at Mugetsu's jealousy. Why the hell was she upset? With a shrug, she ignored the Kamui's stupidity, "I'll even use your favorite detergent. But there's still one last thing we gotta do..."

***" The Original Life Fiber."***

Ichigo grimaced at the name. Even out here, he could sense the Original Life Fiber's monstrous spiritual pressure. It was unbelievable. No wonder Senketsu was nervous. Or Mugetsu was staring at everything *but* the Original Life Fiber. She was putting up a stoic front, but he knew her better than anyone else, "We need to stop that thing. Once and for all. But there's no question it's strong. And if it survived Aizen's Bankai, it probably has a trick or two up its sleeves."

"I say we slice it into pieces!"

Ryuko sat up with an annoyed huff, "So what if it's powerful? It's still made of Life Fibers. And it doesn't have Absolute Domination! There's no way we can't cut through the damn thing!"

"A straightforward plan," Aizen found Ryuko Matoi's blunt manner of addressing her problems cathartic. Almost, for a lack of a better word, amusing. Because she was correct. There was only one way to defeat the Original Life Fiber, "Nevertheless, we should wait for Isshin Kurosaki. His expertise on the Original Life Fiber will prove invaluable if we wish to -"

He interrupted himself when an overwhelmingly *powerful* spiritual pressure blanketed the landscape.

For a brief and incalculably short moment, far longer than any other point in his existence, Aizen experienced the sensation of a superior

presence. His shoulders hunched forward, one knee reflexively tensing while his breathing hastened. Shifting Kyouka Suigetsu into an offensive guard upon acclimating himself to the spiritual pressure, he watched, almost stricken speechless, the Original Life Fiber liquefy. Falling onto Tokyo and prompting an understandable outburst from Ichigo Kurosaki.

"What the hell..."

Ryuko's anger towards the shinigami was replaced by fear. This was bad! Mako and everyone were still in the city! There was no telling what that monster would do to them! Her heel *clacked* as she leapt off the roof, ignoring Ichigo's shouting and Senketsu's warning. She could apologize to everyone later. And maybe allow Ichigo to punch her in the face. Because right now, she needed to end things once and for all! Before anyone else got hurt!

**" Ryuko!"**

Her breath hitched when the Original Life Fiber, instead of attacking Mako and her friends, made a ninety-degree turn, crashing into Tokyo Bay before flowing *over* the water.

Directly towards them.

"Holy shit!"

She pivoted mid-step, throwing herself sideways as the Original Life Fiber reached Honnou City. Her heels *clacked* with every backpedal, each awkward stride taking her farther away from the tidal wave of Life Fibers. Damn it! She could deal with the overwhelming presence making it difficult to breath. And the terror rippling through their connection from Senketsu wasn't too bad. But the awful screaming in the back of her mind was giving her a migraine.

"Don't tell me it's pissed Ichigo killed my mom!"

**" Defeating Ragyo must have been the final straw,"** Senketsu tried - and failed - to hide his trembling from Ryuko, **"Its power is tremendous! There's no telling what it plans to do!"**

"That's why we're gonna kick its ass, Senketsu!"

Energy roared from Senketsu as Ryuko boosted herself higher into the sky. If the Original Life Fiber wanted to fight, then she was going to tear the damn thing apart! One Life Fiber at a time! With a snarl, she spun the Scissor Blade around her wrist, the hardened Life Fiber weapon emitting a metallic *ting* when she gripped its handle. If she wanted to cut through the alien ball of yard, she needed leverage. Hefting her dad's weapon overhead, fully prepared to meet the creature head-on, her eye twitched when it suddenly changed direction.

Straight towards her mom's corpse.

"Senketsu Shippu!"

With a flash of crimson light, Senketsu contorted around her body. Life Fibers shifted and snapped into place as she blasted towards the Original Life Fiber. She didn't give a crap why it was going after Ragyo Kiryuin, but like hell was she going to let that oversized monster get what it wanted! Her mom was dead and she was going to STAY dead! Spinning the Scissor Blade into a reverse grip, she spiraled downwards, ready to slice through the Original Life Fiber using all of Senketsu's power, only to be pulled backwards when someone grabbed her wrist.

"Hey!"

The sudden change in scenery when she was dragged - kicking and screaming - halfway across the No-Star Slums caused her to stumble forward, nearly falling off the roof. Growling at Sosuke Aizen, she swung the Scissor Blade until it was inches from his throat, "What the hell was that for!?"

Aizen brushed aside Ryuko Matoi's resentment. He didn't have time to explain himself. Nor was there time to properly address the situation. This was the worst-case scenario. An event unfolding both impossible to anticipate and implausible to calculate. For how could he have predicted the Original Life Fiber deciding on *this* course of action? That it would, above all else, choose the least likely scenario? Kisuke Urahara had surmised it would react hostilely to Ragyo Kiryuin's death. A conjecture he'd agreed with. They concluded the Original Life Fiber might lash out in a futile act of revenge.

But without Absolute Domination, their combined offensive capabilities were more than a match for its immeasurable spiritual pressure.

To think *this* was the Original Life Fiber's strategy.

"Ichigo Kurosaki..."

His smile tightened into a grimace when the innumerable Life Fibers composing the eldritch creature began flowing into the Kiryuin matriarch's corpse, folding upon themselves until the ground was covered in writhing threads, "Orihime Inoue is concealed within a spiritual barrier approximately three hundred meters to our north. I presume you're already aware of her location?"

"Yeah."

Tournesol emitted a faint *ting* as the blade shifted in Ichigo's grip, "Why? What are you planning?"

"It's likely Ragyo Kiryuin will attempt to recover Orihime Inoue," Aizen observed the shrinking Original Life Fiber with mounting concern, "If that's the case, I'll stall for time while you and Ryuko Matoi will bring her to safety. Whatever happens, her freedom is paramount if we wish to reverse the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet."

Ichigo frowned. He wanted to say something, anything, to Aizen, but the words just didn't come together. The guy was right. Locking eyes with Ryuko, who seemed hesitant to blindly trust Aizen despite the man's goal, he nodded, "Alright. But tell me something. Why is the Original Life Fiber going after Ragyo? Why does it need her?"

"Because you succeeded beyond my greatest expectations."

A barrier shimmered into existence around Ragyo Kiryuin when Aizen stepped in front of the teenagers. Placing himself in the fallen matriarch's line-of-sight, he raised Kyouka Suigetsu into an overhanded grip, "While you were recovering, I confirmed, to the best of my abilities, that Ragyo Kiryuin was no longer alive."

"Then what the hell's happening!?"

His mouth tightened at Ryuko's blustering confusion. It was almost palpable. The steady maelstrom of spiritual pressure radiating from the Kiryuin matriarch's corpse was electrifying the atmosphere, "Something beyond the human insidiousness of your mother. So, do not drop your guard, Ryuko Matoi. Stay alert. Transform your Kamui into his advanced configuration without delay. Don't get distracted for a single moment. For if you do..."

Their surroundings rippled as Seirei-no-Makoto Kyouka Suigetsu's influence deepened, "... you will not survive."

**" Forced to dirty my hands against such insignificant beings..."**

The voice sent shivers down Ryuko's spine when the last trace of the Original Life Fiber disappeared into her mom's body. As the strange tension building in the air grew palpable, and Honnou City began shaking underneath Ragyo Kiryuin's spiritual presence, Ichigo felt a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek, pooling against the underside of his chin. It was slightly different - a little higher pitched and possessing *far* more malevolence - but he knew that inhuman echo.

**"... it's absolutely insulting."**

Ragyo remained ignorant of the turbulent thoughts plaguing Isshin Shiba's son as she placed one hand upon the ground. With nary a sound besides her noticeable contempt, the wounds adorning her flesh and Shinra Koketsu regenerated. Severed limbs stitched themselves back onto her body. The wet *squish* of Life Fibers reconnecting, life and power flowing through the dying threads, animated her movements. Giving rise to the breathless sigh, more reminiscent of venomous hate than arrogance, escaping her lips when she opened her eyes.

Multicolored bands of radiant colors replacing maroon.

"No freaking way..."

Existence itself trembled underneath the weight of her divine presence as Shinra Koketsu regained its majestic luster. Life Fibers constricted around her body as the flagrant denial reached her ears. She raised her hand, examining the perfectly manicured fingernails while Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi voiced their disbelief, slowly but surely accepting the situation. And then, once their murmuring ceased, she faced the shinigami. The corners of her mouth curled downwards at his defiance. As Shinra Koketsu rustled, the ultimate Kamui's eyes narrowed in vicious hatred matching her own, she did not hesitate. Did not falter. Before they could regroup - as the shinigami prepared another paltry technique, she flicked her wrist.

Releasing a sphere of kaleidoscopic energy that *shattered* his pathetic barrier.

**" Her irrational affection for Isshin Shiba weakened her resolve."**

She brushed aside the monumental explosion rippling across the horizon. Nor did the subsequent shockwave slamming into Honnou City faster than the speed of sound, rushing through the decimated fortress, garner the slightest portion of her attention. Only when her surroundings flickered like ripples upon a lake that she glanced at

the multicolored eruption illuminating Honnouji Academy. And her glower twisted into a grimace. To redirect her divine strength without suffering any consequences necessitated arrogance befitting such a sacrilegious being.

But it made no difference.

**" It was an unnecessary distraction. Once I could not ignore."**

In a single movement, she appeared behind those gathered to oppose Life Fibers. To oppose *her*, **"His presence during that most sacred of events was not anticipated. Every setback and delay... the knowledge of Kamui falling into undeserving hands... can be traced back to that night. YOUR interference comes from his original sin. And now..."**

A *clang* of metal against flesh disturbed the tranquility when she stopped the shinigami's zanpakuto from touching Shinra Koketsu. Blocking the weapon that gave her prophet so much trouble with nothing more than the palm of her hand, **"... you use my own power against me!? Tainted and corrupted by your blasphemous hands!?"**

The building shattering underneath Shinra Koketsu was the *only* indication of damage as the shimmer of polished metal against moonlight flickered in the corner of vision. Unencumbered by the necessity of blocking Ryuko Matoi's insignificant and pathetic attack when her mere *presence* - grandiose and divine - halted the Scissor Blade inches from Shinra Koketsu, she nevertheless snarled at the teenager's impudence, **"And to think Kamui would *dare* throw themselves against that which granted them existence!"**

"Fuck you!"

With a defiant roar, crimson energy blasted from Senketsu, exploding against her back in turbulent and chaotic pulses that left her fingers tingling. And yet it wasn't enough! No matter how much spiritual energy she pushed through the Scissor Blade, the stupid



barrier surrounding Ragyo Kiryuin wasn't budging! Damn it! What the hell was going on? There was no way in hell Shinra Koketsu was this powerful without Orihime! It didn't even have Absolute Domination! So, how was her bitch of a mom...

**"... stopping your Scissor Blade?"**

"What the -?"

**" I am the beginning and end of ALL things,"** her gaze swept across the Kamui adorning Ryuko Matoi. For divine clothing woven by the hands of inferior beings, she could not argue its strength. A simple examination of its Life Fibers proved Senketsu was formidable. *Worthy* of being called Kamui. And *that*, above all else, soured her mood.

**" Your existence began with me. And by these hands, it shall end."**

She was tempted to pursue the shinigami when he retreated. Her memories of his insurmountable arrogance and intelligence hadn't faded. There was no doubt he was planning something against Shinra Koketsu. Against herself. The prudent decision would be dealing with his Bankai. Punishing him for every indiscretion and sacrilegious action against Life Fibers. Before he acquired enough time to pose a *slight* risk.

But that would be playing into his hands.

**" Senketsu's advanced gestalts. The name you shall choose to call his fashion week apparel. Everything that began with Life Fibers - all things that end with Life Fibers - does not escape my grasp."**

In a blur, far too quickly for the teenager or her Kamui to follow, she wrapped her slender fingers around Ryuko Matoi's throat. Effortlessly bypassing the Kamui's defensive capabilities and driving the air from her lungs, **"Ryuko Matoi, your thoughts are akin to an**

**open book. I know what your Life Fibers will do before YOU do. Something Ragyo Kiryuin could never accomplish, even with my essence flowing through her threading."**

With a sickening *squelch*, she stabbed her hand through Ryuko Matoi's chest, grasping the teenager's heart as Ichigo Kurosaki took his first step forward, **"But her incompetence won't save you. My plans for this miserable planet cannot be stopped. It's only a matter of time before every lesser being - human and shinigami alike - is devoured by my children."**

"GETSUGA TEN-"

Ichigo never saw Ragyo move. Even wearing Zangetsu, it appeared as if the Kiryuin matriarch flashed between positions. Reacting before the signal reached his brain. One moment the woman was gripping Ryuko's heart, seemingly oblivious to his attack, and the next her fist was lodged squarely against his cheek, snapping his neck sideways and shattering the energy wrapped around Tournesol.

**" Were you not listening, Ichigo Kurosaki?"**

Her lips twisted into a sneer when the impertinent hybrid recovered his bearings. Barely arresting his momentum using the appropriated weapon. Glaring with veiled contempt at the blue sword clasped in his left hand, its ambiguous origins *not* lost to her, she watched Ichigo cough violently, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

**" Don't make me repeat myself."**

It was only through her magnanimity that Ryuko Matoi was afforded the opportunity to regain her composure. Flicking the blood from her fingers, she acknowledged the youth's mature regeneration. Kaleidoscopic eyes, both her own and Shinra Koketsu's, observed the teenager's wound stitch itself shut dozens of Life Fiber at a time before her heel *clacked* against the ground, bringing her within inches of Ichigo Kurosaki. Grasping the appropriated blade without concern, *pulling* the youth onto his feet through the sheer weight of

her power, her mouth curled into a menacing smirk as she *squeezed* .

Shattering the hardened Life Fiber weapon and preventing a repeat of Ragyo Kiryuin's pathetic defeat.

"What!?"

**" It was through my will that humanity evolved from their primitive state."**

Her patience reached its limit when Ryuko Matoi discarded the notion she should stay down. That her Kamui was a match for Shinra Koketsu. As the youth cursed, blood spewing from painful cuts along her hands and arms, she snarled at the Scissor Blade posed overhead, **"Only by my humble generosity did the Kiryuin's grow powerful enough to dominate all of humanity. Each generation feasting upon my essence before sacrificing mind, body and soul unto me."**

**" Now Kamui believe themselves capable of opposing me?"**

An imperceptible twitch of her mouth was the only warning Ichigo and Ryuko before Shinra Koketsu *screamed* and everything exploded. Turbulent waves of superheated spiritual energy erupted from Ragyo, cascading outwards in billowing sheets that disintegrated the ground underneath their feet. Turning concrete into ash that dissolved in the ensuing firestorm. Ichigo felt Mugetsu's discomfort as he instinctively leapt away from Ragyo, leaving the shattered remains of his old man's weapon behind. The very air *burned* in his lungs as the heat scorched his face, drying out his mouth and leaving him gasping for breath.

"Shit!"

Ryuko covered her eyes as Ragyo's overwhelming power literally threw her across the No-Star Slums. Cursing at the blinding display, she launched herself away from her mom, jumping far enough away

from the superheated energy that the cool, autumn breeze left her shivering, "The hell's going on, Senketsu?"

" ***I don't know,***" Senketsu flinched at the smoke rising from his Life Fibers, "***But it's safe to say we're no longer dealing with Ragyo Kiryuin.***"

"You serious!?"

She hefted the Scissor Blade with both hands as the monster, who was floating in the center of an enormous crater, shimmered like a damn Christmas tree, "Crap, this might get rough."

" ***Be careful, Ryuko,***" Senketsu quivered when the primordial creature's attention shift towards them, "***She's completely different from -***"

" **And you DARE align yourselves with that shinigami!?"**

That Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi, mere *children* blind to the truth of existence, believed themselves capable of laying a finger upon Shinra Koketsu was incomprehensible! Even without Absolute Domination, Kamui paled in comparison to its divinity! There was nothing they could do - now or in the future - that she did not know! Their techniques and advanced gestalts, even the possibility of Senketsu and Mugetsu evolving into fashion week apparel, was known! And yet they chose to stand in her path, in the path of *all* Life Fibers, for the good of a lesser, primitive species? One destined to be nothing more than sustenance for Life Fibers?

An animalistic snarl escaped between clenched lips. Multicolored light danced across manicured fingers as Shinra Koketsu reacted to her divine will. Sheets of pristine white Life Fibers contorted around her body. Billowing sleeves unfurled, contours and hems tightened against flesh, as the ultimate Kamui transformed from an elegant wedding dress, reminiscent of her prophet's unnecessary affection for Isshin Shiba, into a shoulderless gown.

**" For that you MUST suffer!"**

The landscape - Honnou City, Tokyo and even Karakura Town - trembled beneath her spiritual pressure. With nothing more than a subconscious *thought*, Shinra Koketsu was surrounded by dozens of eyes, each focusing on the Life Fiber hybrids posed to interfere once more. Multicolored energy oozed from the ultimate Kamui as her solidified presence, flowing in radiant streams against her skin. Twisting monstrously until her fingers were *gripping* the evidence of her superior threading.

**" This contemptible academy..."**

It didn't matter if they begged for mercy. It was too late. She had already made up her mind.

**"... and all those dwelling within..."**

Her anger flared when something flickered in the distance. All but ignoring the shinigami's defiance and arrogance, she allowed Sosuke Aizen to finish the incantation, ten pink spheres coalesced around his body. Scoffing with audible derision when he thrust his hand forward, she turned aside and allowed the technique to harmlessly impact Shinra Koketsu.

The impacts and subsequent explosion doing little more than caressing her Life Fibers.

**"... will be wiped from existence! All of you shall perish!"**

As Shinra Koketsu perforated Ryuko Matoi's disrespectful flesh, she sent Isshin Shiba's offspring careening in the opposite direction, bleeding pouring from his chest, with naught but a glance. For a moment, her eyebrow twitched. Their arrogance in assuming themselves able to match her divine power was infuriating. Insulting! For a moment, far longer than believed necessary, she contemplated, *wondered*, how many lesser beings were required to get the point across. Two? Three? A dozen? Some of them would

undoubtedly escape her retribution like cowards. But tonight their charade of a rebellion would end.

One way or another, they would be slaughtered.

Her fingers tore trenches of multicolored light through the fabric of reality, **"Even the portion of my essence flowing through Isshin Shiba's threading won't save him from -"**

She paused, more from astonishment than pain or discomfort, when something tore its way through her Life Fibers. Cutting through threading and flesh before bursting forth from her chest. As she stared at the blood dripping from the blade emerging from Shinra Koketsu, it took a moment for her mind to process the *impossibility*. But as reality established itself, and the familiar purple weapon didn't vanish, indignation swelled through her soul. With more force than necessary, she gripped the razor-sharp blade stabbed through her heart and glared over her shoulder.

**" What is the meaning of this?"**

Nui couldn't hear the question as she forced the Scissor Blade deeper into Shinra Koketsu, tears dripping down her cheeks, "You're not Lady Ragyo! G-Give her back!"

**" And why does something like *you* care?"**

With a *squelch*, the Original Life Fiber removed the blade piercing Shinra Koketsu. As her Life Fibers stitched themselves together, she dismissed the energy gathered upon the tips of her fingers. That one of her chosen heirs would demean themselves in such a debasing and humiliating manner was abhorrent. Bewildering on its own merits. But for the single offspring Ragyo Kiryuin didn't misplace - raised from conception to worship Life Fibers and view humanity as fattened cattle - to act with such flagrant treachery was incomprehensible! It made no sense!

**" You are nothing more than a marionette."**

She curled a finger through the Scissor Blade, ensuring the weapon didn't move an inch. Aware not only of Ichigo Kurosaki's close proximity, but also the apprehension tracing familiar patterns through his Life Fibers, her lips slowly curled into a maniac smirk, **"That you believe yourself capable of love... of feeling emotions like a lesser being... is abhorrent. It's *not* why you were created. But such a catastrophic defect is not your fault."**

"Gah!"

In the same moment she removed the Scissor Blade from the Grand Couturier's unworthy grasp, she drove her knee into the impudent teenager's stomach. Eliciting a pained gasp that brought a hint of righteous satisfaction to her soul. And as Nui gagged on blood and bile, she thrust the hardened Life Fiber weapon into the pavement before reaching forward, clenching a handful of the teenager's disheveled hair, **"There was only supposed to be one of you. A single marionette loyal to Life Fibers. Created to stitch Shinra Koketsu and then, upon completion, sacrifice their existence unto it."**

Her tone hardened as she struck Nui Harime, driving her fist into the teenager's face. Basking in the pained screams accompanying every impact of flesh against flesh, the Original Life Fiber eventually relented, allowing the Grand Couturier to collapse to the ground, **"But something went wrong. Instead of one daughter, my prophet had three. Each possessing a fraction of my essence. That was a mistake."**

"N-No..."

Nui tried crawling away from the Original Life Fiber, each inch more agonizing than the last. Blood dripped from her nose and mouth as she tried ignoring the creature's words about Amu and Orihime. But a hand clasped around her throat before she realized the thing wearing Lady Ragyo had moved. Manicured fingers that once caressed her with love and affection squeezed tightly, forcing the air from the lungs as she was pulled upwards, **"Just look at you."**

The Original Life Fiber glared at the Grand Couturier's disheveled appearance, **"You're incomplete. Without your other half to stabilize your emotions - without the medium for Absolute Domination synchronizing them - you're unbalanced. It's a miracle my prophet found any use for you in the first place."**

**" But don't delude yourself."**

A malicious smirk plucked against her lips. There. That was it. The single thought radiating through the Grand Couturier's threading. The one thing guaranteed to shatter her delusions of grandeur. With Shinra Koketsu's eyes focusing upon Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi, *daring* them to interfere, she tightened her hold, **"You could never have a family. Ragyo Kiryuin and Isshin Shiba granted you existence. But your only purpose was weaving Shinra Koketsu. And you succeeded. Spectacularly . You've outlived your usefulness. So now I believe it's time your Life Fibers returned to me."**

"What?"

Tournesol nearly slipped through Ichigo's fingers at the Original Life Fiber's insinuation. What the hell? His old man and Ragyo were Nui's parents? That couldn't be true! There was no way his dad would *consider* cheating! The guy couldn't even watch romantic movies without bailing halfway through the opening credits. But if it was true, Nui's constant insistence on being his cousin made sense. And he never heard her lie, not even once.

"There has to be another explanation," he brushed aside Mugetsu's concern. Now wasn't the time to worry. He could get the answers from the old goat after the Original Life Fiber was stopped, "My old man's an idiot, but he would never -"

"I-It's funny."

Nui felt... nothing... at Ichigo's reaction. And that bothered her. She should have been upset or angry the creature wearing Lady Ragyo



spoiled the surprise. She wanted to surprise him about the old goat once they stopped fighting over the pigs in human clothing. When they could finally be a family without any distractions. It would have been perfect. But then Ryuko rejected her. Her sister rejected Lady Ragyo. Then Lady Ragyo was replaced by this thing wearing her body. Nothing mattered anymore. Not even Amu.

So, why didn't Ichigo seem to hate her? Why was he looking at her with such a strange expression?

"Amu did most of the work. S-She was the smart one," her tears stopped when the fingers grasping her throat tightened, "She made sure there weren't any mistakes. I-If we messed any of the stitching, I was the one who fixed it."

The Original Life Fiber paused over the Grand Couturier's heart. With her fingers inches from the beating organ, fractions of a second from dissolving the marionette, her multicolored eyes narrowed, **"Do you intend to garner sympathy with something I already know?"**

"B-But when Lady Ragyo made me finish Shinra Koketsu," Nui slouched in the creature's grasp as her vision blurred, "I-I realized something important."

She latched a finger between the ultimate Kamui's threading and *pulled*, "That I could take it apart if I really wanted to!"

**" No!"**

The progenitor of Life Fibers smashed her fist against the Grand Couturier. But it was too late. As her head twisted awkwardly, spittle and blood spewing from her lips, Nui curled her finger. With a taut pluck, bundles of Banshi unfurled from Shinra Koketsu, caught upon the teenager's fingernail. Gasping incoherently from the pain when she smashed face-first into the ground, Nui listened to the ultimate Kamui *scream* . She heard its agony as the blood dripping from her mouth slowed, and then stopped. She watched the Original Life Fiber attempt to regain control, only to fail. And even though she had

wanted to unravel Shinra Koketsu, she couldn't find any pleasure in watching her pride and joy - the best and most perfect dress in the world - suffer.

"I-It's painful," Nui struggled off the ground. Her voice was little more than a strained whisper as energy burst from Shinra Koketsu. She twitched from the superheated steam erupting from the divine fabric, mimicking the Original Life Fiber's astonishment, "But I made Shinra Koketsu for Lady Ragyo! Y-You don't deserve to wear it!"

**" You treacherous piece of scrap!"**

Her anger was palpable, nearly physical, as the ultimate Kamui's strength waned. She watched, disbelief twisting into shock, when the Banshi *snapped* out of the stitching, permanently rendering Shinra Koketsu nothing more than a pale imitation of the divine gown meant to usher humanity to their destiny. But she kept her composure. Even as energy oozed from the ultimate Kamui's threading, she refused to grant the lesser beings an advantage! With an indignant snarl, her eyes swiveled downwards, focusing on the marionette who dared raise her hand against Life Fibers. That believed itself capable of betraying the source of her existence and purpose!

In a flash of rainbow light, the Needle Blades spun into her waiting fingers.

**" You DARE raise your hand against me!?"**

Moonlight twisted off their polished edges as she swung downwards, the identical blades posed to sever the Life Fibers connecting the Grand Couturier's head and shoulders.

Only to miss when writhing darkness intercepted the Needle Blades, forming a protective barrier in front of Nui Harime. Tracing the source of the interruption backwards, focusing on the familiar blonde above her prophet's errant offspring, the corners of her mouth twitched erratically. *Recognition* and *hatred* coiled through her threading at the vampire. Half-formed memories bubbled to the forefront of her

mind. Her divine presence flared as she tore through the burning shadows oozing from the vampire's shoulder. Shattering the barrier preventing her from destroying the treacherous marionette.

But it was too late. With fury bubbling in her soul, she watched the vampire retreat with the Grand Couturier.

"AHH!"

Seras winced at the blood gushed from the cross-shaped wound across Nui Harime's face. As the soles of her boots dug into the ground for purchase, fighting against the immense force accompanying Ragyo Kiryuin's attack, she found herself confused. Something wasn't right. She remembered the Grand Couturier brushing off Master and that Quincy's attacks without breaking her unnerving smile. So, what was different about this attack? The damage seemed *worse* with every passing second. And the blood touching her skin felt wrong. Like it wasn't really blood but something else.

"Don't worry. I got you."

She launched herself towards Ichigo at the first opportunity, using Ragyo Kiryuin's frustration to place as much distance between them as possible. Despite being completely in the dark about everything, something must have happened after Pip thrust the bullet into the woman's heart. Something that caused the Grand Couturier, who had a body count in the hundreds to thousands, to betray her mother, "But you seem to have pissed her off quite badly."

"S-She destroyed my eye..."

Nui didn't *care* about the vampire. The blood spewing from the wound - so intimately familiar and painful - didn't matter. She remembered Ryuko's dad doing the same thing. Cutting open her face. Damaging her perfect body with those contemptible second-hand blades. But with her mouth stretching into an impossibly wide smile, blood dribbling from the glowing wound across the left half of

her face, she grinned at the Original Life Fiber, "B-But I fixed Shinra Koketsu!"

**" What did you say!?"**

The reprehensible creature's astonishment at something so simple was music to her ears, "Gosh, are you stupid? Don't you remember? I-I'm the Grand Couturier!"

Her voice deepened with every word, alternating between infuriation and shrill barking, "S-So, it makes sense I can adjust its dress patterns!"

*Hatred* flashed through her remaining eye, "N-Now you can't use Shinra Koketsu! You're nothing more than Life Fibers squeezed into clothing!"

**" You impudent little..."**

Astonishment at the Grand Couturier devolved into vitriolic hatred. She was done granted those standing against Life Fibers - standing against *her* - mercy! Shinra Koketsu was already responding lethargically to her orders. Its strength was already fading. And soon, it would vanish entirely. But even without the ultimate Kamui, her power was more than sufficient for dealing with the shinigami. And Isshin Shiba, when the traitorous man emerged from the shadows in a few short moments, **"I will no longer tolerate your belligerence!"**

Through divine superiority, she extracted what little power remained within Shinra Koketsu's threading, **"Your rebellion ends NOW!"**

"Like hell it does!"

The flickers of spiritual energy surrounding Senketsu evolved into a cacophonous explosion as Ryuko met the Original Life Fiber head on, closing the distance between herself and the creature in the blink of an eye, "I'm not through kicking your glowing ass!"

**" How long do you expect this charade to continue!?"**

Her hatred bubbled at the impertinent hybrid's delusions of grandeur. That Ryuko Matoi refused to acknowledge the insurmountable difference between their power was one thing. But the arrogance infecting her threading was insulting! Did the Kamui gracing her flesh believe its strength sufficient to mount a challenge? Absurd! The concept of strength meant nothing to her! And so, with a swift downwards strike, she intercepted the Scissor Blade. In a titanic eruption of clashing spiritual pressure, she repulsed Ryuko Matoi's assault, sending the girl tumbling head over heels.

**" Your Kamui stands no chance! It's nothing more than Life Fibers sewn into clothing!"**

"That's what you think!"

Ryuko spat at the Original Life Fiber. Did the bitch think something that dull and boring would bother Senketsu? They heard worse from Mugetsu! With a snort, she flipped back onto her feet, waiting until Ichigo's signal before darting forward, "Because Senketsu's gonna beat the shit out of you!"

**" Utter nonsense!"**

She caught Ichigo Kurosaki's tempered blade before the youth finished sneaking through her guard. She clasped Tournesol between her thumb and finger, holding the hardened sword before parrying the Scissor Blade with a callous backhand, **"There is nothing you can do that I do not already know! "**

A *crack* echoed across the ruined slums as her fist impacted Ryuko Matoi's face, sending the surprised teenager careening into - and through - several buildings. Yet a suppressed snarl escaped her lips. If not for the Grand Couturier's treachery, that attack would have taken Ryuko's head clean off her shoulders! Pirouetting at the subtle movement accompanying Ichigo Kurosaki's determined efforts, she pulled the Needle Blade from its impromptu perch. In a series of

strikes too rapid for lesser beings to follow, she shattered the youth's guard. Blood sprayed through the air, missing Shinra Koketsu by scant millimeters, when the Needle Blade carved through Isshin Shiba's offspring from waist to shoulder.

It was a wound that should have inconvenienced the impertinent hybrid.

But in her present, weakened condition, nearly bisecting Ichigo Kurosaki wasn't *enough* .

**" So throw yourselves at me!"**

With an audible crinkle of clothing, she thrust her arm upwards, fingers clenching the celestial sphere hovering over Honnouji Academy, **"But without that satellite, it won't matter if you recover Absolute Domination's vessel! You'll perish one way or another!"**

"On the contrary, that's quite an unlikely scenario."

Aizen took pleasure at the Original Life Fiber's reaction. For a creature whose arrogance exceeded its unwarranted notion of superiority over humanity, the subtle quivering of its body at the otherwise innocuous statement betrayed its apprehension, "During our confrontation, I fired a Kido into Shinra Koketsu. Hado Number Ninety One, to be exact. However, we can agree my efforts lacked effectiveness."

Whether the eldritch creature found the information helpful wasn't information. Its surprise. The astonishment dictating its actions. *That* was important. Raising Kyouka Suigetsu, Aizen waited until his words sunk into the Original Life Fiber before taking another step closer, "When attacking, one must focus upon exploiting their opponent's weaknesses. Which raises an interesting question. When I fought Raygo Kiryuin, I verified Kido are ineffective against Life Fibers. It's an aspect of your biology independently deduced by Kisuke Urahara. Your Life Fibers absorb spiritual energy. Thus,

attacking in such a manner requires excessive sacrifice of one's stamina. So, knowing that, why did I waste energy on something that does not work?"

**" You're referring to the trap hidden within your attack?"**

In a flicker of movement, she thrust her hand through the shinigami, blood and viscera erupting from his back, **"An interesting tactic. But pointless."**

"Of course it was."

The blood trailing from Aizen's mouth didn't impede his words as he smirked. Amiably and without arrogance. An attack possessing such ferocity was indeed fatal. Someone with less preparations would have certainly died. But as the Original Life Fiber stiffened, its other hand reaching forward to finish the job, reality twisted upon itself. His corpse vanished into an illusion, leaving the creature surprised until he reappeared behind it, "It was nothing more than a distraction. A trick to lull you into a false sense of security. But, if anything, you should thank the Grand Couturier."

**" What!?"**

"Her interference weakened your control over the World of the Living," he tapped the empty space behind the creatures, searching for the specific frequency of spiritual particles. With a flicker, darkness erupted as jagged, teeth-like tears appeared in the barrier separating the dimensions, "Without her sabotage, you could have easily negated what I'm about to do."

**" How dare you!"**

She shouted with failing restraint when the shinigami ducked beneath the Needle Blade. Her eyes narrowed at the hand planted against the ground. At the fingers lightly gripping crushed concrete. A perturbed twitch of hatred rippled from her stomach when he raised a finger, silently releasing a burst of kinetic energy that thrust

her towards the congealed darkness. But with significant effort, she arrested her momentum inches from the portal. Damn it! Damn him to hell! This arrogant... despicable... shinigami believed himself her equal!

No, he thought himself her better!

She would deny him the satisfaction of victory!

"I don't think so!"

The spiritual energy around the Original Life Fiber's fingers shattered with a sharp *crack* when Ryuko smashed her fist into the bitch's nose. Something that surprised the thing wearing her mom like a suit. Which gave her the perfect opening! Using every scrap of power available to Senketsu - and then some - Ryuko pivoted, heel *clacking* against the ground, before driving her knee into Shinra Koketsu.

Forcing the ugly outfit - and the creature wearing it - into the closing portal.

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"Damn it, how'd she get in here!?"

Contrary to popular belief, Emilou Apacci wasn't short-tempered or rude. No matter how much Mila Rose or Sung-Sun complained. She just couldn't stand idiotic shinigami and anyone who dared raised their sword against Lady Harribel. Especially that white-haired midget. It was that simple. But she wasn't someone who rushed into battle without thinking. Not after getting her ass burned by that old geezer. She wasn't *stupid*. Not anymore.

"You sound scared, Apacci."



Franceska Mila Rose scoffed at her fellow arrancar's lack of courage, "You're sweating. And your teeth are chattering loudly enough to disturb Lady Harribel. If you're going to stand around pissing your pants, you might as well run away and save us the effort of rescuing your ass later."

"You wanna say that to my face!?"

Apacci forgot about the woman - at least it *looked* like a woman - and that creepy uniform for a moment. A biting retort was on the tip of her tongue, something witty enough to screw with her fellow arrancar's sense of self-esteem, until another pulse of spiritual pressure slammed into Las Noches. Taken aback by the *malevolence*, which made even Ulquiorra seem tame, she grinned despite the sweat trickling down her cheek, "If I'm scared, then I guess you're trembling from excitement! Hey, if you want to be the first one to fight that bitch, be my guest!"

Mila Rose's eye twitched as her fingers twitched towards Leona, "Since *when* has that stopped you?"

"What the hell did you say!?"

"Settle down."

Tier Harribel's eyes narrowed at the woman - no, this creature was anything but human - intruding within Las Noches. She could not blame Apacci for her apprehension. Nor was Mila Rose's adamant refusal to confess her nervousness a sign of weakness. On the contrary, she expected nothing less. Despite having regained a semblance of their former humanity, they were still Hollows. And as such, their instincts were predominant. And those same instincts shouted warnings about the intruder. Her masked lips pursed from primal tension every time another burst of spiritual pressure covered Las Noches.

It was no wonder Apacci, Mila Rose and, yes, even Sung-Sun, appeared anxious.

"Do not underestimate this creature."

She hooked a finger through one of the holes adorning Tiburón's guard. Something else troubled her. This creature arrived within Las Noches through a Garganta. But only arrancar or those associated with Sosuke Aizen could bypass the structure's defenses using Descorrer. Her thoughts hardened at the insinuation. The latter was impossible. That man was imprisoned by the shinigami, sealed after his ignominious defeat at Ichigo Kurosaki's hands, "The primal fear influencing your thoughts is understandable."

With a careful, relaxed flick of her wrist, she unsheathed the zanpakuto, golden-yellow sparks accompanying the motion, "Her spiritual pressure is catastrophic. Abhorrent beyond even the most repugnant Hollow. I have never experienced anything remotely this malevolent and reprehensible. It's unnerving. And yet, despite the obnoxious pressure, I cannot wonder if this is but a fraction of her true power."

"So, what do we do?"

Mila Rose glowered as apprehension twisted her expression, "There's no telling what she has planned."

"You're acting like a fool again. Weren't you paying attention?"

Cyan Sung-Sun waited until Mila Rose growled like a primate before covering her mouth. Sometimes it was too easy getting under her skin. One would think after countless years spent together under Lady Harribel, they would try ignoring her taunts. For a moment, she contemplated pushing the issue. Perhaps mocking Apacci's nervousness. But the creature's terrifying spiritual pressure superseded any desires outside of survival.

"Our mysterious intruder stumbled through a Garganta like a rank amateur. Almost as if someone pushed her," she momentarily mocked Mila Rose's ignorance on something considered basic by arrancar standards before glancing towards the source of their worry,

"Lady Harribel likely already realized this, but someone could not defeat this woman. Therefore, they did the next best thing."

"What!? Why'd they send her *here* !?"

"You shouldn't lose your temper over something as trivial as criticism," Sung-Sun rolled her eyes at Apacci's characteristic response to the slightest hint of bad news, "Getting worked up is a great way to get this creature's attention."

"Damn you -"

"Calm yourself, Apacci."

She did not raise her voice. The situation didn't warrant anything other than prudent, careful analysis. Allowing one's emotions to run rampant increased the probability of making fatal mistakes, "Sung-Sun is correct. However, her arrival is not the problem at hand."

A faint *hum* trembled through Harribel's hand as Tiburón spun around her finger, streams of golden energy trailing from the zanpakuto's edge, "This creature is a threat to the tranquility we've painstakingly established. Which is why I shall deal with this intruder myself. Before she becomes a threat to Las Noches and Hueco Mundo."

"There's no reason to risk your life, Lady Harribel!"

Mila Rose glared at the creature staring at Las Noches like she owned the damn place. There was no question Lady Harribel was more than powerful enough to win. With every Espada except Grimmjow dead, and Aizen imprisoned by the shinigami, she was the strongest being in Hueco Mundo. But something about the woman's strange clothing was unnerving, almost to the point she was considering working alongside Apacci and Sung-Sun without complaint, "Please! Let us summon Ayon! Even if that *thing* kills him without breaking a sweat, I'm confident you'll learn enough about her abilities to win!"

"No. I cannot allow you to sacrifice yourselves for my benefit."

Another twist of her wrist brought Tiburón into her waiting grasp. The familiar sensation of her zanpakuto brought comfort. Assuaging a portion of the tension and discontent coursing through her veins, "This woman is beyond your capabilities. Ayon would find itself overwhelmed not only in terms of spiritual pressure, but sheer vindictiveness and malevolence. Do you recall the mass exodus of Hollows?"

"Yeah..."

Apacci frowned. She remembered that day. Five months ago, out of the middle of nowhere, every Hollow in Japan returned to Hueco Mundo. The bastards possessing enough intelligence to talk, and smart enough *not* to pick a fight with Lady Harribel, claimed two monsters had awakened. Inhuman creatures unlike shinigami, Quincy or arrancar. Each with terrifying and monstrous spiritual pressure that threatened to crush their souls.

"You think this... *woman*... is one of those monsters?"

"I do not know. Now go. Observe from a safe distance. If I cannot defeat her, retreat and do not look back. There is no need for any of you to lose your lives saving mine."

Her tone was blunt, almost apathetic. Yet Harribel waited until Apacci, Mila Rose and Sung-Sun retreated to an appreciably safe distance before releasing the restraints upon her spiritual pressure. She could not fault their reluctance. The arrogance behind throwing oneself against an unknown, powerful opponent went against the basic principles of combat. But she had little choice. The spiritual pressure radiating from the white-clad figure felt... *wrong*. More disturbing with each passing second. Inhuman, in the sense the woman, unlike Hollows and arrancar, wasn't created through humanity's sorrow or despair.

Yet there was the overwhelming, *growing* notion, born not from rational thought but primal instinct, that she was being watched. That this *creature* already knew her location and was waiting, patiently and sadistically, to see what she'd do.

"Destroy..."

Golden-yellow spiritual pressure cascaded from her soul at the soft utterance. If the advantage was lost, wasting time analyzing an already terrible scenario was unacceptable. Frowning as the front of her uniform unzipped, revealing the bones covering the lower portion of her face and ample bosom, Harribel breathed through the condensing moisture, "Tiburón."

Las Noches trembled beneath the weight of her spiritual pressure. The damaged dome and artificial skies cracked - then broke - as her power increased, eventually collapsing upon the white sands. She felt Apacci, Mila Rose and Sung-Sun retreat nearly to Grimmjow's extended quarters before destroying the cyclone of water enveloping her body with a single slash.

"I wonder, was that enough?"

As beads of water pooled along the contours of her skin, dripping from Tiburón only to suspend themselves midair, she frowned. Using her *resurrección* against an unknown, powerful opponent was a double-edged sword. The spiritual pressure released was substantial. If Ulquiorra's confrontation against Ichigo Kurosaki hadn't already destroyed most of Las Noches' ceiling, the shockwave accompanying her *resurrección* would have destroyed the structure. But that was a small sacrifice. She was not fighting a shinigami who required time and effort to release their zanpakuto. This creature was a monster unlikely to grant her the opportunity to release Tiburón in the midst of battle.

And yet, the woman - no, the creature - appeared disinterested.

Was the resurrección of an Espada insufficient to warrant even the slightest concern?

Golden-energy energy gathered upon Tiburón until the intensity flickered across her olive-colored skin. Her fingers trailed down the blade as she pressed forward, halving the distance between herself and the woman, "I see..."

Haribel stopped beyond what she presumed the creature's effective range. She could not see a blade or weapon. Yet that did not preclude the possibility of ranged techniques or other attacks. And the billowing sleeves and layered fabric could easily conceal weapons. Such audacious and abhorrent clothing seemed excessive, inefficient. But her fingers tightened upon Tiburón, aqua eyes narrowed at the eerie, almost independent movement of the strange uniform. Something wasn't right. For a moment, she thought the eye-like patterns floating above the woman shifted.

But with some reluctance, she discarded the rampant instincts. Choosing instead to focus upon the present. Upon defeating the woman. Hefting Tiburón overhead, gripping her zanpakuto as the golden-yellow flames roared to life, she swung downwards, releasing the wave of high-pressure energy.

Moisture dripped from her hair as she observed the technique slice towards the woman.

Her breath hitched when the woman effortlessly caught the energy between her fingers.

**" To think that blasphemous abomination's influence spread this far..."**

"La Gota!"

She threw herself away from the woman without hesitation. Without worrying about embarrassment or cowardice. That echoing voice... the warbling tone accentuating each and every syllable... awoke a

flash of primal terror. Instincts long thought buried. Presumed to have been replaced with rational thought and humanity. Flashing across the skies above Las Noches, bursts of pressurized water erupted from Tiburón in rapid, fear succession. Moisture condensed from her spiritual energy. Water flowed from the gill-like protrusions on her zanpakuto, coalescing before firing towards the woman.

No, calling this creature a woman was wrong. She might resemble a human. Or perhaps bore vague similarities to shinigami or even Quincy. But she had never been *human*. The lustrous silver hair shimmering with nauseating rainbow light. The pale, alabaster skin. Those eyes, rings of alternating colors. There was no question. No doubts remaining in her mind.

This woman was an inhuman *monster*.

**" You're one of that shinigami's subordinates, aren't you?"**

"Casca -"

A hand clamped around her throat. Fingers too dainty and delicate bypassed her Hierro, squeezing the air from her lungs, when the woman crossed Las Noches. In a flicker of rainbow light, she was slammed against one of the buildings erupting from the dunes, cracking then shattering the blue façade, **"I can sense that thing's influence on your soul."**

The Original Life Fiber ignored the fingers desperately attempting to loosen her grip. She paid little, if any, attention to the oversized zanpakuto, treating the unique weapon as nothing more than a nuisance, a problem rectified by tightening her grip, cutting off what remained of the arrancar's oxygen, **"He achieved a temporary victory through cowardice, but such tricks only work once . Because I *will* find my way back. I *will* wipe Honnou City - and the lesser beings hiding within its walls - from existence."**

Despite her unbridled hatred for the Grand Couturier, she focused on the matter at hand. Pushing the marionette's punishment for siding

with humanity until later. With a subconscious flicker of intent, the surrounding landscape disintegrated. Sand, buildings and even the very moisture oozing from the arrancar decayed. Mote of spiritual particles streamed into Shinra Koketsu, rejuvenating her weakened Life Fibers.

Bringing a grin, cold and calculating, to her features.

**" And once I've accomplished *that* , everything connected to the planet will perish."**

She adjusted her hold upon the creature, moving her fingers upwards until they were gripping its jaw. Yet its aqua eyes remained defiant. Unaware of its station as something significantly inferior to Life Fibers, let alone herself. But she allowed the arrancar that delusion. Granting it a moment's reprieve before raising her other hand, **"But you?"**

Light danced between her fingers, **"You won't have the fortune of living that long."**

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"This is Hueco Mundo, huh?"

**" *It's not what I expected, Ryuko.*"**

"You're telling me, Senketsu," Ryuko snorted under her breath, "It looks like a stupid, boring desert. Where's all the doom and gloom?"

**" *Boring isn't necessarily bad. And there's a good chance Orihime was exaggerating some of the details,*"** Senketsu was troubled. And it wasn't the first time. If he remembered those remedial foreign language courses Ryuko was forced to endure under penalty of expulsion, everything about Hueco Mundo was Spanish. Entirely different from the Soul Society, which not only



made little sense, but caused his threading to twitch, "***At least we passed through unscathed. That Garganta wasn't the most pleasant experience.***"

"Tch... I know."

Her heels *clacked* against the obnoxiously bright red pillar. The coldness in the air, something impossible since Senketsu hadn't broken into goosebumps, was barely noticeable as she stared across Las Noches. Rubbing the kink between her shoulder and neck, she grunted in visible - and growing - annoyance at the hazy structures stretching beyond the horizon. God damn it, she couldn't even see where the freaking place started! And who the hell builds a fortress with a desert on the inside?

"And who the hell thought breaking through dimensions required knowing *Spanish* ?"

She tensed at a faint shift in the wind. In fact, her hands reflexively tightened around the Scissor Blades at the disturbing feeling trickling down her spine. Only an idiot wouldn't sense that powerful and familiar spiritual pressure. Scoffing out of the side of her mouth, she spat onto the pillar. Satsuki's nerdy friend might find the freaky moon interesting, but she didn't care about stupid and pointless crap! All that mattered was kicking the Original Life Fiber's ass!

"But we made it through in one piece," Ryuko grinned maliciously, "And this time, we're gonna finish that ugly scrap of clothing once and for all!"

" ***Hmm...***"

"Huh? What's wrong, Senketsu?"

The Kamui gave his best impression of a deep, thoughtful frown. Difficult considering he did not possess a face. Everything appeared normal. There was sand blowing in the wind that threatened to get inside his threading. And strange, angled buildings stretching into the

sky. And yet, neither explained the subtle trembling of his Life Fibers, ***"I don't know. But there's something in the air, Ryuko."***

Ryuko stiffened, then looked straight into her Kamui's eye, "You're saying there's something wrong with this place?"

***"I'm not entirely certain,"*** he watched faint specks of light removing themselves from the pillar underneath Ryuko. As the glowing energy entered his threading, instantly relieving the exhaustion, his eye twisted upwards, ***"But I feel refreshed. Full of energy. The complete opposite of how I felt two minutes ago, when Sosuke Aizen was explaining what happened."***

"You feel refreshed?"

She blinked once - then twice - in confusion, "What the hell does that mean?"

"Were you not paying attention, Ryuko?"

Strands of darkness clung to Junketsu as Satsuki emerged from the Garganta without breaking her stride. Not a hair was out of place as calculating steel-blue eyes focused on the bleak and desolate landscape stretching kilometers in every direction. Her mouth curled into a scowl at the strange bitterness in the air. Junketsu instinctively tightened against her skin when a presence inundated Sosuke Aizen's former seat of power. With a hollow *clack*, she pivoted towards Ryuko, "Life Fibers sustain themselves on blood and spiritual energy. Unlike our world, Hueco Mundo is composed of spiritual particles. To our Kamui, this world is akin to an endless buffet."

"I guess that makes sense..."

The wind rushing through Las Noches faded into the background as Ryuko frowned at Satsuki's explanation. She remembered Aizen saying something similar before they entered the Garganta. But he phrased it differently, with a lot more flowery language. And she'd

been too busy worrying about Ichigo to care what the guy said about Senketsu, "So, does that mean Senketsu's gonna get stronger or something?"

"Perhaps. Or rather, the spiritual density of Hueco Mundo will allow our Kamui to fight without worrying about straining their Life Fibers."

From the moment she stepped through the Garganta into Las Noches, she could sense the creature's presence. That encompassing, vile spiritual pressure was unmistakable. The monster controlling Ragyo Kiryuin's corpse was somewhere over the horizon to the north. Precisely where Sosuke Aizen claimed, "Still, we mustn't lower our guards. What's applicable toward our Kamui, also affects our opponent. It's more than likely the Original Life Fiber is gathering its strength. Recovering what Nui Harime took away."

"Then there's no time to lose!"

"Agreed. However, we need to proceed carefully, Ryuko."

The comfort of Junketsu minimized her trepidation. The apprehension mixed with cheerful enthusiasm sung through her Kamui's threading, coming across as a faint whisper within her mind. Yet her brow furrowed, more from experience than concern, "Our opponent can predict Life Fibers. It can read your thoughts. Therefore, it stands to reason there's nothing you nor I can accomplish that it doesn't already know. We must assume the Original Life Fiber is not only aware of Senketsu, Junketsu and Mugetsu's techniques, but is more than capable of countering them."

"I already knew that!"

Ryuko stomped her heel against the pillar, leaving a large, ugly crack. Jabbing her thumb against Senketsu, she snarled, "But that's not going to stop us! If that thing can tell the future, then we'll just need to be so damn unpredictable it won't know what's happening!"

**" More unpredictable than usual, Ryuko?"**

"That's right, Senketsu!"

Her grin twisted viciously, "Predicting the future means shit if we don't know what we're doing until we're doing it!"

***" Are you sure that will work? If the Original Life Fiber can predict our Life Fibers, then it should know what we're doing. Or rather, what we're not doing."***

"You're correct about one thing, Ryuko. The Original Life Fiber's precognition is NOT absolute!"

Satsuki addressed her emphasis not towards Ryuko, but Ichigo, who finally emerged from the Garganta. The last to arrive given Yoruichi Shihoin's wish to speak privately. For a brief, moment, she observed the stabilized tear between dimensions. Watching with discerning eyes as the gateway sealed shut, reality correcting itself until the only method of departing Las Noches vanished. It appeared Kinue Kinagase was not participating against the monster puppeting her mother's corpse. But she could not fault the woman's reluctance. Unlike Ichigo and Ryuko's relationship with Mugetsu and Senketsu, Danketsu had been stitched into Kinue's skin. They were, for lack of better vernacular, a single being.

The negative consequences from Absolute Domination ripping them apart couldn't be estimated.

"Our mother's demise, Orihime Inoue's rescues and the Grand Couturier's treachery were events it did NOT foresee," Junketsu crinkled beneath the weight of her passion. With a loud *thud*, Bakuzan slammed against the pillar, "If the Original Life Fiber precognition was flawless, we would not be having this conversation! It would have predicted Nui Harime's actions and reacted accordingly!"

"Then we shouldn't stand around talking."

Ichigo found himself grimacing, almost involuntarily, at the familiar landscape. He never imagined returning to Hueco Mundo. And Aizen was right. Mugetsu was reacting to the high concentration of spiritual particles. *His* Life Fibers were responding, "The Original Life Fiber's pissed. And it's getting stronger every second. If we're going to stop that thing, we need to do it now. Before it recovers."

***" We should cut that excuse for clothing apart. It worked last time!"***

The bitter, almost supernaturally dry, wind throughout Las Noches felt strange against her Life Fibers. And the energy she was passively absorbing from the environment, which never happened in recent memory, was invigorating. Like an exceptionally bad ironing after Ichigo forgot her favorite detergent. With her mood irrevocably soured at the comparison between Hueco Mundo and her favorite activity, Mugetsu glared at the blade in Ichigo's left hand, ***"Of course, she's stronger than Ragyo Kiryuin. And faster. But not as fast as us! Or enough to make a difference."***

"Whether we like it or not, that thing's smart," Ichigo frowned. There was someone else with the Original Life Fiber. A presence identical to an arrancar's. It was faint but still stronger than Grimmjow, "The Original Life Fiber's pissed, but it can stall for time. It doesn't need to *win*, just keep us busy long enough for the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet to finish. Even if it doesn't see into the future, hitting that thing with another Getsuga Jūjishō's going to be tricky."

"I'll distract mom for ya, Ichigo!"

Satsuki's scowl hardened at the unprompted declaration, "What?"

"I'm tough enough to take a few love taps!"

Ryuko hissed out of the corner of her mouth, "And while the bitch is busy kicking my ass, Ichigo and Mugetsu will attack from behind! But that probably won't work. So, while she's shouting some bullshit

about Senketsu being inferior, and maybe beating the crap out of us, you'll hit her with everything Junketsu's got!"

**"Keeping the Original Life Fiber's attention that long will be tricky, Ryuko,"** the plan was passable, if a little dangerous. It could certainly work. But one wrong move, if Ryuko couldn't avoid an attack, would be disastrous. For the both of them. There was no way Satsuki Kiryuin would accept a strategy this -"

"Is that your plan, Ryuko?"

A furrowed brow, unrelenting in its familiarity, was Satsuki's response. But her attention was focused upon Ichigo. Seeking his reaction. Her sister's strategy was straightforward. But feasible, nevertheless. Against the Original Life Fiber, complex strategies and complicated plans would falter. In the interest of time, it was pragmatic and necessary to keep everything simple, allowing one to easily modify their strategy.

And from Ichigo's reaction, his train of thought was similar to her own.

"If you got a better plan, I'm all ears," Ryuko grumbled, more irritated at doing *nothing* than Satsuki criticizing her half-assed plan.

"No. It's acceptable. And considering its source, almost brilliant."

"Hey!"

Satsuki accepted the annoyance without yielding the conversation, "Given our limited resources, I doubt I could devise anything better."

"I'm not stupid," Ryuko tried ignored the insult. She could deal with Satsuki's annoying habit after kicking that ball of yarn's glowing ass, "I actually *studied* at your crappy school. It would have sucked getting expelled before beating answers out of ya!"

"Why did you choose me, Ryuko?"

The sharp, almost surgically precise, question interrupted her sister, causing Ryuko's final words to fade into a whisper. When she didn't receive an answer, Satsuki added, "Junketsu's power *is* formidable. However, Mugetsu and Ichigo are equally powerful. So, answer my question. Why did you choose me to land the finishing blow on our mother's corpse?"

"Do I have to explain everything?"

Her tone hardened into subtle mockery at the look on Satsuki's face. That smug arrogance. But it was Mugetsu's laughter, with Ichigo doing his best not to look in her direction, which caused the tension to abruptly deflate, "Because I remember that cocky look on your face! The one where you have some super-secret plan!"

"Your confidence is inspiring, Ryuko," Satsuki restrained herself to a sly, almost amused, smirk at her sister's enthusiasm, "I assume Senketsu's already commented upon the weaknesses of your plan?"

" ***Of course. It's an exceedingly dangerous strategy,***" for a moment, Senketsu forgot Satsuki could not hear his voice, "***But we don't have much of a choice, do we, Ryuko? The longer we waste time talking, the more time the Original Life Fiber has to recover its power. And while I find our plan incredibly dangerous, I'll help you every step of the way. We're in this together!***"

"Heh... now you're speaking my language, Senketsu!"

Ryuko leapt into the air. The pillar cracked underneath her heels, splinters expanding outwards in spider web patterns. This was perfect! She could fight that damn pile of scrap clothing without holding back! No more worrying about anyone getting caught in the crossfire! Spinning midair, grinning wildly as crimson light shone from her dual-colored hair, she shouted at the top of her lungs, "Let's do this! Senketsu Shippu!"

Satsuki watched with cold, focused eyes as the crimson pulsing from Senketsu disappeared towards the horizon. A moment passed in absolute silence, the only sound coming from the wind upon the bone-white dunes. As the seconds dragged onwards and the last traces of her sister's presence vanished, she frowned, consternation visible upon her brow, before finally speaking.

"I heard about the Grand Couturier."

"It's not important."

"Is it not?"

An eyebrow quirked at Ichigo's sharp denial. As much as she wished otherwise, she couldn't blame his reluctance to discuss the matter. Whatever happened between her Isshin Kurosaki and her mother was open to interpretation. But considering Nui Harime's vehement disdain towards lying - which resulted in more than one of Ragyo Kiryuin's middle managers falling victim to her wild emotions - the evidence was nearly overwhelming, "Do you remember what you said to me after saving Junketsu?"

Her heel *clacked* as she faced Ichigo, steel-blue eyes boring into brown, "You claimed not to understand my problems. Nevertheless, you offered assistance. Ensuring that I did not need to shoulder the burden of my mother's actions alone. So, please. Allow me to offer you the same proposition."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. But this is... different... than what Ragyo did to you."

"Perhaps," she conceded as her expression tightened, "Nothing can match her depravity. But I *am* here, Ichigo. And so is Ryuko. If you wish to talk about it."

"I know you're worried, Satsuki. And Ryuko... before leaving Honnou City, I know she wanted to say something."



Ichigo couldn't look Satsuki in the eye. But he wasn't upset. Despite everything, he appreciated her efforts to help. And maybe, if only for a moment, he was being selfish. But no matter how hard he tried, knowing Nui Harime was his half-sister was shocking. Weeks ago - *hours ago* - if anyone claimed his old man cheated on his mom, he would have kicked in their teeth. Then ask Orihime to heal their wounds before doing it again. The old goat was a moron. But nobody could question how much he loved - and missed - their mom.

"But there's only one person with answers."

He stared at the sword in his left hand, identical in all aspects to the blade in Satsuki's possession, "There's a lot of things he hasn't explained. Not just about Ragyo, but about everything that happened between them. There's a lot I want to ask him. Maybe more than he knows. But that will have to wait until after we stop the Original Life Fiber."

"... I trust you, Ichigo."

When he offered her Bakuzan, she accepted the weapon without hesitation. Her fingers clenched around the familiar, yet different, hilt, Junketsu crinkling as the sapphire hue reverted to golden-yellow. Her brow furrowed, not from consternation, but worry, when Ichigo stepped forward, prepared to help Ryuko before anything happened. And for a moment, the proper words remained elusive. Ichigo's explanation was valid. Yet she could not accept it.

It wasn't *right* .

"My mother was a manipulative, vindictive and arrogant woman."

A hint of her former position as Student Council President of Honnouji Academy gave the otherwise concerned statement a sense of passion and unyielding emphasis. Which doubled when Ichigo turned around, their gazes meeting, "I've known Isshin Kurosaki for only a few weeks, but that man would never betray your mother. His loyalty is unquestionable. If your father denied Ragyo Kiryuin's

advances, I do not doubt she took measures ensuring her efforts were not wasted. She had years to gain his trust. She would not allow anyone - not even Isshin Kurosaki - stand in her way."

"You're right."

"Now is not the time to declare oneself right or wrong," a deep breath escaped her lips as Junketsu's power filled every fiber of her being. The Kamui's unrestrained eagerness was not dissimilar to a child seeking approval. But she was neither Junketsu's parent nor superior. Merely a partner, equal in every way, "We have a mission to complete. I'm assuming Mugetsu is competent enough to act as a distraction?"

**" Competent!? A distraction!? How dare -"**

"We'll be fine," Ichigo ignored Mugetsu's sputtering indignation, "What about you?"

"You needn't worry about me, Ichigo. Junketsu might not possess Mugetsu's speed or Senketsu's raw power. But I wouldn't trade her for anything," faint traces of a smile pulled upon Satsuki's mouth before vanishing just as quickly, "Now go! Ryuko cannot fight the Original Life Fiber by herself!"

**"... she has a point, Ichigo. Senketsu's not nearly powerful enough to take down something that monstrous. But since when was Junketsu better than me?"**

"You can argue with Junketsu later," he stepped off the pillar, falling several inches before leaping forward, "Because there's no time to waste! Mugetsu Gufū!"

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The Original Life Fiber frowned at the presence. A trilling, almost majestic, spiritual pressure that strummed her Life Fibers. Plucking at the depths of her soul. Turning what minimal enjoyment obtained from torturing the arrancar into disdain. With noticeable annoyance, her eyes swiveled rightwards while the creature in her grasp, an insect believing itself capable of standing in her presence, continued struggling. Its desperate attempts to escape requiring more than a fraction of her attention.

**" Hmm?"**

Her fingers tightened around Tier Harribel's mouth. All but tearing apart the arrancar's lackluster hierro as she focused upon Ryuko Matoi. The frown adorning her features deepened at the teenager's thoughts and intentions. Which quickly twisted into a disappointed glower upon *understanding* every aspect of the foolhardy girl's primitive strategy. Its thousands of twists and turns. Mistakes and unintentional advantages.

And everything that occurred after her embarrassing arrival to this spiritual realm.

**" How pathetic."**

She contemplated ignoring Ryuko Matoi. At least for the moment. That abominable shinigami sending reinforcements was anticipated. Nay, predicted. But she would not underestimate Sosuke Aizen's intelligence. Not again. *Never* again. Still, this was interesting. She expected him to choose Isshin Kurosaki as their vanguard. But to send Ryuko Matoi, Ichigo Kurosaki and Satsuki Kiryuin? It was absurd. And yet, she was suspicious. Not because of their power. But from the shinigami's confidence in their abilities.

Eliciting a pained gasp from the arrancar was her vice-like grip tightened.

Did that reprehensible shinigami - that contemptible, blasphemous man - believe they possessed an infinitesimal chance of surviving

her wrath?

Her spiritual pressure blanketed Las Noches at the implausible - no, impossible - notion. The atmosphere warped underneath her divine presence, threatening to suffocate the arrancar's existence at Sosuke Aizen's *true* objective.

**" Damn him!"**

She was enraged. Infuriated beyond any concept created by humanity. Hatred dripped from every word passing through her clenched teeth. Shinra Koketsu twisted furiously around her marionette's corpse. Plucking the information from Ryuko Matoi's unaware threading, she watched Sosuke Aizen speak about forcing Absolute Domination's medium to acquiesce to awaken. If he was successful. If that incomplete marionette utilized Absolute Domination while she was trapped in this forsaken realm? Every fiber of her being trembled at the growing possibility of her prophet's inability - no, absolute failure - to kill Sosuke Aizen and *pathetic* infatuation for Isshin Kurosaki jeopardizing the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet.

A gurgling choke returned the Original Life Fiber to the matter at hand.

Turning her gaze onto the dark skinned Espada, she focused on the minuscule fraction of her essence circulating through the being's soul, **"As that shinigami's subordinate, you know a method of returning to the World of the Living, don't you?"**

The arrancar didn't answer. Or rather, the pressure around her mouth, suffocating her lungs of oxygen and forcing her mouth shut, prevented her from speaking. Staring at the defiance in the aqua eyes peering over her fingers, aware but unbothered by the normally bone-breaking punches landing against her stomach, she scoffed, more to herself than annoyance. The creature's power was appreciable. Perhaps enough to destroy the Grand Couturier if she had time to weave Marionette Threads into what function as her

mind. And watching the insect tear herself apart taking down that failed marionette, limbs breaking and flesh tearing, would have been amusing.

At least until the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet reached fruition.

But with a casual, almost admonishing, backhand, she dispersed the golden-yellow energy coalescing around the insect's weapon.

**" No matter..."**

Her fingers slipped away from the arrancar, allowing the insignificant creature to pull herself from the brink of unconsciousness with each gasping, pathetic breath.

**"... I didn't expect you to answer."**

Blood dribbled from the arrancar's mouth when she thrust the Needle Blade between her ribs. Cracking, and then shattering, the structure behind them. Its paltry construction unable to withstand her strength. Tapping her fingers around the weapon's handle, she watched the creature gasp for breath with something akin to satisfaction. The question was redundant. She didn't need an answer from the insect. Her Life Fibers remembered the shinigami's technique. All she needed was time to replicate the spiritual pathway. To return to Honnouji Academy before Sosuke Aizen awakened Absolute Domination's medium.

And finally destroy those standing against Life Fibers.

But first...

With her fingers caressing the Needle Blade, she haphazardly tore the weapon from the arrancar, carving a bloody gash across Tier Harribel's stomach. She was careful not to allow any of the liquid spurting from the arrancar land upon Shinra Koketsu. Moving carefully - and just enough - to avoid the crimson spray. Turning with a sharp, resounding *clack* as the insect collapsed to the ground, she

listened to the obscene curses on the breeze. Her ears perked at the power rushing from Senketsu's engines. Taut, pert lips twisted into a snarl at the delusions of grandeur filtering through Ryuko Matoi's mind.

And yet, she waited. Patiently and stoically. Blood dripping from the Needle Blade resting in her fingers. As the impertinent hybrid grew closer.

Disturbing bands of shifting colors narrowed as the Scissor Blades - reunited after the Grand Couturier's treachery - carved crimson paths towards her neck.

**" It's pointless."**

A resounding *clang* of metal screeched against her ears when she thrust the Needle Blade between the Scissor Blades.

"God damn it!"

The curse came out a little forced. Almost fake. But Ryuko knew - from the Original Life Fiber's arrogant snarl - that the creature believed she was pissed. That she honestly expected Senketsu's awesome, overwhelming strength to slice through Shinra Koketsu without *some* effort. For a second, she believed the ball of yarn wearing Ragyo Kiryuin's body like a cheap suit realized it was an act. That maybe she saw the future or something. Making everything they were doing pointless.

But then the Needle Blade *moved* . Pushing towards the Original Life Fiber less than an inch, maybe nothing more than a trick of the eye.

And then the trembling weapon shifted another inch.

**" What do you hope to accomplish!?"**

Her anger was palpable at Ryuko Matoi's arrogance. Even if it did not speak - no, refused to speak in her presence, perhaps fearful of

her divinity - she could sense the Kamui's false optimism. She would not tolerate blasphemy from lowly, rebellious threading! With an animalistic, almost barbaric, snarl, she pushed back. Wiping the smugness from the impertinent hybrid's face when the Scissor Blades stopped inches from her marionette's neck. Overwhelming and reversing their momentary victory in the blink of an eye.

"I thought we would kick your ass!"

Sweat dripped between Ryuko's eyes as Senketsu transformed from Shippu to Senkou. Shifting configuration in a flash of crimson light. And immediately giving her enough power to force the Needle Blade - and her Scissor Blades - towards the Original Life Fiber's throat, "Because thanks to Nui Harime, Senketsu has a shot of taking you down!"

**" Is that what you told Ichigo Kurosaki? Satsuki Kiryuin?"**

Her attention swiveled to the Scissor Blade in Ryuko Matoi's right hand. The razor-sharp, hardened Life Fibers trembling inches from her neck. And then towards the familiar weapon in the petulance hybrid's other hand.

**" Or your delusions?"**

A hint of hatred perforated the question. She already knew the answer. She knew what Ryuko Matoi would say. How she would phrase the response. And the emotions passing through her Life Fibers during each moment. Even the Kamui's reaction - its blunt honesty towards Shinra Koketsu and caution - was known! Despite the youth's best efforts, their Life Fibers were akin to an open book! Everything they know - will know - cannot be concealed from her!

Metal *screeched* when she thrust the Needle Blade downwards, releasing a shockwave of kaleidoscopic spiritual pressure that flattened the desert underneath them. With an exaggerated flourish, she repulsed Ryuko Matoi's counterattack. Her arm blurred, the only traces of movement the rustling of Shinra Koketsu's sleeve, as

dozens of strikes were blocked. And then dozens turned into hundreds.

Until reality itself crackled from their clashing presences.

**" Did you presume your Kamui could stand against me!?"**

A twist of her wrist diverted the Needle Blade mid-swing. The abrupt shift in the weapon's angle of approach, the changed curvature of the razor-sharp edge when the Scissor Blade in Ryuko Matoi's left hand swung towards her shoulder, forced the treacherous hybrid's guard open. Sending her staggering backwards, throw off balance by the subsequent explosion of spiritual energy. And in the next *fraction* of a second, she stabbed the Needle Blade through the teenager's stomach. And then her chest and throat. Again. And Again.

**" Against ALL Life Fibers!?"**

And again.

**" I am the beginning and end of all things! For all your strength, you're nothing more than an insect!"**

A final thrust sent Ryuko Matoi careening across the desert. Smoke drifted from the hybrid's decimated body. Burns covered every exposed inch of flesh. Yet it wasn't enough. Despite regaining some of her strength, the consequences of the Grand Couturier's treacherous refitting of Shinra Koketsu remained. She meant - no, *desired* - killing Ryuko Matoi using Shinra Koketsu. Ending this farce of a battle before Ichigo Kurosaki's arrival. Yet at the moment of impact, when the teenager's guard was lowered, her Life Fibers faltered. The strain disrupted her concentration. Turning an attack meant to disintegrate every fiber of Ryuko Matoi's being into something merely powerful.

And that wasn't good enough.

"Damn it! She's still tough as hell! I'll give her that!"



Through one half-opened eye, Ryuko watched the Original Life Fiber shrink into a pinpoint on the horizon. Damn it! What the hell happened? Weakened or not, the thing was stronger than anything they'd fought. Even the undead bastard couldn't hold a candle to the monster wearing her mom's corpse like a cheap, second-hand suit. As the wind whipped through her hair, she pushed aside the mild discomfort from the Needle Blade stabbing her body. Wincing as the damage regenerated, "But it's nothing we can't handle!"

**" Be careful, Ryuko. Nui Harime may have weakened its threading, but the Original Life Fiber is still quite formidable,"** Senketsu couldn't suppress the tremble rippling throughout his threading. The sense of existential dread radiating from the Original Life Fiber was almost instinctual, **"And it's rather angry with us."**

"Heh... I know."

With an obnoxious *clack*, she slammed her heels against the air, creating twin trails of smoke before flipping into a kneeling crouch. As the rushing wind died, and the deafening silence filling Las Noches rang in her ears, she spat a glob of blood over her shoulder. It *sucked* getting stabbed in the chest! She would never get used to the sensation of her Life Fibers sewing themselves back together. It wasn't painful. Just freaky. And disturbing.

"I *really* want to piss this thing off, Senketsu," she tossed the Scissor Blades until their curved handles rested in the palms of her hands, "Because the angrier we make it, the more likely it won't see what's coming!"

**" That's dangerous!"**

For the first time in weeks, Senketsu *vehemently* disagreed with Ryuko. That was not to say he didn't understand the plan. On the contrary, it was sound logic. And despite his concerns about being a distraction alongside Ichigo and Mugetsu, stopping the Original Life Fiber was important. More important than anything. He accepted that. But Ryuko was taking things too far! She might not have

sensed it, but Nui Harime's sabotage saved their lives. If the Grand Couturier hadn't adjusted Shinra Koketsu's threading, that last attack would have killed them.

**" *Ichigo and Mugetsu are still too far away! If the Original Life Fiber decides to -*"**

"I know, Senketsu."

Ryuko smudged the blood leaking from the corner of her mouth onto Senketsu. He was right. Whether she liked it or not, Senketsu *always* knew the right thing to say. But did he think she enjoyed throwing herself at the Original Life Fiber? Hell no! The thing could read their Life Fibers! It said so itself! It probably knew her plan from the moment they arrived! Which meant pissing the damn thing off... making sure it was so freaking upset and annoyed that it wanted nothing more than to kick her ass... was the only way to get around something able to predict the damn future!

"But this thing can read our thoughts."

The crimson undertone in her feathery hair softened as she glared at the kaleidoscopic light on the horizon, "So being reckless and stupid is the only -"

With a disconcerting *lurch*, her head snapped sideways. The bones in her neck almost breaking when the Original Life Fiber teleported thousands of feet in the blink of eye. Half-formed thoughts flickered across the edges of her consciousness at the manicured fingers clasp her face. Spittle trailed from her lips when the talon-like fingernails pierced her skin, drawing blood as the Original Life Fiber flickered into view.

**" *Lumière Divine.*"**

Ryuko *screamed* when the multicolored explosion detonated point-blank against her face. She *heard* the Original Life Fiber's arrogant satisfaction as the energy threatened to overwhelm her and

Senketsu. The pain was excruciating. Almost unbearable. Far worse than her bitch of a mom's cheap shot back at Honnouji Academy. And from the power pushing against her body, the piece of scrap clothing wanted to end things with one final, cheap-as-hell, shot! And that pissed her off!

If the Original Life Fiber thought she couldn't stand a little 'tough love,' she was more than happy to prove it wrong!

"Like hell I'm gonna..."

She threw her shoulders forward, pushing back against the Original Life Fiber's attack. A wince - then curse - tore from her throat when she smashed through one of the weird buildings sticking out of the desert. But that was nothing more than a tickle! She didn't feel a goddamn thing! With an enraged snarl, her heels *clacked* against the air. Her knees flexed when she stopped the technique in its tracks, Senketsu glowing with a vibrant, crimson light.

"... let this stupid attack..."

Senketsu's voice faded into the background as she thrust the Scissor Blades into the chaotic mess. Throwing caution to the wind by stabbing directly into the middle of the Original Life Fiber's attack. Her vision swam beneath the blinding light as the only sound reaching her ears was the constant, deafening roar. Shit! This was hard! But she wasn't going to die without putting up a fight! Roaring over the cacophony as energy *burst* from Senketsu, she pushed against the turbulent, almost physical, light. The Scissor Blades vanished into the multicolored energy as the attack bent, inch by freaking inch, away from her body.

"... take me down!"

With one final curse, she sliced through the technique. And then several more times for good measure. Until nothing remained but shards of rainbow light drifting around them like rain.

**" Ryuko!"**

The corner of her mouth twitched long before Senketsu shouted in her ears, "Yeah! I know!"

She barely finished speaking before the creature wearing her mom like a cheap, secondhand dress attempted to grab Senketsu. The initial surprise from watching the Original Life Fiber teleport across Las Noches quickly shifted into an annoyed snarl at the energy gathering above the manicured fingers inches from her throat. It was more than enough power to destroy Senketsu.

And then, at the last possible moment, with her heart beating a mile a minute, she leaned backwards.

"You can predict the future, right?"

Ryuko didn't blink beneath the Original Life Fiber's withering glare. Damn it! Just looking into the creature's pissed expression was nerve-wracking! But why would something capable of seeing into the future get pissed about a stupid question? Unless... there were limits to its powers! Bolstered by that knowledge, and with Senketsu helping every step of the way, she twisted her wrists. At this range, there was no way the creature could dodge! Even with predicting the future! That thought - that flicker of confidence - raised her spirits as the Scissor Blade in her right hand extended into Decapitation Mode. Immediately getting the Original Life Fiber's attention.

Until the Scissor Blade in her left hand did the same thing.

"Well, try predicting this!"

An afterimage lagged behind their movements when she drove both knees into the Original Life Fiber, giving them more than enough breathing room, "Because I just freaking made it up!"

Time slowed to a crawl when she flipped the Scissor Blades until both edges were facing Shinra Koketsu. Her arms trembled not from

exhaustion but sheer determination to finally kick Ragyo Kiryuin's ass. The crimson undertone in her hair, one of the only signs of what her mom did, shimmered brightly as power flowed through Senketsu. Causing him to tighten and push *more* spiritual energy into the Scissor Blades. Her smirk turned sinister, a single tooth falling over the edge of her lips when the swords were covered in crackling, buzzing torrents of energy. And at the last possible moment, when the ugly ball of yarn finally realized what she had planned, she *swung* using every scrap of power in her body.

"SENJIN GENKAI!"

She immediately grimaced underneath the stronger-than-expected backlash of energy splashing against the Original Life Fiber. And all she could see, all she could sense, was Senketsu's power. Damn it! It felt like she was standing in Honnouji Academy's sauna. Or Mako's bathroom when Satsuki made them super rich.

But thinking about Mako only made her push *harder* .

With the intense heat burning her skin, and causing Senketsu to grumble, she finished swinging the Scissor Blades. Crossing them over each other while the massive crimson explosion enveloped the creature wearing Ragyo Kiryuin like a cheap suit. She stared into the cross-shaped eruption of Senketsu's power rippling across Las Noches, her grin widening when the energy blasted through the remains of Aizen's former base. Electrifying the atmosphere. Making her fingers tingle right before she felt Senketsu's threading strain from using something so damn powerful.

But feeling a little tired was worth it if...

"... **it did some damage?**"

Ryuko gasped alongside Senketsu when the Original Life Fiber emerged from Senjin Genkai. Her most powerful attack, something designed with both Scissor Blades in mind, shattered with a single wave of her mom's hand. Leaving the monster unharmed as the

spiritual energy dispersed into nothingness. Or, nearly unharmed. Because the only damage she could spot on Shinra Koketsu, the sole piece of evidence suggesting her efforts amounted to *something*, was a small-cross-shaped tear across the ultimate Kamui. A blemish that was regenerating before her eyes.

"What the -"

The air was dragged from her lungs when cold fingers latched around her throat, **"Don't be ridiculous."**

Contempt dripped at the asinine question spewing from Ryuko Matoi's lips. Then again, witnessing one's most powerful technique, forged from their Life Fibers and created under the encompassing guise of desperation, shattered couldn't be ignored. She could already see the emotions synchronizing between Kamui and hybrid. The concern meeting worry, twisting into suppressed frustration, was exhilarating. If only the teenager realized the hopelessness of their situation, **"Before you arrived... before you spewed incessant drivel... before you *imagined* the technique... I knew you would decide upon Senjin Genkai as a desperate, pathetic *coup de grâce* ."**

She tightened her hold upon Ryuko, **"All I needed to do was play along. And then, at your moment of triumph, negate the damage through synchronization. It was that simple."**

"D-Damn it..."

Ryuko coughed when the pressure around her neck worsened, "You were fucking with us this whole time!?"

**" On the contrary, my disdain towards your actions..."**

Accompanied by the sound of crinkling fabric, the Original Life Fiber smashed her fist into Ryuko Matoi's stomach. The taut muscles caved beneath her strength. Spittle flew from the obnoxious teenager's mouth. A snarling frown twisted her features when she

punched the youth once more, breaking several ribs and inducing a painful gasp, "... **wasn't acting!**"

The third, and subsequent, strikes returned the damage sustained by her prophet. Each punch expression what humanity, in their limited wisdom and intelligence, defined as hatred. But was she, a greater and more divine existence, knew as *retribution*, "**You raised your hands against me! Your Kamui had the audacity to believe itself my equal! And you worked alongside those seeking my destruction!**"

She wasn't shouting. No, allowing herself to lose control would only grant Ryuko Matoi a modicum of satisfaction. As the teenager's blood dripped from her fingers, flowing from the smooth, perfect skin like water, she relented. Allowing the hybrid to catch her breath. But, as expected, the anger in Ryuko's determined eyes was palpable. And for that, she once more smashed her fist against the teenager's cheek.

With the sickening *cracking* of bones shattering beneath her knuckles, she ended the hybrid's insult before she opened her mouth.

**" But don't get me wrong."**

She traced the contours of Ryuko Matoi's chin, feeling each and every Life Fiber along the way, "**Although it won't save you, I am impressed by your ingenuity."**

Ryuko spat the blood filling her mouth onto Shinra Koketsu, "The hell are you talking about?"

**" It took two seconds for you to imagine Senjin Genkai. One second for your Kamui to incorporate the information. And another three seconds to properly synchronize your Life Fibers. Against any other being, it likely would have succeeded."**

It was pathetic, almost lamentable, that Ryuko Matoi believed her attention would lapse even for a moment. That answering such a trifling question would split her attention. As a matter of fact, Ryuko already had a working strategy. An escape plan that, against anyone other than herself, had a significant chance of success. So, without warning, she shattered every bone in the teenager's arm with a disturbing, yet satisfying, *crack* .

Intercepting the Scissor Blade before the notion crossed the annoyingly resilient hybrid's mind.

**" But I already know everything you will say or do! Your existence began with me! And through these hand, I shall unravel it one Life Fiber at a time!"**

"Bullshit!"

Ryuko *spat* at the Original Life Fiber's cocky... bitchy... smirk. There was no doubt about it. The monster wearing her mom's ragged corpse was enjoying watching her body pull itself together one Life Fiber at a time, "You keep yapping about predicting the future! But you're bluffing! If that was true, you would have already kicked Senketsu and me halfway across this stupid place before we knew what happened!"

**" Are you trying to sew doubt into my mind?"**

The strangled gasp from Ryuko Matoi was cathartic. Almost poetic given her treachery against Life Fibers, **"Even if that was true, what can you hope to accomplish? Do you plan on waiting until the perfect moment to lash out with the Scissor Blades? Or, perhaps you're thinking of shifting your Kamui's gestalt in some desperate hope of escaping. Or maybe, despite knowing everything you do, everything you try, will amount to nothing, you're actually a distraction..."**

A smirk pulled on her lips as she slowly, almost deliberately so, glanced over her shoulder, **"... isn't that right, Ichigo Kurosaki?"**



Even without using precognition, it was almost pathetically easy sensing the youth's approach. He hadn't made any effort concealing his presence. And despite standing a few feet away from Shinra Koketsu, Tournesol gripped overhead with both hands, spiritual energy thrumming along the blade until it *sung*, she knew how Ichigo Kurosaki would act. How he intended to swing his weapon. That he was using the knowledge gleaned from the Grand Couturier and his own observations, astute they may be, to strike while she was preoccupied with Ryuko Matoi's insolence.

"GETSUGA TENSHOU!"

She stopped Tournesol with a backhanded swing.

Her fingers plucked against the Life Fibers composing the Needle Blade as she intercepted Ichigo's attack. Tightening subtly, imperceptibly, as the hardened Life Fiber weapon froze inches above her neck. The edges of their respective weapons fought for dominance. A battle she quickly - and effortlessly - won. Emerging victorious before the youth realized he had already lost. Yet she was frustrated. *Infuriated*. And that divine desire for retribution made itself known when she shattered the energy surrounding Tournesol. With nothing more than a flick of her wrist, she dismantled the teenager's technique one threading at a time.

Once more demonstrating *her* superiority.

**" You *really* shouldn't have given Bakuzan to Satsuki Kiryuin."**

The hybrid's grip upon Tournesol tightened at the truth. Just as she knew it would. Precognition or not, even without knowing Satsuki Kiryuin's ulterior motives, only a naïve inferior being wouldn't realize the teenager's plans, **"That was a fatal mistake."**

With a sharp, ear-wrenching *clang* of metal upon metal, she swung the Needle Blade clockwise in a half-arc. Forcing Tournesol outwards. Breaking through Ichigo Kurosaki's defenses alongside an outpouring of Shinra Koketsu's spiritual pressure. And, just as

expected, he leaned backwards at the first opportunity. When her index finger momentarily slipped against the Needle Blade. A minor inconvenience. Something that would allow him, under normal circumstances and against an equal foe, to turn things to his advantage. A strategy implemented when Ichigo's shoulders stiffened. When his gaze hardened, energy thrumming through his Life Fibers.

But against her, anything he, or Ryuko Matoi, attempted, amounted to naught.

**" Unfortunately..."**

In a single, fractured moment, as Ichigo Kurosaki stepped forward, intent on breaking her guard, she callously discarded Ryuko Matoi. Her fingers twisted against the Kamui's smooth surface before an explosion of power trickled from Shinra Koketsu, sending the impudent teenager crashing to the ground. During that same fraction of time, when the traitor's offspring began responding to her actions, she swung the Needle Blade against Tournesol.

**"... that STILL wouldn't have been enough!"**

She witnessed the frustration etched upon the teenager's expression. The trembling of his muscles when the Needle Blade slid along Tournesol before halting against the foreign blade's guard, the relatively minor impact sending waves of spiritual pressure echoing across Las Noches, was pathetic. And then she pushed. Using more than enough power - and her intimate knowledge of Ichigo's planned counter - to overwhelm his efforts. Turning his counterattack into a desperate defense as his own sword's razor-sharp edge inches towards his face. And then, with a casual twist of her fingers, she completely shattered his guard.

Only for her following strike to sever, not his head as expected, but a few strands of orange hair when he ducked. Granting him the opportunity, with her arm extended and body posed overhead, to return the favor.

When the Needle Blade reached its apogee above Ichigo Kurosaki's shoulders, she flipped the multicolored blade into a reverse hold. Another being would react to the weapon thrusting towards their heart. They would try to avoid such an attack. But her smirk, already manic, widened as she moved just enough for Tournesol to miss Shinra Koketsu, **"But you already knew that, didn't you?"**

Blood and viscera mixed within glowing sapphire as the Needle Blade carved a path of destruction across Ichigo Kurosaki's upper body. With a flick, she removed the blood from the Needle Blade, her attention already focused on the other problem while his body crashed to the ground.

**" As for you..."**

She halted the Scissor Blades by gripping Ryuko Matoi's right wrist once the teenager came within arm's length and *pulling* sideways, forcing both weapons away from her body. The subsequent flicker of multicolored energy and subtle fluttering from Shinra Koketsu when she parried the next attack wasn't required. Not to prevent Ryuko from escaping nor to have the hybrid realize nothing she did amounted to anything. But to infuriate the girl. With every interaction between their weapons, she observed Ryuko's expression. She *peered* into the future. Witnessing the girl's infinite reactions in the time required for her nervous heart to beat a single time.

If she shifted to the right, Ryuko would attempt another Senjin Genkai.

Retreating across Las Noches would force Ryuko to prepare Niban Genkai with both Scissor Blades. And, of course, drawing Ichigo back into the fray.

If *she* struck first, Ryuko would discard one of the Scissor Blades to grab the Needle Blade. Giving her enough purchase to slam a knee into Shinra Koketsu. Which she would avoid by shifting her center of balance.

Countless options.

It was almost too easy.

When the teenager pivoted with a sharp *clack*, the Scissor Blade in her left hand arcing downwards, aiming at the junction of her neck and shoulders, she thrust the Needle Blade through the hole near the weapon's edge. Flexing her wrist, she then pulled the shocked hybrid forward until their faces nearly touched. The *fear* radiating through Ryuko's Life Fibers beneath her pompous, arrogant bluster exhilarating.

**"... you shouldn't make me repeat myself."**

With a sickening *squelch*, the Needle Blade perforated Ryuko's stomach. A gasp - then curse - forced its way through her lips at the sensation. At the feeling of metal digging its way into her body. But it was the Original Life Fiber's grin that raised warning bells. She *knew* that smirk. It was Ragyo Kiryuin's. Right down to the evil glint in their eyes. But that didn't help when the ball of yarn suddenly sliced through half of her body before she could grab the damn weapon.

And then punched her nose.

*Hard .*

Several times.

"Damn it..."

Ichigo forced himself onto one knee, and then onto stumbling feet, when Ryuko crashed head-first into the sand. He panted, heavily and deeply, while sweat dripped down his face. As flesh and Life Fibers stitched together until nothing remained of the Original Life Fiber's attack but painful memories, "I knew it wouldn't be easy. But... damn it! How the hell are we supposed to keep it busy when it's messing with us?"

**" *This is getting dangerous, Ichigo.*"**

Mugetsu disliked the sensation of the Needle Blade carving through her threading. While regenerating the damage from a single hardened Life Fiber weapon wasn't difficult, it wasn't something she preferred experiencing. Especially since Ryuko and Senketsu, not Ichigo, should function as distraction. Since it was *their* plan to rush the Original Life Fiber like a pair of idiots, ***"It's toying with us. And Senketsu. How can we stop something when it already knows what we're going to do?"***

"I don't know."

He grimaced at the question, "But giving up? We don't have that option, Mugetsu. I know you don't like it, but if we don't stop the Original Life Fiber, there's no way Aizen or Kisuke would stand a chance. You feel it, right? It's getting stronger. Fixing whatever Nui did to Shinra Koketsu. If we don't take this thing down, Yuzu, Karin and everyone else will die!"

"Like hell we're going to lose!"

A trembling fist smashed into Las Noches as Ryuko *seethed* at the Original Life Fiber. She didn't need to hear Mugetsu to know things were bad! That was obvious! Unless they figured out a way around the stupid ball of yarn's story-breaking power, they wouldn't last long enough for Satsuki's plan to work. Whatever it was! And the monster *knew* they were stalling for time! Her eyes narrowing when the Original Life Fiber didn't immediately beat them senseless, she cautiously yanked the Scissor Blades out of the sand, never taking her attention away from the rainbow bitch in the sky.

"Shit! What's it waiting for? A freaking invitation?"

"It's Satsuki."

The answer didn't feel right. But even as he stood at Ryuko's side, Ichigo couldn't escape the notion something was strange. It was a

theory. But with everything riding on their shoulders and the Original Life Fiber's sudden hesitation, it was the only explanation that made sense, "The Original Life Fiber can read our thoughts. It can predict the future. But Satsuki didn't tell us what she planned to do. She didn't say anything. We're flying blind. Hoping she has something up her sleeves to beat this thing. And since we don't know anything..."

Senketsu's eyes widened, **"... the Original Life Fiber's also clueless!"**

"So, the bitch is worried, huh?"

"No wonder she's pissed," Ryuko grinned, "She's probably going crazy trying to figure out what Satsuki's planning."

**" Be careful, Ryuko,"** Senketsu *knew* that confident smirk. Months spent being worn, dozens of comfortable hand-washings and ironings afforded him a measure of knowledge matched only by Ichigo's relationship with Mugetsu, ***"Rushing into battle without thinking is highly dangerous. Besides, the longer we wait down here, the more likely she'll come to us. We ARE a distraction, after all."***

"Don't remind me."

She would never admit it. And painfully kick anyone's ass who claimed otherwise. But in hindsight, throwing herself at the Original Life Fiber as a distraction was a stupid plan, "But we've been through worse, Senketsu. So, we ain't giving up! Not until we take down this thing!"

**" Is that so?"**

It was the Grand Couturier's unwarranted refitting of Shinra Koketsu that prevented Tournesol and the Scissor Blade from shattering. Despite squeezing the hardened Life Fiber blades between her fingers, they were unyielding. But she didn't announce that frustration. She didn't give Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi a single

trace of hope, **"You still believe Satsuki Kiryuin capable of defeating me?"**

She observed Ichigo responding to her sudden appearance by kicking Shinra Koketsu. Then, when the youth *actually* attacked, she raised her forearm, blocking the feeble attack while the spiritual energy circulating through his Life Fibers and Kamui exploded harmlessly across Las Noches.

At the same time Ichigo used her hold upon Tournesol as a fulcrum, her attention shifted towards Ryuko. Before the former raised his foot, sapphire energy thrumming through his Life Fibers, she observed her prophet's daughter taking advantage of the distraction. Both the successful strike on Shinra Koketsu and the countered failure. And countless other alternatives that would never come to pass.

Her eyes tracked the hardened Life Fiber weapon as Ryuko Matoi stepped backwards with the sharp *clack* of one heel against air.

She twisted, gently and purposely, counterclockwise around Ichigo's surprise attack. A flicker of motion accentuated her avoidance of the Scissor Blades when Ryuko recovered from her ignominious failure. She pivoted sharply, tracking the paths - present and future - of both hybrid and Kamui, before blocking their weapons with the Needle Blade. A single swing downwards, angled away from Shinra Koketsu, instantly shattered their collective guard.

**" It is because of ME that humanity exists!"**

Her body danced above the bone-white dunes.

Every movement... every subtle motion... was guided by the changing future. Nothing was purposeless. And they followed. Throwing everything at Shinra Koketsu. At herself. Knowing their world's existence hung in the balance. As she knew they would. And she met their challenges without faltering. With precision surpassing instinct, she countered their increasingly desperate attacks.

In a flash of multicolored light, another Needle Blade spun from Shinra Koketsu into her waiting fingers.

The once amiable expression adorning her features furrowed when Ichigo and Ryuko struck from opposite directions. Her eyes narrowed at the hardened Life Fiber weapons fervently inching towards Shinra Koketsu, spiritual energy flowing upon their razor-sharp edges, **"And you believe - truly believe - Satsuki Kiryuin, an arrogant, pathetic human, can stand against ME!?"**

Shinra Koketsu rippled alongside the metallic *clang* of hardened Life Fibers upon each other. Her fingers tightened against the slim handles of the Needle Blades as the accompanying eruption of clashing spiritual pressures illuminated Las Noches with flashes of crimson, sapphire and other colors, **"How absurd!"**

A snarl - hateful and inhuman - pulled upon her sneering lips as, with naught but a subconscious desire, she overpowered their Kamui, **"Your reliance on Satsuki Kiryuin is nothing more than a feeble, desperate dream!"**

The flutter of fabric whispered into her ears when she crossed her arms, catching Tournesol and the Scissor Blades upon her own weapons, **"You believe you're distracting me!?"**

She allowed one Needle Blade to slip from her fingers. With a purposely vague expression of frustration, she allowed the sword blocking Tournesol to falter. And, as expected, it drew Ichigo Kurosaki's attention. His well-honed instincts *forcing* him to respond. Which all but *earned* the subsequent grunt when she grabbed his throat, cracking his Kamui's armor in the process, and slammed them into Ryuko, **"Past! Present! Future! Nothing you do is concealed from me! Your efforts are forfeit! So perish with the knowledge all you accomplished amounted to nothing!"**

"Shut up!"



Ichigo knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, the Original Life Fiber was toying with them. It was angry. It hated Ryuko and his existences. And given the chance, it would like nothing more than killing them. That much he knew. And the moment Satsuki arrived, it would use Shinra Koketsu's remaining strength to slaughter her. But still, he mentally begged Mugetsu for power.

Just enough to last a few more minutes.

"You probably already know this, but I've spent the last few minutes trying to figure a way around your precognition. Nothing's perfect. I thought I could find a weakness. Something that would take you down. But you were right. The way you are now, it's impossible to catch you off guard. Not when you can predict the future."

"But we WILL kick your glowing, bitchy ass!"

The anger flowing through her veins was unlike anything she'd felt. But Ryuko's mind was clear. As the Scissor Blades shimmered beneath crimson mirages, Senketsu's power covering her dad's weapons with enough energy to take down Nui Harime, she spat at the Original Life Fiber, "Because failing isn't an option! Everyone's counting on us! Mako! Orihime! And even Ichigo's old man! They'll be pissed if we lose to a pathetic ball of yarn! So, like it or not, take your precognition and shove it up your ass!"

She crossed the Scissor Blades, purposely holding them in front of Senketsu, "It's that fucking simple!"

**" Enough of this charade!"**

Every last scrap of Shinra Koketsu's remaining power - what she recovered since the Grand Couturier's betrayal - thrummed at her fingers. The Needle Blades quivered as the ultimate Kamui flared. Rows upon rows of multicolored eyes, various shades of crimson, orange and yellow, opened. As she *forced* the betrayed fabric underneath her divine will. Enough was enough! She could sense

Junketsu. But the Kamui was perched upon a building in the distance. Waiting alongside Satsuki Kiryuin.

But if the human deigned not to interfere with Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi, she would no longer wait!

Las Noches trembled beneath the unrestricted weight of her divine presence. The impertinent hybrids stumbled, but did not kneel, as reality itself bent to her whims. Power flowed from the spiritual realm into Shinra Koketsu. The pure energy flowed through her Life Fibers into the Needle Blades. Saturating the multicolored swords as a facsimile of the ultimate Kamui's former grace illuminated the silent desert.

**" So perish knowing Satsuki Kiryuin never -"**

Blood sprayed from her chest when two swords - one midnight black and the other golden - thrust through Shinra Koketsu. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, confusion transforming into vitriolic hatred at their *familiarity* .

How!?

How was this possible!?

With her teeth stained crimson, the Original Life Fiber felt the energy she so painstakingly gathered dissipate. Severed, physically and metaphorically, by the hardened Life Fiber blades propelling her forward. Gasping, she turned trembling eyes towards the source of her shock. To Satsuki Kiryuin standing behind her.

Completely naked.

Bereft of Kamui and clothing.

**" What!?"**

For once, Satsuki was proud of Ragyo Kiryuin's tutelage as she crossed her wrists, forcing both iterations of Bakuzan into a form

reminiscent of the Scissor Blades. Not a trace of anger slipped through the stoic façade. The only expression the Original Life Fiber recognized through her mother's corpse was confidence. *Certainty* . And everything representing humanity when she tore Bakuzan in opposite directions, shimmers of blue-white energy flowing upon the blades.

"KOUKI SEN'I SŌSHITSU!"

## Never Can Say Goodbye

*I write these author's notes to get my thoughts on the writing process across. It helps, I find, to convey how I come to decisions in order to minimize confusion. Which leads to the major questions settled in this chapter and the answer to the long-running poll on my author's page - who Ichigo ends up with. Ryuko or Satsuki. The answer is below but I would like to discuss my dislike for romance displayed in a large quantity of manga and anime. Where the main character falls in love at first sight with little to no time for the relationship to develop beyond that point.*

*Sure, I can accept some writers and/or artists don't wish to spend an exorbitant amount of time developing relationships. Time which could be better spent on the actual plot of the story. I get that. And, perhaps, I accept that. But one thing I've tried to keep despite supernatural suits of Life Fibers, swords forged from one's soul and an eldritch creature bent on subsuming humanity as part of its reproductive cycle is a sense of realism when it comes to relationships. Hence, how Ichigo's relationship with Ryuko and Satsuki developed over the course of the story. Where they, over time, opened up more and more. Were more willing to expose their feelings. Etc.*

*And this realism involves, by necessity, Ryuko and Satsuki's troubled childhoods. The former acting out for attention due to her father sending her to boarding school for most of her childhood and young teens. And the latter due to Ragyo Kiryuin. These things affected how Ryuko and Satsuki's relationship with Ichigo developed.*

*That being said, whether you like my decision or not, please not that it wasn't easy. I didn't make the choice months - years - in advance. On the contrary, up until writing this chapter, I was prepared to go with either one. In fact, I had outlines for both Ryuko and Satsuki prepared. So, if you're upset, please keep that in mind.*

*And if you wish to discuss the matter further, please send me a PM.  
I'll be more than happy to answer any questions.*

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## **Chapter 64 - Never Can Say Goodbye**

"Oh! Come on!"

As her heels scrapped against the air beyond the edge of the Garganta, Ryuko swore to beat the shit out of Sosuke Aizen. No, she *had* to kick his ass. And she knew Senketsu was with her every step of the way. They were synchronized on kicking the bastard's ass from Honnou City to Karakura Town! And for a damn good reason! Because, as she fell forward out of the dimensional portal, cursing at the top of her lungs, Ryuko realized the so-called genius forgot to put the Garganta near the ground like a goddamn normal person!

"That goddamn bastard's screwing with us!"

Ryuko considered herself lucky Senketsu was always on top of things. That his quick thinking shifted their balance at the last second, making her stumble instead of falling flat on her ass. Licking the inside of her mouth before spitting on the ground, she glared back and forth across the ruined landscape for the shinigami. The Scissor Blade *itching* to slice the bastard apart. But once she recovered her bearings, and the adrenaline from fighting the Original Life Fiber faded, Ryuko decided to hold off on kicking Sosuke Aizen's smug ass. And it didn't have anything to do with being too tired to deal with his pompous attitude.

All she needed to see was the empty skies above Honnouji Academy.

"Hah! We pulled it off, Senketsu!"

With a deep, exhausted and utterly content sigh, she collapsed onto her back, the Scissor Blades slipping from her fingers. Somewhere in the distance, she could hear something calling her name. A voice that sounded awfully familiar. But Ryuko was too tired to care. Because they won! The Original Life Fiber wasn't coming back. Not after Satsuki's stunt! That was all that mattered! Grinning at the memory, her breath condensed into a wispy mist as she laughed. But when Senketsu returned to normal in a flash of crimson light, leaving her splayed on the ground in her school uniform, Ryuko discovered she couldn't lift a single finger.

"Shit... I can't move..."

**" It's been quite the night, Ryuko."**

Senketsu yawned. However, since he lacked the proper anatomy to express his exhaustion, the sound emerged into a visible ripple across his uniform, **"Fighting Nui Harime and Ragyo Kiryuin back to back. Not to mention the Original Life Fiber. I cannot remember the last time I've felt so drained of energy. But I've failed you."**

"Huh?"

**" Your father created me purpose of combating Life Fibers. Yet our strength insufficient against Ragyo Kiryuin,"** Senketsu looked downwards, aware from Ryuko, **"Despite working together... pushing ourselves to new heights... we never reached the same level as Junketsu."**

Ryuko stared through half-lidded eyes at the moon. After spending months searching for her dad's killer and getting dragged into one thing after another, finally *winning* didn't feel that normal, "If you're that worried, Senketsu, I'll ask Satsuki about fashion week. And if she doesn't know anything, we'll figure out another way to reach that level of power. Together."

**" R-Really?"**

"Yeah," her lips quirked into a smirk. But as Senketsu started blubbering - and tears of joy formed in his eye - she spontaneously, perhaps miraculously, recovered enough strength to lean away, "H- Hey! Don't start crying on me! You're getting all damp and gross!"

" ***S-Sorry,***" Senketsu sniffled, an odd sound that echoed more in Ryuko's mind than any physical displacement of air, ***"It's just... once we figure out fashion week, Mugetsu will have no choice but to admit I'M superior!"***

"Hold on..."

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched as she pieced together her Kamui's answer. Trying to understand what he meant. But when no startling revelations came to mind, she fell back on her normal response whenever Senketsu compared himself to Mugetsu, "THAT'S what you're crying -"

"RYUKO!"

She had no time to react before Mako's arms wrapped around her neck. And then dragged her forward off the ground. Gagging as her best friend's strength and her unnatural exhaustion made breathing painful, Ryuko clawed at the air. Damn it! She didn't help Satsuki kick the Original Life Fiber's ass to die like this! Fire burned in her veins as, with renewed vigor and strength, she managed to breathe. To take big, heaping gulps of air. So, when the vice-like grip returned moments later, Mako snuggling against Senketsu, Ryuko didn't resist. Despite feeling like crap, she blinked, then frowned, before shouting in surprise.

"Mako! You're alright!"

"Everyone made it out safe and sound, Ryuko," Mako didn't stop hugging. Not even for a moment. She was so relieved that she squeezed as hard as humanly possible, "Gamagori and Chad got hurt fighting those super-duper copies! They fought tooth-and-nail to win! I saw it with my own eyes, Ryuko! Those clones were super

tough! Nobody danced away without a few cuts and bruises! And that's why after you, Ichigo and Lady Satsuki left, Mr. Aizen suggested we visit Orihime!"

**" Mr. Aizen?"**

Despite having a decent understanding of Mako's train of thought, it took Ryuko a few seconds to process the information, "You're saying Orihime's fine!?"

"Yup!"

Mako nodded. Enthusiastically. Happily. And then Satsuki and Ichigo leapt through the swirly portal leading to the realm of the dead. Which, if she squinted just hard enough, resembled one of those weird, deserts from geography class. But even so, once they landed, and Ichigo collapsed from being super tired just like Ryuko, she pointed over her shoulder at Uryu and Chad. Who were much closer than she remembered, "She's right over there!"

"Ichigo!"

Ichigo couldn't believe his eyes.

Despite the unconscionable things Ragyo Kiryuin did, or might have done, Orihime was fine. She didn't have a scratch on her. He sagged in relief. The tension left his shoulders as the guilt and worry gnawing at his mind dissipated. As Orihime ran across the broken landscape faster than he remembered, Ichigo heard Mugetsu's exhausted groan before she returned to normal, too tired to maintain the transformation. Which left him, or rather them, weak and exhausted. And at Orihime's mercy when she hugged him.

Sending them sprawling to the ground.

And her forehead straight into his nose.

"Oh my god! Ichigo!"



"I'm fine," it was baffling how Orihime's hard head gave him a bloody nose when he tanked punches from Ragyo Kiryuin without trouble. But it wasn't a problem. In fact, he already felt his Life Fibers repairing the damage. Still, Ryuko's snickering wasn't helping. Neither was Satsuki's uncharacteristic smirk. And Orihime's embarrassed blush only helped to make things *worse* .

"You don't need to worry about it, Orihime," he glared at Mugetsu, daring the Kamui to chuckle at his misfortunate, before standing up with a groan, "I'm already feeling better. So, it seems kind of a waste using your Shun Shun Rikka to -"

"Move it, asshole!"

Sprinting full-tilt out of the Garganta, Emilou Apacci planted her foot against Ichigo Kurosaki's head before vaulting onto the ground. She couldn't give less of a crap about his feelings or injuries. She was pissed. She was angry. But most of all, she hated herself for being scared. For being worthless. How could she let Lady Harribel to fight that thing? She should have done something! Anything! Yet when that monstrous *thing* arrived in Las Noches, all she could do was run away with her tail between her legs. It didn't matter that Sung-Sun and Mila Rose hadn't fared any better against the horrendous spiritual pressure.

That she, of all arrancar, was forced to leave everything to those humans and their weird clothes wracked her mind with guilt.

It was *shameful* .

"YOU!"

Despite almost shouting, Apacci just wanted to make sure Orihime Inoue got the message. But then, before saying anything else, she paused. Hesitating mid-stomp as anger succumbed to mind-searing terror. She had been ready to beg the human for help. To fall on her hands and knees, throwing pride to the wind, if it meant saving Lady Harribel's life. But the moment she turned towards Orihime, Sung-

Sun and Mila Rose exiting the Garganta with the latter carrying Lady Harribel, her words devolved into a strangled gasp. She stiffened, eyes trembling and arms shaking, as Sosuke Aizen slowly marched across the landscape.

Out of instinct, out of self-preservation, she twisted her arms together, fingers gripping the collars around her wrist.

"There's no reason to be alarmed."

Aizen dismissed the arrancar's reaction to his presence. Neither did Ichigo Kurosaki or Satsuki Kiryuin's expression garner sympathy. From Emilou Apacci's posture, she presumed he was upset about their betrayal. Or survival. Which was, in and of itself, an interesting conjecture. He'd believed the Seireitei slaughtered the Espada he painstakingly gathered as pawns for humanity's future. The notion Tier Harribel survived the battle, let alone returned to Las Noches in the ensuing months, hadn't crossed his mind when he sent the Original Life Fiber through the Garganta.

"I won't prevent Orihime Inoue from resuscitating Tier Harribel."

With a soft *clack*, he sheathed Kyouka Suigetsu, "Neither will I interfere with your efforts to return to Las Noches. You are free to do as you please."

Apacci's hands trembled at the bastard's tone. She sure as hell didn't trust Sosuke Aizen. Not after everything he did to Lady Harribel. And his insufferable, arrogant smirk really pissed her off. But whether she liked it or not, there was nothing she could do. Aizen was too strong. And he *knew* it. So, with as much reluctance as she could muster, Apacci snapped Cierva back onto her wrists. All the while anticipating whatever complicated scheme Aizen had waiting in the wings. But when the shinigami didn't move an inch, she snorted out the side of her mouth, taking some amusement from his bloodied appearance.

But any remaining semblance of self-composure shattered when she grabbed Orihime's wrist.

It was nearly instantaneous. The moment her fingers touched the teenager, Apacci felt the overwhelming instinct to run back to Hueco Mundo with her tail between her legs. Whatever Orihime Inoue was, she wasn't human. Not anymore. And the terror flooding her soul. It reminded her of the disturbing creature who almost killed Lady Harribel. But with a determined snarl, she pushed through the instincts clouding her judgment. Blood dribbled down her chin as she bit her lower lip, steadying herself before looking into Orihime's eyes.

"I don't care what you do to me! But please... save Lady Harribel!"

Orihime didn't need to hear anything else. She took a deep breath. Focusing her thoughts on the steady, comforting rhythm of her heartbeat, "I understand."

Shun Shun Rikka.

She would never forget the moment the spirits dwelling within her brother's gift awakened. Granting her the strength necessary to protect Tatsuki and Chizuru. Calling the six friendly spirits Shun Shun Rikka had felt right. But she knew, deep within her heart, it wasn't complete. But at the time, with everything going on, she hadn't thought much about it. Considered it nothing more than a strange, fleeting emotion. And then Ragyo Kiryuin pulled her into Shinra Koketsu. And her power *blossomed* into something beautiful. She couldn't describe it better than that. It was as if she'd been dreaming for years. Constantly walking around in the daze. And only now, after everyone risked their lives saving hers, did she finally awaken.

Absolute Domination.

Nothing had changed. Everything had changed. If she wanted, she could summon the six fairies representing her powers. Ayame. Baigon. Hinagiku. Lily. Shun'o. Tsubaki. They were all still there. Yet her Shun Shun Rikka felt different. *Complete*. And there was

something else. Her spiritual pressure wasn't the same. Becoming part of Shinra Koketsu, even for a few minutes, changed something. She was still the same person. She still liked eating spicy bread and sweets. But Ragyo Kiryuin awakened something deep in her soul.

Yet the darkness clouding her thoughts scattered to the far winds at Ichigo's smile. How he was simply grateful knowing she was alright.

And she returned that smile. Proud of herself as she knelt next to Harribel, unbothered by the blood staining her jeans. With Apacci and the other fracción crowding around her, worried about the person they cared about, Orihime visualized the strength resting in her soul. The ability to help. To heal. To do so much *more*. Her fingers brushed the plastic hairpins as gold light danced upon her arms. Everything was different. And yet, everything felt the same. This was what her Shun Shun Rikka had always been.

Was always meant to be.

"Soten Kisshun."

She didn't need to concentrate. Didn't need to focus upon reversing the wound cutting across Harribel's stomach. Not anymore. By the time the oval barrier surrounded the arrancar, all signs of Harribel's confrontation with the Original Life Fiber vanished. As aqua eyes slowly opened, focusing on her before turning to Apacci, Mila Rose and Sung-Sun, Orihime stood back up, watching the heartwarming display with clasped hands.

This was Absolute Domination. The ability to protect everyone. The strength to keep those she loved safe.

The power to make sure someone like Ragyo Kiryuin could never hurt another person.

"You have my gratitude, Orihime."

Satsuki perceived more than a trace of Junketsu's curiosity at Orihime Inoue filtering into her subconscious. But that was expected. From personal experience, she knew how much time Soten Kissun required to heal grievous wounds. To ignore causality. To resurrect the dead. But this was different. Tier Harribel, whose injuries were reminiscent of those she sustained during the Great Culture and Sports Festival, vanished in a fraction of the time. Flesh and bone knitted together, or rather, reversed to a previous state by the time she understood what happened.

Was this the result of Orihime's synchronization with Shinra Koketsu?

Her thoughts soured at the question. The reason behind Orihime Inoue's enhanced technique did not matter. Perhaps becoming one with Shinra Koketsu, even for a few minutes, evolved Orihime's natural abilities beyond their previous limitations. If so, it was possible Orihime could render clothing made from Life Fibers - Kamui or otherwise - powerless. To bend all Life Fibers scattered across the world to her will. Yet she wasn't concerned about such remote, implausible scenarios.

Because Orihime Inoue wasn't their mother.

"Our Kamui might have stalled the Original Life Fiber. But *your* assistance ensured humanity's survival."

She bowed her head, expressing her deepest, sincerest gratitude, "And for that, Orihime Inoue, I'm immeasurably grateful."

"N-No, I didn't do anything special!"

Orihime desperately waved her hands back and forth, "My Shun Shun Rikka is nothing like your Kamui! I mean, Junketsu's really strong. And she can transform! If Aizen hadn't helped me, I wouldn't have been able to fix anything!"

"Even so, you were the only person capable of reversing the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet."

Out of the corner of her eye, Satsuki noticed Ryuko grinning at Orihime's innocent comment about Junketsu, "Sosuke Aizen might have known the method. He might have been aware of the steps required to reverse Ragyo Kiryuin's efforts. But you, and you alone, utilized Absolute Domination to save humanity. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

**" *Can we go home? I'm really tired.*"**

"Huh?"

Orihime perked at the unexpected voice. Where had it come from? It sounded like a young child. A girl. And there was something else. She couldn't explain it. Not in words. And not after everything that happened. Not just to her, but to everyone. But the whisper in the back of her mind... the reverberation resonating in her chest... made her look at Junketsu. Thinking for a moment, almost unsure whether she was doing the right thing, Orihime swallowed her nervousness and stared into the Kamui's eyes, "You're tired?"

**" *Yes, I am.*"**

The Kamui seemed... excited? Happy? Satisfied? She didn't know. But Junketsu wasn't anything like she expected. From the first time Ichigo and Ryuko said their Kamui talked, she'd imagined Satsuki's Kamui as being serious. Maybe without a sense of humor. Just like she thought Mugetsu was like a female Ichigo. Or Senketsu as Ryuko's strict but well-meaning parental substitute. As another two unfamiliar voices grew louder alongside her thoughts, one arguing with Ryuko, she blinked owlishly when Junketsu yawned. Something that seemed impossible since Ichigo explained Kamui don't breathe.

**" *Satsuki's blood tasted really good tonight. But for some reason, I'm really tired,*" Junketsu's lapel twitched, "*Can you please ask her what's wrong?*"**

"You can hear Junketsu?"

A frown pulled upon Satsuki's lips. Although their personalities couldn't be further apart, Orihime Inoue was the Grand Couturier's sister. It only made sense. Nui Harime had responded to Senketsu and Mugetsu multiple times. Even Ururu Tsumugiyu, from what little surveillance footage Inumuta obtained, could understand Kamui. It seemed becoming one with Shinra Koketsu did more than simply evolve Shun Shun Rikka. And when Orihime explained what Junketsu asked, a task usually delegated to Ichigo or Ryuko, she nodded. Truly grateful for the information. But despite its importance, she focused on the matter at hand.

Allowing herself to smile, an almost wistful expression, Satsuki raised her voice, the stern warning possessing neither arrogance nor authority.

"Did you think you could sneak up on me, Sanageyama?"

"Of course not," Sanageyama didn't bother masking his presence. Not when Lady Satsuki sensed his spiritual pressure coming from a mile away, "Your tenor changed halfway through your conversation with Orihime. So, Ragyo Kiryuin kicked the bucket? No last-minute revivals or transformations?"

"That appears unlikely barring unforeseen developments," Satsuki flicked a strand of hair, knocked loose during the confrontation, behind her ear, "Of course, I would have thought the same before the Original Life Fiber's interference."

Sanageyama scratched the scar tracing down his chin, "I'm sure Kisuke Urahara could find a way to launch whatever's left of Ragyo Kiryuin into the sun. She'd be like a shooting star."

"Enough with the lame puns!"

Her eyebrow quirked when Nonon punched Sanageyama, eliciting an equally-sharp retort from the former Athletic Committee Chair.

And as the argument devolved into bickering only disrupted by Gamagori, Satsuki discarded the burden of responsibility. She watched Yoruichi Shihoin approach Orihime, speaking about restoring the arm destroyed by Ragyo Kiryuin in Karakura Town. Her attention drifted towards Tessai Tsukabishi when the shinigami arrived in a rather subdued manner, Heinkel Wolfe under one arm. In the faint, bitter autumn air permeating Honnouji Academy, she nevertheless smirked at Ichigo's argument with Uryu Ishida. A rather heated discussion Yasutora Sado had difficulty moderating.

Judging by Ichigo's expression and her sister's derision, it appeared Uryu found the notion he'd succumb to Xcution's Life Fiber clones laughable.

"For the moment, we shall presume Ragyo Kiryuin dead. Yet the battle *isn't* over."

That's right," Sanageyama knew *exactly* what Lady Satsuki was talking about, "We still need to hunt down that coward!"

"Yuu Akiyama is a threat, Sanageyama. But he can wait," Satsuki noticed Heinkel Wolfe stiffen at the mention of her mother's employee. As well as Yoruichi Shihoin's subtle attempts at concealing her interest, "Right now, we must concentrate on apprehending Hououmaru! As commander of Xcution and Ragyo Kiryuin's secretary, she knows every detail about the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet. Including details Kisuke Urahara might not know! If there's a chance, however remote, she could resurrect the Original Life Fiber, or resume my mother's plans from scratch, we mustn't allow her to flee into the shadows!"

"About that..."

With a single *tap*, Inumuta booted his laptop, which miraculously survived the climactic battle relatively unscathed, "I took the liberty of regaining administrative control over Honnouji Academy. Including the security and surveillance operating systems. It appears someone



beat us to the punch concerning Hououmaru. And made sure to finish the job."

The tension was overwhelming. But none were more surprised by the revelation than Satsuki, "How?"

"Apparently Yuu Akiyama wasn't as loyal as Ragyo Kiryuin believed," Inumuta flicked the bridge of his glasses, "He betrayed Hououmaru before she activated EXCELSUS. And then delivered the *coup de grâce* using high-yield explosives laced with extremely potent Anti-Life Fiber components."

"I see..."

Satsuki was surprised, to say the least. But Heinkel Wolfe's strange reaction steadied her thoughts. She understood the paladin's suspicions. Yuu Akiyama had been one of her mother's staunchest employees. Someone who could theoretically subdue the Grand Couturier. At least until Nui Harime decided to stop holding back. For him to betray Xcution during Ragyo Kiryuin's moment of triumph, after years of displaying nothing but loyalty, was bewildering. Perhaps it involved Alexander Anderson. But even so, she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"However, that may be the least of our concerns, Lady Satsuki."

Inumuta typed several commands, bringing up multiple images displaying every major city in the world, "When Orihime Inoue reversed Absolute Domination, those absorbed into the Celestial Cocoon Seed Planet were released. Unfortunately, most of them are naked. And without Life Fibers devouring unnecessary information, not to mention the death toll reaching into the thousands, people are going to start asking questions."

"Understandable. However, we shall deal with that problem in due time."

As the cold air stung her face, Satsuki involuntarily winced. Something that didn't go unnoticed by the others. She was tired. Exhausted. Not the strongest will, nor the most tempered resolve, could compensate for the immense strain from wearing Kamui. Even with almost perfect synchronization and cooperation, allowing herself to be worn by Junketsu for several hours had pushed her body to its absolute limit, "There is still much to be done. And limited time to do so. Inumuta, what is the status of my mother's remaining COVERS?"

Nui listened to Satsuki.

She stared at Ichigo and Ryuko. Heard everything they told the humans. Their happiness caused her heart to clench. And so, she tucked her knees against her chest.

The disgusting wound blemishing her face, the cross-shaped reminder of what she did to the Original Life Fiber, throbbed. But she didn't care. Blood trickled down her cheek, dripping onto her favorite dress. Yet she couldn't muster the energy to move. Why should she care? Because of *her*, Ichigo and Ryuko sliced apart Shinra Koketsu. The best, most perfect, outfit that would ever exist. Nothing she made, or would ever make, could ever compare to the ultimate Kamui. A cold dread settled in the pit of her stomach at the thought.

Nothing mattered anymore. Lady Ragyo was dead. Amu wasn't coming back. Ryuko hated her.

And Ichigo never wanted to talk to her again.

Her family was gone.

She was truly alone in the world.

"Nui..."

Nui flinched at the voice so similar to her own. And she couldn't understand why. Orihime was her sister. The one meant to be worn by Shinra Koketsu. Ichigo and Ryuko's friend. Yet she was talking to

her. For a moment, her remaining eye widened. But she didn't say anything. Even when Orihime steadied herself, seemingly conflicted about whether or not to move closer, Nui couldn't help but notice everything - shinigami, human and even Ichigo - watching them.

Staring at *her* .

"Please hold still for a moment."

The dejection in Nui Harime's eye bothered Orihime. Far more than she would admit. She knew what Nui could do. What she had done. But even so, knowing how dangerous the Grand Couturier could be, Orihime couldn't stand back and watch her waste away, "If it's alright with you, I want to heal your eye."

"... why!?"

She didn't mean to shout. But hearing that question brought back painful, unbearable memories. Her shoulders trembled as she suppressed another wracking sob. Blonde hair fell around her shoulders in disheveled curls as she rested her forehead upon her knees, "Why are you helping me? I don't deserve this! I-I don't deserve anything! Lady Ragyo's dead! Ichigo and Ryuko hate me! A-Amu's never coming back! A-And it's all my fault! There's nothing left. I-I'm all alone. So please, tell me why you're doing this! Why are you being so nice!? Why don't you hate me!?"

"I don't know."

Orihime clasped her hands together. And then, against common sense to anyone else, stepped closer to Nui. Almost to the point where she could grab the Grand Couturier's hand, "You hurt Ryuko. You almost killed Mako. But for some strange reason, and maybe it's silly, I think I understand why you did those terrible things."

She looked away. First at Ichigo. Then Ryuko and Mako. Before settling on Satsuki and her friends. Everyone was relieved Ragyo Kiryuin was dead. Orihime could see the happiness in their eyes.

And maybe, for a moment, she was glad everything was over. That everyone didn't need to care about anything but having fun and relaxing. Gripping her sweater between her fingers, Orihime felt her nervousness ebbing with every comforting beat of her heart, "Ragyo Kiryuin hurt a lot of people. She took Sora. She took Ryuko's dad. And I'm sure there are hundreds of other people just as mad. But she was your mom. She was the only family you had, wasn't she?"

"So maybe, just a little bit, I understand why you're sad."

The tear welling in Nui's eye plucked at her heart, "It might be naivety. Or wishful thinking. In fact, it doesn't make sense to me. But still, for some reason, I'm beginning to understand why you always talked to Ichigo. Why you never tried hurting him. Not really. Even when Ragyo Kiryuin asked you to. I'm sure you'll deny it. Or say that I'm lying. You might even shout at me. But that's fine. Maybe I deserve that. Because I think, truly, the only thing you ever wanted was a normal family."

"Y-You..."

Everything Nui wanted to say - to shout, to deny - emerged as painful sobs. She cried. Tears rolled down her cheek as Orihime wrapped her arms around her shoulders. As she sat with her sister pulling her into a hug, Nui didn't know what to do. What to say. Despite everything, Orihime didn't hate her. She cared about her. And knowing that, more than anything else in the world, caused any lingering doubts to fade.

**" It's been a long night, Ichigo."**

"It sure has, Mugetsu," Ichigo watched Nui awkwardly return Orihime's hug before Mugetsu yawned, something that caused the Kamui to physically ripple, "Tired?"

**" I'll be fine! But more importantly, are you certain Nui Harime won't become a problem in the future? There's nothing**

***stopping her from seeking revenge. After all, we were the ones who killed Ragyo Kiryuin."***

"Enough about Ragyo!"

Ryuko was sick of hearing about her stupid mom! Glaring at Mugetsu, meeting the Kamui's annoyed gaze with her own, she sat up with a huff, arms folded and Senketsu complaining about pushing her body, "The bitch is dead! End of story! After all the crap she's pulled, I ain't feelin' too bad she's gone!"

"You shouldn't say such horrible things, Ryuko!"

Mako leaned closer to Ryuko before continuing in the same excited, yet mildly chastised, tone, "When we snuck into those movies, the person who bragged about nothing going wrong was the first to die! So, if you say really nice things about Ragyo Kiryuin, even if you don't mean them, when she returns as a zombie, you'll be safe!"

"Uh..."

***" While a zombie Ragyo Kiryuin would be troubling, there's a more pressing matter we need to deal with, Ryuko."***

"Yeah," Ryuko yawned and collapsed onto her back, "I didn't forget, Senketsu. I'll iron you when we get back to Karakura Town. After I take a shower and a nice, long rest."

***" We'll need to find someplace with appropriate steam-cleaning technology. Assuming Nui Harime didn't destroy everything, Kisuke Urahara should have the required equipment to fulfill our needs. Of course, going to that shop of horrors should be our last resort."***

Senketsu ignored Mugetsu's childish growl. There was no need to lower himself to such inappropriate standards. Not when something else required his attention. A terrifying sensation almost as horrifying as the Original Life Fiber. For as Seras Victoria appeared within the

familiar burning darkness that caused his threading to itch, he stared at the woman holding the vampire's hand. Or more specifically, the familiar clothing Kinue Kinagase happened to be wearing.

**" So, that's Danketsu's regular appearance. It's..."**

**"... JUST like Junketsu,"** Mugetsu laughed. Her threading rippled with every chuckle as she *stared* at the off-colored Junketsu. It was hilarious! More than enough to make her forget about Senketsu's stupidity, **"Ichigo, doesn't Danketsu look just like Junketsu? And she had the nerve to claim she was the better Kamui! At least I'M original!"**

**" What did you fucking say!?"**

"Don't let Mugetsu bother you, Danketsu," Kinue stumbled briefly, which did not go unnoticed by Seras. But she brushed off the vampire's assistance. Without Danketsu stitched into her skin, walking under her own power was a strange experience, "Remember what happened the last time she got under your skin?"

**" Only because you REFUSED to take my side!"**

It had been so long since Danketsu could remember the freedom of moving under her own power. Only fuzzy memories of her first moments of life - awakening in that disgusting and drab laboratory, her first movements and wrapping herself around Isshin Kurosaki - remained. But with a triumphant flourish, which translated into rustling her sleeve, she glowered at her wearer with all the disgust she could muster, **"She mocked my appearance! So, go over there and teach her a lesson! If you don't, I will force you to hit Mugetsu!"**

"If you want to fight Mugetsu, why don't you do it yourself?"

Kinue gave Danketsu's sleeve a light tug, "Ragyo Kiryuin separated your Life Fibers from mine. There's nothing stopping you from removing yourself from my body. You finally have the freedom to

leave. To not be forced onto 'a human' against your will. So, what are you waiting for?"

**" What? But... I..."**

Danketsu's sputtering quickly devolved into indignation. And then cursing. But by that point, Ichigo decided to follow Ryuko's example. With a groan, he sat on the ground. The weight of fighting Ragyo Kiryuin and the Original Life Fiber finally taking its toll. Sighing as Mugetsu continued laughing at Danketsu, Ichigo asked, more to himself than anyone, "It's finally over, isn't it?"

"It better be!"

Ryuko growled as her temper, never the best, threatened to snap from exhaustion, "Mom's dead. That stupid ball of yarn is sliced to pieces. And Nui Harime's not going to go batcrap insane any time soon. Wait a second. Where's the old goat?"

"You think I care?"

That was a lie. He actually *was* curious about his old man's mysterious vanishing act. The guy should have been waiting for them. But since Aizen seemed not to know much, he decided not to worry about it. He was already planning on beating information on Ragyo Kiryuin out of the old goat. A few more minutes wouldn't kill him, "He probably got caught in one of that Yuu guy's traps. Or he's making sure Satsuki's clone doesn't do anything stupid."

"Yeah..."

A tired yawn escaped her mouth as Ryuko watched Harribel leave through another Garganta alongside her annoying sidekicks. Closing her eyes, she wished, more than anything, for a hot shower. And then, after another few seconds, sat up with a startle.

"Satsuki has a clone? When the hell did that happen!?"

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November 12th, 2002

"My offer still stands, you know."

"That's quite the considerate proposition, Kisuke Urahara. Has my participation changed your perception this much?"

Kisuke frowned at the question. Almost absentmindedly, he adjusted his bucket hat, pulling the brim below his eyes. With the pitch-black void of the lowest level of the Central Great Underground Prison pressing upon his soul, deafening his senses and chilling him to the bone, it was difficult getting an accurate read on Aizen. He had to give the guy credit. That was not something easy to pull off, "I wouldn't phrase it so... suspiciously. Try to think of it..."

The steady *clomping* of his geta stopped, "... as payment for services rendered."

His attention shifted towards the seals spreading across the ground in a circular fashion. They were etched into the very fabric of the underground prison. A precaution against attempts at inducing discrepancies through overwhelming spiritual pressure. Of course, a cursory examination of the cracks surrounding the seals suggested they wouldn't last another few months under Aizen's presence. Maybe a year. Nevertheless, despite the blatant mockery of his personal craftsmanship, Kisuke hummed, "Nothing to say? Oh well, you can be as enigmatic as you want. But without your knowledge of Life Fibers, defeating Ragyo Kiryuin and the Original Life Fiber would have been difficult. If not impossible."

"The destruction of the Soul King and the Original Life Fiber has always been my objective."

Aizen took the opportunity, with Kisuke Urahara distracted by introspection, to examine his attire. One could not question his



former adversary's handiwork. Using nothing more than the scraps of clothing cast aside in Karakura Town, Kisuke stitched an exact replica of the sealing fabric placed upon his body by the Central 46, "Three days ago, you admitted knowing what motivated my actions. And, if memory serves, explained quite a few interesting details on Life Fibers. Such as Kamui."

"Oh?"

Kisuke smirked, the mirth never quite reaching his eyes, "From the way you said 'Kamui,' I'm inclined to believe you examined Junketsu when Satsuki wasn't looking."

"That would imply I succeeded," Aizen returned the expression, albeit lacking the underlying sarcasm. If he decided to be truthful on the matter, inspecting a Kamui such as Junketsu had been too good of an opportunity to ignore. Pure Life Fiber clothing? He'd theorized its existence. Contemplated how Life Fibers could have esoteric applications. But the few Life Fibers he'd procured were spent creating *his* Hogyoku, preventing further experiments.

"It seems collecting useful data on Kamui requires their cooperation," the cursory inspections of Junketsu had given him little he hadn't already known. Nothing more than information available to anyone familiar with Life Fibers, "But rest assured. My interest in Junketsu was nothing more than scientific curiosity. I have no desire to experiment on Junketsu, Mugetsu or any other Kamui."

"Is that so?"

"Well, if there's no chance you'll abscond with a Kamui, I don't need to worry about Mugetsu vanishing in the middle of the night," Kisuke chuckled. It was a wispy, hollow laugh that echoed into the surrounding darkness, "Still, your assistance kept casualties to a minimum. One could even suggest humanity's continued existence rests upon your shoulders."

Aizen stood upon the precipice of the sealing array, smirking, somewhat faintly, at the shopkeeper, "But that's not the reason for your generous offer, is it?"

"Now, why on earth would you think that?"

The exiled captain turned shopkeeper of sugary affections and specialized shinigami merchandise mumbled under his breath, "With the excessive, and somewhat torturous, sentence of twenty thousand years, who knows when someone will bother checking on the Soul Society's most infamous prisoner? After all, Muken is supposedly impenetrable. Nobody can enter or leave the infinite realm without a specialized key. It could be years... centuries... before anyone wonders if the immortal Sosuke Aizen was still locked away!"

"Be that as it may, I must decline your offer."

With a moment for introspection, Aizen took in the familiar prison. The dark void stretching into infinity. The chair crafted by Mayuri Kurotsuchi and Kisuke Urahara with the singular purpose of restricting his movements to an absolute minimum. Something the former announced with arrogance befitting someone granted the position of 'captain' multiple times during his transfer to Muken almost a year ago to the day, "Yet, from your lack of criticism, one might assume you already knew my answer."

"Was it that obvious?"

Aizen stepped beyond the sealing threshold, "The Original Life Fiber's control over the barrier between the World of the Living and the Soul Society began weakening within hours of its death. In a matter of days, perhaps weeks, it will fully dissipate. At that time, the Seireitei will launch an investigation into the dimensional abnormality. And, as I'm certain you've realized, they will discover the existence of Life Fibers."

"You got me there."

The admission came easier than anticipated. Which Kisuke found mildly concerning as he removed from his jacket, which still had a few traces of damage from his confrontation with Nui and Ururu, the duplicate set of nineteen keys to Aizen's prison, "I'm not looking forward to explaining how Life Fibers almost destroyed the World of the Living. That something more dangerous than Alucard existed under their nose. Or, even worse. Why you, of all people, were walking around Karakura Town."

"Oh? Will you though?"

"I might conceal some of the more exotic details," Kisuke didn't bother refuting the accusation. Not when Aizen would throw evidence back in his face at the first opportunity, "Alucard on the other hand? There's no hiding what happened in London. The captain-commander will ask questions. Difficult questions. Such as why three million souls vanished alongside the most dangerous being in the World of the Living. Fortunately, for all involved parties, there's a thick silver lining."

He brushed dust off his pants, "As a consequence of Alucard's overwhelming presence and, shall we say, monstrous abilities, proving whether other spiritual beings, such as shinigami or hybrid, were present around the time of his abduction is just about impossible."

"I suppose Ichigo Kurosaki and Ryuko Matoi can take solace in that fact," Aizen stated matter-of-factly, "Of course, there's still the matter of our *other* friends."

"Ah... them."

Kisuke rubbed his stubble-covered chin, "The Wandenreich fought Ragyo Kiryuin out of self-preservation. But if the information on Millennium is accurate, what happened in London was the result of decades of planning. I've asked Ryuken to look into the matter. Yet from what we already know, the two events are connected."

"The Wandenreich have their stated goals. And then they have their actual objectives. The question, Kiskeya Urahara, is whether they're mutually exclusive," Aizen chuckled, an almost airy sound as he sat down. Kiskeya's suspicions were intriguing. And rather close to his own conclusions, "The only thing we can conclude, with any true certainty, is that Ragyo Kiryuin was one of the few beings Yhwach feared. With her death, it's more than likely he'll accelerate his plans."

"That reminds me..."

Nearly half a minute passed in absolute silence, broken only by the ambient noise of his rustling clothes, as Kiskeya carefully fit the keys into their respective slots one by one. Once all nineteen were prepared according to design, even if they didn't accomplish anything besides providing the illusion Aizen remained sealed, including his ability to speak, Kiskeya stepped back, "Consider it morbid curiosity. But why did you let Orihime use Absolute Domination on your zanpakuto?"

The subtle narrowing of Aizen's eyes spoke volumes, "Manipulating reality isn't simple. Every change, even trivial alterations, induces proportionally greater repercussions. I presume you've extensively tested your Bankai's limitations. Documented the consequences of altering reality. Understood what you could feasibly accomplish. But the stunt you pulled against the Original Life Fiber? Against Ragyo Kiryuin? If I didn't know better, I'd call that excessively reckless."

"Because your Bankai's effects are temporary."

He stared at the enigmatic shinigami. Or, more specifically, the limb Ryuko claimed Aizen sacrificed casting Ittō Kasō, "I'm going to take a wild guess. Once you deactivate Seirei-no-Makoto Kyouka Suigetsu, every alternation and change 'snaps' back to normal. Including injuries. But magnified tenfold. Even with the Hōgyoku granting you a level of regeneration close to that of Life Fibers, the wounds you sustained fighting Ragyo Kiryuin were fatal. At least, not

without Absolute Domination overwriting the consequences of your Bankai. Am I in the right ballpark?"

"More or less."

Aizen shrugged as black fabric wrapped around his ankles. And then ignored the two seals restraining his left arm and right leg from moving, "Despite your expectations, I was honest about Seirei-no-Makoto Kyouka Suigetsu's connection with the lunar cycle."

With every additional key twisted into position, the spiritual fabric constraining his movements tightened. First his neck was pulled backwards. Then his waist and shoulders were held taut, unable to move more than an inch. Trivialities easily overcome with the slightest of efforts. But he granted Kisuke Urahara the illusion of believing the seals worked, despite both of them knowing it was simple showmanship, "But that's not what you're wondering, is it? What you're actually asking, Kisuke Urahara, is why I insisted Orihime Inoue use Absolute Domination on my zanpakuto."

"I'll confess my actions have been abhorrent. One might even call them monstrous," Aizen smiled at his former adversary, "Yet given an opportunity, I wouldn't change anything. Why you ask? Because the results speak for themselves. The Original Life Fiber and its prophet were destroyed. The former at the hands of Satsuki Kiryuin, a human it considered little more than an insect. That being said, if one considers the innumerable lives destroyed throughout my pursuit of humanity's survival, I doubt most people would have cared if I died."

"That may be true."

Kisuke conceded the point, "But without your help? Well, I don't think we'd be having this conversation."

"Fair enough. Now, tell me, Kisuke Urahara. What do you plan on doing now?"

The closest emotion Aizen felt towards Kisuke Urahara was mixed resignation. Yet he smirked. An enigmatic, condescending expression that physically strained the black fabric around his chin, "The Seireitei will investigate Ragyo Kiryuin. Once they realize *what* she was, they'll examine her activities with the subtlety of a Hollow. Including anyone associated with her conglomerate. Even someone with your intellect won't be able to completely conceal the truth of Life Fibers."

"And when Genryusai Yamamoto discovers the unvarnished truth?"

Aizen leaned backwards, yet his eyes never strayed from the shopkeeper, "Kamui. Goku Uniform. Life Fiber Hybrid. He'll order their destruction to preserve the false illusion of balance between the World of the Living and the Soul Society. When the Seireitei takes matters into their own hands... when the Onmitsukido determines Kugo Ginjo was working for Revocs and you *said nothing*... when Mayuri Kurotsuchi discovers that Life Fibers evolve adaptations towards specific threats, including Bankai... what will you do?"

The *click* when Kisuke activated the final, nineteenth key, the one meant to restrain his mouth, went unnoticed. He was bound head to foot upon the chair, limbs immobilized by restraints designed to withstand his massive spiritual pressure. And yet Aizen continued without batting an eye, "That's alright. You don't need to answer. I'm sure you, of all people, will think of something when the time comes."

A moment passed before Kisuke shook his head, "Boy, you're rather pessimistic."

Aizen frowned, "And you're foolishly optimistic."

"Who me? I'm nothing more than the handsome owner of a small candy-store. Being optimistic is good for business," the exiled shopkeeper brushed aside Aizen's depressingly cautious pessimism. There was not point worrying about the thousands of possible scenarios involving the Seireitei discovering Life Fibers. At least not without additional data. Removing one of the spiritual keys, then

another, he continued until all nineteen replicas were secured within the confines of his coat, "As for what you're implying? I understand your reasoning."

His footsteps echoed across the pitch-black void as he began the journey towards the backdoor into Muken. A personal entrance tied to his spiritual energy. Yet, before taking no more than five steps, Kisuke paused, "Yet I disagree with your conclusions. Perhaps the captain-commander will consider Ichigo and the others threats towards the balance of souls. Maybe he'll order them imprisoned. Killed. Or since Ichigo and Ryuko helped destroy the Original Life Fiber, he'll be content with mere observation. There's no 'right' answer. Because, after all, in the real world..."

"... things are never quite black and white."

Aizen allowed the unspoken farewell to carry across the infinite expanse of Muken. He watched Kisuke Urahara retreat until even the faint echoing of his footsteps faded. With his body restrained, at least to the casual observer, by the nineteen seals, he smirked. An arrogant expression befitting one of his stature. And yet, possessing a hint of understanding.

"Well then, I look forward to seeing whether you truly believe those words, Kisuke Urahara."

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November 24th, 2002

The spiritual training grounds underneath the Urahara Shop were abandoned. For the first time in months, it wasn't filled with the sounds of nudists preparing for battle. Pieces of debris lay scattered across the battle-marked environment. Trash and burnt husks of vehicles all that remained of the secondary Nudist Beach headquarters. Without Ragyo Kiryuin breathing down their neck,

Olivier returned to Osaka. Intent on using the Takarada Conglomerate's resources to rebuild the city following Xcution's invasion.

"I should have known something was wrong."

A faint breeze, produced through means known only to Kisuke Urahara, rustled Ichigo's hair as he swallowed the bitterness rising in his throat. He couldn't look the shopkeeper in the eye. Not when everything was his fault. If he'd listened to Mugetsu, took her concerns a little more seriously, this wouldn't be happening, "She was tired. Hard to wake up. And every day, she got a little worse."

He was grateful Uryu lent him one of his jackets. Even if the Quincy symbol stitched across the back was blatantly obvious. Because without it, there was no way he could have hidden the slight trembling of his hands, "By the end, she didn't have the strength to move on her own."

The silence was uncomfortable. But like everything else, that was his fault. Grimacing from the guilt, he stared at the ground, refusing to look Kisuke in the eye, "Kisuke... what's wrong with Mugetsu?"

"It's difficult to say."

"Difficult!?"

Ichigo all but spat the word. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Hat-and-clogs, the guy who outwitted Ragyo Kiryuin, didn't have an answer? Dirt crunched beneath his sneakers when he rushed forward, grabbing Kisuke's coat before the bastard said anything, "Don't pull that crap! You know something! Tell me, damn it!"

"... Isshin informed me of Mugetsu's condition three days ago."

The tension was overwhelming. Stifling. But that didn't make things simpler. And confessing to Ichigo that his old man knew something



was wrong with Mugetsu for days and didn't say anything? Kisuke grunted through his nose. As a scientist, first and foremost, he prided himself on discovering the unknown. In finding answers, no matter how difficult, through a mixture of analytical research and empirical evidence. Everything he'd accomplished, even Mugetsu, was based upon that premise. Yet for the first time in years, perhaps decades, there was no logical explanation. No reason for the circumstances surrounding Mugetsu besides theories and conjectures.

"And for the last sixty-two hours, I've spent every waking moment examining her dress patterns. Inspecting her stitching from hem to collar."

He felt Ichigo's grip slacken. First the right hand and then the left. Dozens of thoughts, excuses and reasons passed through his mind before Ichigo stepped back, almost unsure of what to say and yet determined to speak. And during that uncomfortable silence, his grimace tightened into a frown at the hermetically sealed containers next to his computer. Each constructed from modified soul-synthesized metal and glass. The first of which, immediately to his left, contained Mugetsu. The other three Senketsu, Danketsu and Junketsu.

All of whom weren't moving.

"You see, I kept detailed notes. Something immeasurably useful considering Mugetsu was my third - and only successful - attempt at creating Kamui."

A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek, pooling against the underside of his chin before dripping onto the floor. He sighed, a weary breath that only served to illustrate the mounting tension. This wasn't the optimum environment. Ichigo might be keeping himself together, but it was temporary. After all, Mugetsu was cut from the same cloth. She was, for lack of a better comparison, the Kamui equivalent of a shinigami's zanpakuto. And thinking, even theoretically, of Benihime in a similar condition, existing yet unresponsive, soured his already terrible mood. With another sigh,

one containing the depths of his shame, he slowly, almost deliberately, removed his bucket hat while staring over Ichigo's shoulder at Ryuko, Satsuki and Kinue Kinagase.

Who were in his shop for the same reason.

Suggesting, unfortunately, the problem wasn't isolated to Mugetsu.

"Which made things simpler. But not necessarily easier."

He directed the comment at Ryuko but kept his attention on Satsuki. She'd been silent throughout his explanation. Choosing to acknowledge certain answers with a solemn nod, "I spent more than two days examining Mugetsu. I searched for any conceivable changes in her threading, including differences stemming from evolving advanced configurations."

His shoulders fell as the next words struggled to form, "I'm sorry, Ichigo. But there's nothing physically wrong with Mugetsu."

"That's a load of crap!"

Ryuko shoved Ichigo aside. Without giving anyone a chance to think, she grabbed Kisuke by the scruff of his coat. She tried slamming him against the computer, hoping for some damn answers. But the bastard didn't so much as budge an inch, "There's something wrong with Senketsu! So spill it! I don't care if it's good or bad news! I just want..."

The plain, otherwise ordinary, black sweater from Mako's closet felt itchy against her skin. For a moment, she stumbled over her words. Unsure what to say. Before her voice dropped into a whisper, "... I just want to know what's wrong with him."

"There is *one* theory."

Kisuke observed Ryuko's attention, her desperation, intensify, "After eliminating every other possibility, the only remaining conclusion is

that Senketsu's condition directly results from the Original Life Fiber's destruction."

"... what?"

"The Life Fibers in your Kamui. Goku Uniforms. Aizen's Hogyoku. The COVERS. They all came from the Original Life Fiber," his voice hardened despite the magnitude of Ryuko's disbelief, "It's complicated. Something I could spend hours describing without getting to the point. But I'll keep things simple. Senketsu sustained himself through your spiritual energy and blood. But what about Life Fibers not yet woven into clothing? How do you think they survived?"

"Your logic is flawed."

With the hollow *clack* of her heel, Satsuki stepped forward, brow furrowed into an introspective frown, "The Life Fibers delivered to the Sewing Club were removed from the Original Life Fiber weeks before shipping. If such a connection existed, they wouldn't have survived long enough to be woven into clothing."

"Were you aware Ragyo Kiryuin was communicating with the Original Life Fiber throughout the Great Culture and Sports Festival?"

He took Satsuki's silence at the question as permission to continue, "The Original Life Fiber was, for lack of better terminology, the lynchpin holding everything together. Its existence stabilized the system. There's no other way to describe it. Because, as we speak, Life Fibers are undergoing 'cataclysmic feedback.' In a matter of weeks, maybe days, every Life Fiber throughout the World of the Living will die."

"Are you saying Senketsu's gonna die!?"

Ryuko dragged the bastard down until she was staring into his eyes, "And what about me and Ichigo!? What's gonna happen to us!?"

"Nothing."

Not for the first time, and likely not the last, Kisuke watched Ryuko's frustration turn into confusion. A similar reaction to Ichigo and Kinue. But he derived no pleasure from it. In these circumstances, giving comparatively good news didn't necessarily make people feel better, "I've tested your Life Fibers. Examined samples of your blood. For some reason, most likely stemming from your unique physiology, your Life Fibers aren't affected by the Original Life Fiber's destruction."

"So what if I'm fine!?"

More than anything, Ryuko wanted to punch Hat-and-Clogs. Instead, she settled for shouting at the top of her lungs, "That doesn't matter! Because Senketsu's not! And you know what that freaking ball of yarn did to him!"

"Professor Matoi extracted some of your Life Fibers to complete Senketsu. Which explains why his spiritual pressure was identical to your own."

Kisuke noted, more from curiosity than any scientific interest, Satsuki's reaction. It appeared Ragyo Kiryuin never shared the secret behind Kamui. Which made sense. The woman was notoriously paranoid. After all, Nui Harime, someone more than loyal to Life Fibers, hadn't succeeded in weaving Kamui. And if the Grand Couturier of Revocs didn't know the secret behind Kamui, the likelihood Ragyo confessed everything to Satsuki was slim to none, "This created a connection between you two. Or, in Satsuki's case, a connection between Junketsu and Ragyo Kiryuin and Isshin. A synchronization, if you will."

"That doesn't answer the question."

He acknowledged Kinue's legitimate concern by pausing. If only briefly. While Ryuko refused to release his coat, something that grew more concerning with every passing second, he still managed to

keep his composure, "This synchronization interfered with their connection to the Original Life Fiber. Enough to ensure Danketsu won't die. Unfortunately, it appears that creature's destruction still had consequences."

Kinue grimaced, her mouth opening and closing before the question spilled forth, "There's nothing you can do?"

"The mere existence of the Original Life Fiber overturned centuries of knowledge," Kisuke didn't move when Ryuko's hands slipped from his coat, "In fact, I can count on both hands what I *won't* have to reexamine. But this is something I'm going to solve. Not out of curiosity. Or even as a final insult to Ragyo Kiryuin. Rather, after everything you've done, all the sacrifices you've made, this is the least I could do."

Ryuko didn't know what to say.

She was angry. Fuck! She was pissed off. Why the hell did this happen to Senketsu! It wasn't right! She wanted to beat the crap out of Kisuke for not having the answer! But punching the bastard wouldn't solve anything. It wouldn't help Senketsu. Her hands trembled at the echoes of his voice. She remembered his brutal honesty about everything. Even her atrocious diet. She bit her lower lip, almost drawing blood as she remembered the countless times Senketsu complained about her BMI. And how, every time, she argued back, exclaiming he had no right to say stuff like that.

Her heart sank at the memory. The anger bubbling in her chest evaporated, leaving behind nothing but an encroaching emptiness, "Ichigo said you shinigami have living swords. So do you ever... talk... with your zanpakuto?"

"Benihime isn't the 'nicest' zanpakuto," Kisuke motioned toward the sealed zanpakuto leaning innocuously against the computer, "But compared to your relationship with Senketsu, I suppose the correlation is strained at best. Most shinigami don't bother

conversing with their zanpakuto outside of training. And even the rare moments they do, it's usually never about something trivial."

"It's just... the silence. Not hearing his voice," Ryuko didn't look at her sweater. Or rather, Mako's sweater. Sure, it was nice even if it was a little tight. And maybe the strange pattern hurt her eyes. But the more she looked at it, the more she felt like she was betraying Senketsu. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she pulled on her sleeves, smoothing the nonexistent wrinkles, "Because without Senketsu, it's like..."

"... something's missing?"

Kinue never intended to finish Ryuko's thoughts. But the question came without prompting. The words spilling forth as if they were her own, "Because it's the same for me."

For the first time in years, she was wearing something other than Danketsu. A long-sleeved, vibrant blue blouse. One of Aikuro's last gifts before the accident. Something he confessed to spending days picking out before asking Olivier for guidance. Which, from Aikuro's bruises in the immediate aftermath, hadn't gone as intended. And yet, at the time, she'd worn it with a smile. But now things were different. After more than ten years wearing Danketsu, having the Kamui share her thoughts and body, without the Kamui, she felt naked. Alone. As if missing part of herself.

"After that day, when I decided to put on Danketsu, Isshin never returned to Osaka."

Her tone softened with every word, "Back then, I was the only one who could hear Danketsu. I knew Life Fibers were alive. But capable of human speech? The thought never occurred to me. For years, I thought the voice in my mind - shouting, yelling, screaming in my ears - was a hallucination. I ignored Danketsu. I ran away from my problems. Refusing to talk to Aikuro. My brother. Anyone. I was terrified what might happen if I lost control. That I would hurt... or worse... the people I love."

"I once believed clothing and humans could coexist. Tsumugu said I was naïve. That Life Fibers couldn't be trusted. And perhaps, to some extent, he was right."

She felt her hands trembling, "But there's nothing wrong with dreams. If I didn't blind myself with self-loathing, maybe things would have turned out different. Perhaps I would have seen the truth."

"It's disgraceful it took meeting Ichigo to realize that."

The beating of her heart didn't stop Kinue from sensing the shifting atmosphere, "After seeing him speak to Mugetsu as friends... as equals... I realized what happened to Danketsu was my fault. And mine alone. Her anger was born from loneliness. The madness from watching, helpless and afraid, the only person who could hear her voice deny her very existence."

Something in her voice cracked, "At that moment, I vowed, no matter the cost, to help Danketsu. To undo everything created through my ignorance. I knew it wouldn't be easy. Perhaps impossible. But towards the end, I believe she was beginning to forgive me."

"So, I want your word, Kisuke Urahara."

Kinue glared at the shinigami, a cold glint shimmering beneath steel blue eyes, "That you'll save Danketsu."

"If that's what it takes..."

Kisuke bowed, not just as Kinue, but at Ichigo, Ryuko and Satsuki. He swept an arm across his body, bucket hat clasped in his fingers, "You have my word. I won't stop working until reversing what happened to Danketsu."

"I..."

Ichigo stared at the ground in front of Mugetsu. He wanted to look into her eyes. But for some reason, found himself unable to do so.

Seeing his Kamui like this wasn't right. He'd seen Mugetsu sleeping. This was different. It reminded him, although not perfectly, of the days before she awakened. When he believed she was something Kisuke created for some ulterior purpose. His jaw clenched, brow furrowing into a frown. This shouldn't have happened. After everything they've been through - dealing with Nui and Ragyo Kiryuin to Alucard - she didn't deserve *this* .

If only...

"It's not your fault."

Despite the ghost white overcoat hugging her body, Satsuki shivered. She wanted nothing more than to speak candidly with Ichigo. To abolish the unnecessary guilt festering within his mind. But she couldn't relate to his sorrow. At least, not to the same extent. Junketsu had been - was - her ally. Her friend. Yet when the Kamui first awakened that night many months ago, she treated Junketsu as nothing more than clothing. Something to be conquered under the necessity of keeping control. A rabid, inhuman creature destined to kneel underneath her iron will and unyielding determination. And perhaps, during those initial weeks, that was closer to the truth than she cared to admit. For Junketsu *had* sought every advantage to devour her body and soul beneath Life Fibers.

Yet, if Ichigo's recollections were accurate, Ragyo Kiryuin was to blame for Junketsu's original personality.

"I never heard Junketsu. Merely faint whispers on the wind. Intense emotions. Her constant curiosity. In some regards, I'm envious of you and Ryuko."

Without the slightest reluctance, she stared at the patches of fabric representing Junketsu's eyes. The way she originally treated the Kamui as clothing, something Ragyo Kiryuin would have been proud of, could never be forgiven. Even if Junketsu herself thought otherwise. Frowning, almost glowering from disgust, she turned towards Ichigo, "Perhaps that's nothing more than an excuse. But



even so, there's no reason to blame yourself. If Mugetsu were here, I'm certain she'd tell you the same thing."

"Satsuki's right!"

Ryuko backed away from Kisuke, no longer interested in threatening the shopkeeper. Instead, she snorted. A hint of normalcy breaking through the guilt as she nudged an elbow against Ichigo's ribs, "Senketsu wouldn't want me moping like an idiot! And if there's anyone on this freaking planet smart enough to wake him up, it's the smug bastard who tricked my bitch of a mom!"

"Well, that's awfully flattering of you to -"

"But let's get one thing straight."

Kisuke *froze* when the Scissor Blade hooked around Ryuko's belt expanded to full, lethal size with a metallic *clang* . He grinned nervously, the corner of his mouth twitching, when that same weapon gently touched the underside of his chin.

"If anything happens to Senketsu," Ryuko twisted the Scissor Blade against the shopkeeper's chin, "I'm gonna tear you apart limb from limb! Got it!?"

"T-There's no reason to act so rashly," Kisuke was keenly aware of the Scissor Blade's sharpness. While he never worked on Professor Matoi's creation, the Scissor Blade and Tournesol were created based upon the same principle, "Senketsu's in capable hands! After all, I created Mugetsu! You can trust me, Ryuko!"

"Oh really? Because now I'm *really* worried you're gonna -"

"Calm yourself, Ryuko."

Ryuko flinched when someone grabbed her shoulder. But after taking one look at Satsuki, she allowed her sister to approach Hat-and-Clogs. But not without snorting. And making sure to keep an eye

on the bastard, "Your fears are unfounded. I'm confident Kisuke Urahara's expertise in Life Fiber manipulation is more than sufficient to help our Kamui."

"I knew you'd see things my -"

"However, as inheritors of our mother's estate, if something *does* happen to Senketsu or Junketsu," Satsuki interrupted the shopkeeper without regard for social etiquette. Every ounce of her legendary willpower was focused onto a single point, taking the otherwise implacable man off guard, "We have the power and resources to make him disappear."

"T-That's a little excessive, isn't it?"

From the neutral perspective of an outside observer, Kisuke knew Satsuki posed little threat to his wellbeing. While she was frighteningly strong for a human, without Junketsu he was relatively certain he could handle anything she threw in his direction. Yet his heart was beating a mile a minute. Perspiration trickled down his cheeks. And it had nothing to do with the blue-white backdrop of light flickering around the teenager, "To think that I, an entrepreneur of children's delicacies and other products, would damage Junketsu is preposterous! Surely you can trust someone Ragyo Kiryuin despised with every fiber of her being!"

"Perhaps you're correct."

The words *sounded* positive but Kisuke found the underlying threat very disturbing. In desperation, he turned to Ichigo, looking for support, careful not to prick his skin on the Scissor Blade, "Ichigo! Tell them there's nothing to worry about!"

"Hang on, Satsuki. Threatening Hat-and-Clogs won't solve anything."

Kisuke breathed a sigh of relief. Hearing Ichigo intercede on his behalf against Satsuki and Ryuko was a weight off his shoulders. At least until Ichigo continued speaking in a slightly less friendly tone, "I

mean, Uryu's old man has more money than Ragyo Kiryuin ever did. He must have enough cash to make sure nobody asks questions."

"That's right," Ryuko agreed, perhaps a bit too quickly, "Besides, it would be really bad if Satsuki got in trouble."

"Y-You're not serious!"

"A word of warning, Kisque Urahara."

Kinue found herself experiencing a variety of unexpected emotions. Kisque Urahara was a renowned expert on Kamui. Something not even the Grand Couturier could claim. There was no questioning his experience. Yet, with subtle nuance, she stepped to the side, placing herself between the shinigami and Karakura Town, "While I haven't researched Life Fibers for years, I'm still considered a world-renowned expert. And I recognize most of your equipment. Life Fiber extraction and manipulation. Weaving threads into clothing based upon a fifty percent purity basis while minimizing catastrophic loss of cohesion. Which is why I can say..."

She paused, considered her words, before adding in a tone brooking no arguments, "If you screw this up, Olivier will be the first to know."

"N-Now, there's no reason to get her involved!"

Kisque couldn't help but chuckle nervously. He had *no* intention of incurring that woman's wrath. And while Olivier Mira Armstrong didn't possess the strength nor the power to beat him within an inch of his life, multiple plans were already in motion. Countless scenarios formed in his mind. Hundreds of variables came and went as he dealt with the notion of having the second most terrifying woman he'd had the misfortune of meeting coming for his head.

"I'm sure we can work something out!"

He instinctively raised his hands in a placating gesture. Hoping, perhaps foolishly, to reduce the chances his life would devolve into a

veritable hell worse than anything Ragyo Kiryuin's twisted mind could inflict. And yet, when that failed, Kisuke realized, after wondering most of the morning, why Yoruichi decided to take the day off.

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December 20th, 2002

"I should have told you."

Her breath emerged in pale whispers as she stared across the grave-marked landscape of Yanaka Cemetery. She'd never visited the infamous location. There was never any desire to do so. Only a few people were meandering through the ancient monuments and weathered memorials, paying their respects to ancestors long gone. Most likely from the inclement weather overtaking Tokyo. She sighed, lightly and with regret hanging onto her expression, not at those who might eavesdrop upon her confession, but at Gamagori. Her former invincible shield had offered her accompany them. A request she'd originally rejected only to change her mind, convinced by Gamagori's unwavering insistence.

As well as Soroi's.

"No. It's... fine," Ryuko spared Satsuki a quick, almost guilty, look through the mist from her breath, "It's fine. This... I don't know... seems better. I guess."

"He deserved something more respectful than a nameless grave in an overgrown cemetery," the words, practiced until memorized, came easily. And yet, even with the cold winter biting at her cheeks, the blue scarf wrapped around her neck fluttering in the wind, Satsuki felt not a trace of the surrounding winter. She had used the Kiryuin name, a phrase that left a bitter taste on her tongue, to remove the bureaucratic tape and silence questions from curious

individuals in order to transfer their father to Yanaka Cemetery. A process, for anyone other than herself, that would have taken months.

Perhaps even years.

"This was my decision," she looked downwards, disturbing the snow settled in her hair, "But I believed it was better his grave bore the name he chose for himself. Not the one given by our mother."

"... it's funny."

The polished granite stone bearing the name 'Isshin Matoi' didn't mean crap. Isshin. Souichiro. Or whatever. The name didn't matter. He was dad. That was all he ever was, "Dad took me from that orphanage. But you know what? The first chance he got, the bastard sent me to a stupid boarding school. I only really spent time with him on Christmas or my birthday. I was angry. I wanted to know why he never talked about mom. Or what he did. Or why he seemed really nervous whenever I came home."

Guilt swelled in her chest, growing until she was forced to look away from the grave, "I was too stupid to realize dad was protecting me. If I hadn't been so immature maybe -"

"Our father made mistakes."

Yanaka Cemetery shimmered with a pale light from the snow-heavy skies. But Satsuki wasn't paying attention to such trivialities. At the moment, all she wished to do - rather, all she could do - was bear her share of the guilt, "Yet he dedicated his life to making amends for those same mistakes. He promoted Life Fibers. Oversaw countless atrocities. And more than likely agreed with our mother's heinous experiments. But he saw the errors of his ways. Alongside likeminded individuals, he established Nudist Beach. Using the knowledge obtained at Revocs, he created the Scissor Blades, Senketsu and Danketsu. They would never have existed if he hadn't betrayed Ragyo Kiryuin."

"He even sacrificed his life protecting you from Nui Harime."

Satsuki stopped, eyes widening in realization, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have -"

"That's the damn problem!"

Ryuko staggered underneath the weight of her own guilt. And she didn't need to see Satsuki to know her sister understood exactly what she meant, "I had her, Satsuki! Senketsu finally kicked Nui's ass! I had the perfect chance to take down Nui! I could have avenged dad's death! But when I had Nui right where I wanted her..."

Her jaw clenched as she trembled, barely able to speak above a whisper, "... I couldn't do it."

"Don't blame yourself, Ryuko."

An excuse formed in her mind. Or perhaps an apology. But Satsuki couldn't say them. She had no right to speak lies veiled as the truth. Ryuko had spent months searching across Japan for the Grand Couturier. Transferring from one academy to another. Tirelessly looking for clues and information on the woman who killed their father. At the same time, she had known Nui Harime killed someone deemed enough of a threat for her personal involvement. A stark departure from their mother's usual approach of leaving Nudist Beach to Xcution. But not any specifics beyond the knowledge Isshin Matoi wounded the Grand Couturier before succumbing to his wounds.

And worsening Nui Harime's already fragile mental stability.

"You spared the Grand Couturier. An act of mercy I never would have considered."

Satsuki crushed the nausea growing in her stomach. An unwelcoming sensation not at the confession, but the implications.

Every word she told Ryuko was the truth. If their roles were reversed, if *she* pursued Shinra Koketsu instead of Ryuko, she wouldn't have hesitated to strike down Nui Harime. It would have been cathartic. Well within her rights to do so. But her death would have been a short-term, pyrrhic victory. One that ensured humanity did not live to see another morning.

"And perhaps that was for the best."

Her gaze settled upon the incense burning in front of the grave, "If Nui Harime hadn't betrayed the Original Life Fiber, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Ryuko bit the inside of her cheek. A shudder trailed down her shoulders as the falling snow muffled everything. Maybe her sister was right. If she hadn't backed down, there was a good chance the stupid ball of yarn would have destroyed the world. But that didn't make her feel better, "Hat-and-Clogs said I was probably born with a lot of spiritual energy. That I should have always been able to see ghosts and shinigami and stuff."

"But I never saw dad's."

Her voice almost broke. When Satsuki didn't say anything, not even an excuse or apology, she stared at the ground, unable to look at the grave, "If I could see ghosts, why didn't I see dad's? I should have seen him, right? I stuck around for hours! He should have been there! Why wasn't he there?"

"I don't know."

Satsuki found herself at a loss for words. Yoruichi Shihoin explained the basic duties of shinigami. But nothing overly specific, "Only those bound through regret and strong emotions cannot pass on without assistance. Perhaps he didn't -"

"Dad was freaking murdered!"

Her voice echoed throughout the graves, briefly earning Gamagori's attention before he returned to his stupid vigil. And almost immediately, Ryuko felt like an idiot. Why the hell was she shouting at Satsuki? Her sister had no way of knowing what happened. In a quieter tone, she looked away, the corner of her mouth trembling, "You think he wouldn't want to stick around to see if I was okay? To see... to see if Nui Harime got me too?"

"What makes you think he didn't?"

Satsuki pulled the scarf downwards, exposing her tight-lipped grimace. Contrary to Ryuko, she possessed nothing more than scant recollections of their father. Faded memories twisted by time. But what she remembered was a man explaining Junketsu's purpose. The truth behind Life Fibers. How Ragyo Kiryuin murdered her little sister, which had been nothing more than a lie. Words that convinced a five-year-old child, ignorant of the cruelty awaiting her, to embark upon the arduous path leading to the Original Life Fiber's demise. A frown, almost imperceptible given the bitter weather, formed upon her brow.

Despite sacrificing her childhood for that, and other, more insidious reasons, she would never forget his smile. Nor the way their father played with her, at times against Ragyo Kiryuin's wishes.

She doubted Isshin Matoi was any different.

The encroaching cold penetrated her coat, forcing her thoughts to hasten. Nudist Beach's objective was victory over Life Fibers. But Isshin Kurosaki was likely the reason their father assumed Ryuko would be safe. If there was anyone their mother feared, whose existence tempered her otherwise unchecked lust for power, it was Ichigo's father. That fact might have been enough for their father to pass on. Believing Isshin Kurosaki would take a more proactive approach against Revocs following his death, ensuring Ryuko discovered, if not through her own actions but Nudist Beach's or his own, Senketsu, might have cleansed any regrets or strong attachments.



Yet the question remained unsettled.

It felt wrong to presume their father would pass over to the Soul Society without bidding farewell to Ryuko.

"You were besides yourself with grief, Ryuko. You had just witnessed Nui Harime escape justice after murdering our father," Satsuki closed her eyes, envisioning the last fond memories of her father, "At the same time, you were unaware of your spiritual abilities. You had never seen a ghost. Or even a Hollow. Perhaps you did see our father. Only, wracked by misplaced guilt over his death, you believed he was nothing more than a figment of your imagination."

A moment passed before Ryuko scoffed, "You really suck at making me feel better."

Satsuki arched an eyebrow at the hint of familiarity, "Am I not succeeding?"

"... damn it."

Her shoulders fell alongside a resigned sigh. All of her anger and frustration, built over the last couple of days, was gone. But now she was curious about something else. Most of what she remembered was a blur - finding the front door unlocked, her dad slumped against the wall with the Scissor Blade, chasing Nui outside and then desperately hoping he survived the explosion. But by that point, she'd been crying. That much she remembered. So maybe Satsuki was right. Maybe she did see dad's ghost.

But that didn't make her feel any damn better.

"I wish I could see him again."

Ryuko shivered, but not from the cold, "I want to tell him everything's fine. That we kicked mom's ass and saved the world from that stupid ball of yarn. And after punching him in the nose for dying without telling me anything, that I really miss him."

"You're not alone," Satsuki stared at the grave bearing her father's name, the smell of incense filling her head. It should be possible to visit the Soul Society. Ichigo accomplished such a feat, after all. Perhaps they could locate their father. But she didn't dare give Ryuko hope. If Kisuke Urahara was telling the truth, most souls lose their memories. Not to mention the scope of searching for a single soul of millions, perhaps billions, over the Rukongai.

She would not burden her sister with such devastating news.

"We've come a long way since our first meeting, Ryuko."

"Yeah," Ryuko forced a grin, "When Ichigo embarrassed you in front of everybody, right?"

Satsuki frowned, yet traces of a smile pulled against her lips, "That's not how I remember it."

"Tch! Of course, you'd say -"

"It was worse."

The confession instantly ended her sister's half-formed argument, "Ichigo was the first person to stand against Honnouji Academy. He proved himself my equal in combat. And superior in everything else. I wielded Ragyo Kiryuin's influence to further my own objectives. To create an army to combat Life Fibers, an altruistic goal through selfish means. Yet Ichigo never cared about gaining power. At any time, he could have usurped my position using Mugetsu. Something, giving my relationship with Junketsu, I could do little to prevent. But he did not do so. Ichigo only cared about one thing - protecting his friends and family. You. Mankanshoku. His family. Power meant nothing to him. *Means* nothing to him."

With every word, she found her smile growing, "I cannot imagine a world where I didn't meet Ichigo. It was through his defiance that I discarded my arrogance. My pride. That I began treating Junketsu as

a friend instead of clothing to be worn. And for that, I'm truly grateful."

Ryuko looked at Satsuki, then at their dad's grave, before scratching her nose, "Yeah, I like him too."

"... I know."

The answer was almost impossible to hear. For a moment, Ryuko believed she only imagined Satsuki saying something. But when she saw her sister's expression, the forlorn look that didn't belong anywhere on Satsuki Kiryuin, she found herself speechless. She wanted to laugh about liking Ichigo. That she was just kidding around. But that would only make everything worse.

Instead of lying, or saying anything stupid, Ryuko decided to stand in the snow, the bitterly cold winter pressing against them. As the seconds trickled into minutes, she tucked her chin into her jacket, staring past their dad's grave. And then, as the overcast skies darkened as the oppressive weather grew worse, she reached out, hesitating at the last second, and wrapped her fingers around Satsuki's.

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January 4th, 2003

"Having trouble sleeping, Milady?"

"There's no need for formalities between us, Soroi," Satsuki tucked a strand of misplaced hair behind her ear without another word. Leaning her head against the couch, fingers tracing a path along the collar of the form-fitting white robe accentuating her figure, she stared through the frost-covered window at the waxing moon, "How many times must I repeat myself?"

"At least once more."

Mitsuzo Soroi continued stirred the bitter-smelling liquid while replying without the slightest hesitation. Tapping the spoon against the teapot, he held the sterling silver tray delicately in his hands, careful not to disturb the carefully arranged ensemble, before maneuvering across the darkened living room with the dexterity of someone half his age, "In any case, I took the liberty of preparing some tea."

"Thank you, Soroi."

"It's my pleasure, Milady."

Satsuki listened to the man she considered her surrogate father pour the steaming tea with measured precision. Careful not to spill even a single drop. But she didn't speak. Rather, she closed her eyes, allowing what faint wisps of Karakura Town's winter that survived the interior heating to touch her face. She needed to properly thank Ryuken Ishida for his unexpected hospitality. While Karakura town was undergoing reconstruction through cooperation between Revocs and Ishida Pharmaceuticals, he'd graciously allowed both herself and Ichigo's family to stay at his manor.

A courtesy, he called it, for defeating Ragyo Kiryuin and ending the threat posed by Life Fibers.

"Your technique hasn't dulled in the slightest," she accepted the offered cup, nodding curtly before bringing it towards her mouth. After a single taste, the familiar bitterness resting on her tongue, Satsuki added, "Exquisite. I dare say it might have even improved."

"Practice makes perfect. Although, if I may speak freely, I'm certain no one shares your particular palate," Soroi placed the sterling silver tray on the nearby table, careful not to disturb the arrangement, "Just last week, your sister asked if I could make her some tea. *Your* tea, to be specific. She was quite insistent. Unfortunately, she didn't find the taste to her liking."

She sighed under her breath, "I suspected as much."

"Incidentally, I have news concerning your affairs," Soroi stepped back into place, to the right of his mistress, with practiced expertise, "Nudist Beach attempted to reach you earlier in the evening. While I couldn't understand most of the vernacular, it appears your mother's estate will require extensive decontamination. According to Mister Armstrong, the amount of Life Fibers beneath the manor was 'nightmarishly overwhelming.' In all likelihood, there's little chance you'll have the opportunity to rebuild."

"Do you think I care?"

The scent from the bitter liquid filled her head as Satsuki scowled, "That place means nothing to me."

She stared through the fogged window, brow furrowed into an introspective frown. It was a ridiculous question. One that required no thinking to answer. Her family sustained themselves through barbarity. They sacrificed their souls - their very essence and humanity - to Life Fibers. Despite the countless atrocities committed at her hands, or by those working underneath her authority, Ragyo Kiryuin's actions were nothing more than the logical conclusion of that parasitic relationship. Rebuild the Kiryuin Manor? No. That was unacceptable. She would not take the chance the slightest remnant of the Original Life Fiber survived.

"Inform Alex Louis Armstrong that his organization has permission to destroy everything they believe dangerous," she momentarily paused, contemplating Soroi's subdued reaction to the order, before continuing in the same, commanding tone, "As for my mother? According to the news, Ragyo Kiryuin was one of thousands who perished during the 'cocoon incident' last year. I intend to ensure her legacy remains as such."

"Your mother... was quite different in her youth."

The reminder of Ragyo Kiryuin brought to the forefront of Soroi's mind memories of better times. For a moment, he reminisced about the past, remembering the woman as she used to be instead of the monster who died, "When I first started working for your family, Ragyo was kind. Happy. One of the friendliest people I'd had the pleasure of meeting. Of course, she also had quite the sense of humor."

He sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping forward, "You might have inherited your mother's appearance, but your sister has more of her personality."

An eyebrow quirked at the admission, "You don't say..."

"Perhaps lacking most of Miss Ryuko's colorful language," Soroi quickly corrected himself with a cough, "But when she met that... *thing*... your mother disappeared, replaced by that monster. To some degree, I'm relieved you never knew Ragyo. If only to spare you from having memories of the woman she used to be."

"... your honesty is appreciated."

Satsuki lowered the cup until it was resting upon her lap, hints of steam wafting from the scalding liquid. As moonlight streamed through the window, casting pale shadows across the living room, her thoughts coalesced around Isshin Kurosaki. Or, more specifically, the dozens of pictures he'd shown not only her, but Ryuko, much to Ichigo's embarrassment. Soroi was correct. Contrary to her personal wishes, she possessed an uncanny resemblance to Ragyo Kiryuin. The similarity was indeed striking. But despite subconscious desires, the woman in the photographs smiling alongside Ichigo's father and her own, who had playfully laughed in the same living room in which she was currently seated, was not her mother.

That woman had long been consumed by Life Fibers, losing whatever remained of her humanity years ago.

She listened to the monotonous ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner of the room before schooling her features. It was pointless dwelling upon things that would never come to pass. But as seconds turned into minutes, and the tea in her cup slowly diminished and cooled, Satsuki heard Soroi's posture shift ever so slightly.

"You needn't my permission to speak, Soroi."

Soroi clasped his arms against the small of his back as the pale, white light from the waxing moon danced strangely across his tuxedo. After a moment to collect his thoughts, his brow furrowing in concentration, he asked, "Forgive my rudeness, but when do you intend on leaving Karakura Town?"

The question gave Satsuki pause. But not enough to arrest her thoughts. She'd expected Soroi would eventually broach that particular subject. Following Ragyo Kiryuin's death and the Original Life Fiber's destruction, Honnouji Academy was no longer necessary. Her objective, the ambition driving her forward all these years, had been fulfilled. She no longer needed an army of students that were resistant to the effects of Life Fibers. Nor her Elite Four. Even Jinketsu, should she awaken, would find herself purposeless.

"Within the next few days," she stared through the steam wafting from the tea, eyes slightly narrowed, "Possibly a week."

Jakuzure had been the first to announce her retirement.

Her childhood friend returned to her parents a few days ago, intent on acquiring the necessary skills to inherit control of the Jakuzure Corporation. An objective she'd supported without hesitation. Which, to all those familiar, possessed a certain irony given Ishida Pharmaceuticals bought the business and all related assets during the autumn but had only announced the merger after Christmas. It was a discovery Nonon took with the temperament and serenity of a rather tempestuous hurricane. And while Uryu professed innocence concerning what his father's conglomerate did, that hadn't stopped Jakuzure from chasing him halfway across Karakura Town.

Gamagori, to her muted surprise, was working underneath his father and aunt as the liaison between Nudist Beach and Kisuke Urahara.

Even with the Original Life Fiber destroyed and her mother dead, the enigmatic shopkeeper was combing through her family manor's wreckage. Something Nudist Beach undoubtedly wanted to keep on top of. Thus, explaining Gamagori's passionate resignation from the Elite Four. Where he vowed to return to her side if, or rather when, the need arose. To cast aside the shackles of nudity. But, of course, that was the public reason. The truth of the matter, that which he denied without conviction, was his relationship with Mankanshoku. Something developed at a remarkably steady pace despite Ryuko's mockery of his familial name.

After Iori reversed the surgery upon his eyes, Sanageyama explained he was heading home within the month. Alongside a generous student stipend. Although, if the rumors concerning his behavior were accurate, he'd prostrated himself before Yoruichi Shihoin, begging for further training. Something the shinigami had been more than willing to accommodate due to Kisuke Urahara taking Iori as his understudy in Life Fiber research and manipulation.

According to Inumuta, he intended to pursue an IT specialization at a premiere university in Europe. A laudable career choice. One she expected from the moment her mother's security forces caught him hacking into Revocs and manipulating its stock portfolio.

As for herself?

"Someone must stand atop the Kiryuin Conglomerate."

It was a troublesome fact known only to a handful of people. But despite the standard template of corporate bureaucracy, Ragyo Kiryuin was Revocs. Every aspect of the conglomerate ran through her office. Nothing was changed or altered, approved or denied, without her permission. For all intents and purposes, underneath the cruel façade of a monster that delighted in torturing humanity and



committed further unspeakable acts, her mother had been one of the most ruthless businesswomen on the planet.

"But assuming control wasn't particularly difficult."

The corner of her mouth twisted into a disgusted sneer, "Nui Harime and Xcution were my mother's primary means of establishing order amongst those displaying resilience to the Life Fibers in standard Revocs business attire. Without them, all that remains of her authority is the Board of Directors. A group of cowardly men and women more than willing to lick my mother's feet for the slightest scraps of power. Who, time and again, not only looked the other way, but indulged in the horrific atrocities committed at Revocs."

Which explained why they sacrificed themselves to the Original Life Fiber.

"Fortunately, they've stepped down," she craned her head slightly without averting her gaze, "Removing the last significant obstacle preventing me from completely controlling Revocs and the Kiryuin Conglomerate."

When Soroi didn't voice his opinion, Satsuki waited more than was necessary before placing the cup onto the accompanying saucer. His silence was concerning. Despite their relationship as master and servant, he wasn't one to hold his tongue. Not around her. Not anymore, "You disapprove of my decision?"

"Not at all, Milady."

Soroi shook his head, "You've informed your friends. Spoken with Isshin and Ryuken Ishida concerning your desire to inherit your mother's businesses. You even sent a detailed letter to Nudist Beach explaining what you wished to do. It seems you've informed everyone. Everyone, that is, except your sister. A suspicious lapse in judgment. Unless, of course, there is a reason you don't wish to speak with Miss Ryuko at the moment..."

Steam wafted from the teapot as he poured another cup, one that went initially untouched, "... perhaps involving a certain young man."

"... you know me too well."

A faint sigh was her only reaction to the admission, which came with far too much difficulty. Steel blue eyes stared through the frost-covered window at the waning moon, softening at the conflict raging throughout her consciousness. Soroi was correct. But for once, she wished he hadn't confessed the truth. That he reconsidered disturbing her façade of stoicism with the ease afforded by a close acquaintance. Who she considered more a parent than Ragyo Kiryuin. Her attention lingering on Soroi long enough for the tea to settle, she lowered the cup from her mouth, "But what I feel for Ichigo cannot be expressed with words."

Her pulse quickened as a strange bitterness filled her mouth, "Time and again, he threw himself into danger. He risked everything saving Junketsu from my mistakes. Fought the Grand Couturier to protect his friends, knowing full well she possessed the strength to kill him. He never backed down in the face of overwhelming adversity, even when Ragyo Kiryuin proved herself too powerful to stop."

"Ichigo's done so much for me... for Ryuko... when I've done so little for him."

The corners of her mouth twisted into a guilt-filled grimace, expressing the depths of her self-loathing. Worthiness. Happiness. Contentment. Others would believe those explained her affection towards Ichigo. But they would be wrong. There was another reason. One she would never confess, not even to Soroi or Ryuko. Throughout existence, perhaps the entire world as well, he was the only remaining person knowledgeable of Ragyo Kiryuin's depravity. The mere confirmation of which was enough to curl her fingers into fists. Not even Soroi knew more than the slightest traces of the truth. An ignorance she spent years painstakingly cultivating.

Only Ichigo understood what truly transpired between Ragyo Kiryuin and herself.

Yet, that knowledge hadn't changed his opinion. Knowing the horrendous actions Ragyo Kiryuin committed, the deeds she stoically accepted for humanity's survival, hadn't caused his impression to lessen. Ichigo never once looked upon her body with disgust. Pity. Or even disdain. The only thing she saw in those brown eyes was acceptance of who she was alongside attempts at understanding what she endured.

And how he could help.

"With my mother dead and the threat posed by Life Fibers gone, there's nothing standing between Ichigo and myself. If I wished, I could pursue him to the best of my ability," without a trace of the conflict raging in her soul, Satsuki raised the cup to her lips, pausing just before drinking, "But I cannot."

Her voice lowered an octave, "Because Ryuko's feelings are more authentic than my own."

The porcelain cup quivered despite her best efforts. Satsuki watched, a hint of disdain in her eyes, as her fingers trembled. The words - her excuse - to Soroi fading alongside her faint whisper into the surrounding darkness, "She stood alongside Ichigo long before I considered them anything more than stepping stones for my ambition. While I was dedicating my very existence to obtaining the strength necessary to defeating my mother, they were growing closer. They fought side-by-side. Supporting each other. When the Grand Couturier's murder of Mankanshoku caused Ryuko to lose control over Senketsu, Ichigo never stopped trying to save her. While I believed she needed to be put out of her misery."

"So, tell me, Soroi. Why should I place my own wants above Ryuko's?"

She hadn't intended for the question to be anything other than rhetorical. For there was no answer worth considering. Her voice nevertheless faltered towards the end, a weakness quickly suppressed by furrowing her brow. No. She didn't deserve the honor of Ichigo's affection. His kindness and sympathy. No matter how much she wished otherwise.

"Love is insidious, Milady."

An understanding, almost paternal, smile was Soroi's reaction to Satsuki's admission. With a light *clink*, he placed the teapot back on the tray, any further thoughts of refilling the cup forgotten, "You know it exists. That it's out there. Somewhere. Waiting for you. And, perhaps, like most people, you believed yourself ready. Prepared for whatever might happen. But then it sneaks up on you. In the middle of the night, you wake up and realize you've lost the battle before the war even began. That is love."

He absentmindedly mixed the bitter liquid, "Even the strongest have fallen beneath its sway. Ichigo's father. Your mother. Neither could escape its grasp. For better or worse."

Tapping the spoon against the side of the teapot, his smile tightened at the unexpected memories, "Miss Satsuki, I'm certain you already know what needs to be done. The question, to be so bold, is whether you're prepared to deal with the consequences. Whatever they may be."

"Are you speaking from personal experience?"

His hold upon the spoon relaxed at the lighthearted annoyance in the question. It was a welcoming departure hearing Satsuki speak with such emphasis. A reminder of the young woman he'd raised in her father's absence, "Let's just say I was quite popular in my younger -"

"Oh?"

The faint creaking of floorboards interrupting Soroi's attempt at regaling Satsuki with stories of his younger days. Turning towards the door, he was curious who could be awake at this time of night. And judging from Miss Satsuki's arched eyebrow, it wasn't an opinion he held alone. Yet his curiosity was sated, replaced by veiled relief, at the young man standing at the entrance to the living room.

"My apologies," he bowed his head, careful not to disturb the arrangement in his hands, "I must have forgotten to close the door."

"It's fine."

Ichigo looked at Soroi. And then at Satsuki sitting on the other side of the room. He hadn't intended to eavesdrop on them. But when the old goat wouldn't stop snoring no matter how much he tried smothering the bastard, he decided to stretch his legs. Maybe get something to drink. With an awkward cough, he pivoted on the spot, more than ready to leave, "I should probably get going."

"Are you having trouble sleeping?"

"My old man's been snoring all night," Ichigo snorted under his breath at the question. He'd tried everything short of stabbing the bastard. But the old goat's subconscious strength was more than enough to send him flying across the room, "It's so loud I can hear him through the freaking wall."

"Perhaps some tea would soothe your nerves."

Soroi began preparing another cup of tea despite the young man's insistence to the contrary. But when little more than a light trickle poured from the pot, barely enough to fill a quarter of the cup, a perplexed frown pushed against his brow, "It seems I'll need to prepare another batch of tea. If you'll excuse me, Milady."

"No, it's really not -"

Ichigo reached forward in protest only to sigh, defeated and embarrassed, when Soroi closed the doors to the living room with a soft *click* . Leaving him alone with Satsuki, who hadn't so much as turned around or spoken. For a moment, the deafening silence was oppressive as he stood there, wearing nothing more than a white shirt and pajamas, with the grandfather clock Uryu claimed was a family heirloom ticking away in the corner. Each second more awkward than the last. But eventually, as he prepared to leave despite whatever consequences awaited on the other side of the door, Satsuki's voice pierced through the darkness.

"How much did you hear, Ichigo?"

"Pretty much everything."

He knew better than to keep secrets from Satsuki, especially when she already knew the answer. But after hearing Satsuki confess her feelings... about him and Ryuko... he really didn't know what to say. Feeling a pang of guilt in his chest, he frowned, mouth tightening into a grimace, "What you said. To Soroi. Did you really -"

"The Kiryuin Conglomerate is interwoven with the world economy."

Satsuki purposely interrupted Ichigo. She deliberately and with great effort pushed aside what she *knew* he would ask. About Ryuko and herself. She couldn't allow that. So, she decided to focus their conversation upon another matter, "If Revocs were to collapse in the wake of Ragyo Kiryuin's death, there would undoubtedly be a major recession. Millions would lose their homes when the markets crashed. Countless others would suffer."

She heard the unmistakable sound of Ichigo walking across the room. But her gaze never shifted away from the window. Even now, with the city sleeping, she could see the dozens of construction sites littering the cityscape. Yet, at this time of night, everything was quiet. Peaceful. But when Ichigo collapsed next to her on the couch, his body only inches away from her own, she found her hand

subconsciously clenching into a fist, "This is something I must do. Yet the thought of leaving Karakura Town feels unconscionable."

A self-loathing scoff passed between her lips when Ichigo remained silent, "I suppose this sounds incomprehensible. That I would consider discarding my responsibility. It must sound pathetic."

"That's not true."

Ichigo tried to think of something, or really anything, to say. But that was all that came to mind. He hadn't expected to talk with Satsuki about this. At least, not yet. But the words came without prompting, "You told me once, back at Honnouji Academy, that you didn't care if you were embarrassed or ashamed as long as you fulfilled your ambitions. That if something stood in your way, you wouldn't hesitate to charge forward without regret. But you're *not* Ragyo Kiryuin. You're not the woman who tried sacrificing everyone to Life Fibers. You say you want to undo her mistakes. I get that. But what do *you* want?"

"I..."

Two days ago, the notion that she, Satsuki Kiryuin, couldn't answer something so blatantly obvious would have been ludicrous. And yet her mouth opened and closed, silence passing between her lips. Her eyes quivered slightly, falling upon the empty cup in her hands. Since her earlier recollections, Ragyo Kiryuin's death had been her sole ambition. The reason she endured that monster's reprehensible depravity. Every second of her existence, from the moment she awakened in the morning to her final thoughts, had been focused on preparing for the day her mother lied dead at her feet.

Yet now her resolve faltered?

For years, she'd known that someone would need to place themselves upon the vacant position of CEO of Revocs. Her mother, whether through arrogance or amusement, had instilled into her consciousness the knowledge necessary to successfully inherit the

Kiryuin Conglomerate. After in the immediate aftermath of her mother's death, at her very hands no less, she discovered nothing had changed. From her first steps through the Garganta to recuperating in Karakura Town, she'd prepared to atone for Ragyo Kiryuin's sins. It was her responsibility as a Kiryuin.

So why, sitting next to Ichigo, could she not utter those simple words?

"Since I could remember my father's smile, I've anticipated watching Ragyo Kiryuin's blood leave her dying corpse. Never once did my resolve to see that come to pass waver. Standing victorious over Life Fibers... no matter the cost... was my ambition," she stared into the hazy reflection formed upon the cooling tea. A deep, breathless sigh passed between her lips as she hesitated to look into Ichigo's eyes, anxious at what she might see, "One I was determined to see through. And then accept punishment. I was prepared to accept the burden not only of Ragyo Kiryuin's innumerable sins, but my own as well."

"Satsuki..."

"But that no longer holds validity."

She frowned at the words, unsure whether the emphasis behind them was genuine, "For the first time, I wish nothing more than to cast aside my responsibilities. To allow others to deal with my mother's mistakes. Because sitting here... at your side, Ichigo... alleviates the weight of the world upon my shoulders."

Her voice immediately hardened as a sense of guilt, of self-loathing and disdain towards her selfishness, gave it a sharp edge, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have -"

"You're worried about how Ryuko will feel, aren't you?"

Satsuki wished nothing more than to deny the accusation, but all that emerged was a faint whisper, "... yes."



Ichigo didn't know why Satsuki was apologizing. Worrying about Ryuko, how she felt and what she wanted, should have been the normal reason. At least, for most people. And seeing Satsuki flustered? It was completely at odds with what he'd come to expect from the Student Council President of Honnouji Academy. But he didn't say that. For what seemed like an eternity, he sat in silence, listening to the monotonous ticking of the grandfather clock, the words he wanted to confess refusing to form.

"I understand."

It took effort to speak. But that was more than enough to break the tension, "You're worried about hurting her feelings. I get that. I mean, Ryuko's saved my life. And I've rescued her more times than I can count. She's the kind of person that won't let you down. Who will always have your back, no matter what it takes. But the truth is, we're just friends. So, if you're blaming yourself, don't. Because it's not your fault. I spent a lot of time thinking about this. Wondering what to say. If I should say anything. And the only thing that came to mind... the only thing that wouldn't hurt you or Ryuko... was not to say anything."

Her fingers trembled at the strange, unfamiliar tightening in her chest.

A strand of hair fell across her eyes. But Satsuki found herself unbothered. All that mattered were Ichigo's words. Yet she didn't dare broach the only subject on her mind. Asking him whether Ryuko knew of his decision was repugnant. Whatever words they exchanged weren't any of her concern. She did not have the right to know what was said. Whether anything was said. Yet she felt relieved by his reassurance. A sense of contentment that quickly twisted into self-loathing guilt.

How could she think something so callous and cruel about Ryuko? She was her sister. The only family she had left.

To derive satisfaction from winning something so *pointless* was...

"You were right about one thing."

She almost flinched at the unexpected admission. Eyes widening, she looked at Ichigo, surprised by his faint, almost embarrassed, grin, "Someone needs to run Revocs. And there's no one better than the Student Council President. Just don't ask for my help. The only experience I have with that sort of thing is being your Vice President. And I wasn't very good at it."

"... I suppose you weren't."

Her eyes fell towards the cup clasped between her hands as she returned Ichigo's smile. Promoting him to her Vice President had been a calculated decision. One designed to alleviate his suspicions of her actions while simultaneously protecting Ryuko and him from the Grand Couturier through her unlimited authority as Student Council President. Something Ragyo Kiryuin had agreed superseded Revocs within Honnou City, "But it was a prudent move. One I wouldn't change, even in retrospect. Although, there is one point of contention."

A familiar scowl, possessing neither anger or frustration, formed upon her face, "Your acceptance speech during Parent Student Day could have been expanded. I expected, based upon our former animosity, at least two minutes of insults and complaints."

When Ichigo laughed at the reminder, Satsuki set the cup down on the table. There was more she could say. *Wanted* to say. She could confess her feelings. Thank Ichigo for everything he's done. Not only for her, but for Junketsu, Ryuko and even Nui Harime. It appeared, coincidentally or not, everyone he befriended found themselves bettered. But she didn't. Instead of wasting time on meaningless words, none of which possessed the ability to convey the depths of her feelings, she simply returned Ichigo's smile while gazing out through the window into the moonlit skies over Karakura Town.

Perfectly content and happy.

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March 22nd, 2003

"... you are cordially invited to attend the wedding celebrating the unison between..."

Kisuke's voice devolved into intrigued muttering at the fanciful, almost extravagant, invitation. As the torn envelope fluttered to the ground, scrapping against the dirt as the early spring breeze blew it away from his shop, he blinked owlishly, unsure whether he'd misread the names embossed in golden script. Rereading the invitation with the delicacy of a scientist, and then a third time to be sure, he hummed quietly, "Well, this is quite the pleasant and unexpected surprise!"

"Why'd you stop reading?"

He doubled over when Yoruichi thrust the sharp edge of her elbow between his ribs. She couldn't believe Kisuke, of all people, would purposely stop right before announcing the lucky couple's names. Was he that much of an idiot? Shooting an irritated glare at the incapacitated man clutching his ribs, Yoruichi snatched the invitation from his quivering fingers, amber eyes darting back and forth. The two names written in golden script immediately drawing her attention.

Kinue and Aikuro.

Yoruichi paused at the names. So, they were finally tying the knot. She'd wondered when the exhibitionist would finally propose to Kinue. And it appeared they decided the ceremony will take place in July, right at the peak of summer. Which was fantastic. But it was the venue, sponsored by Revocs with all expenses and accommodations included, that transformed her smirk into a cat-like audacious grin.

At least until she recognized the familiar glint in Kisuke's eyes.

"It's in *Paris*..."

Leaning forward, purposely positioning herself between the man and the nearest escape route, her eyebrow twitched, "If you're thinking about not going..."

"Who me? Come on, Yoruichi! Would I honestly turn down something like this without a good reason?"

Kisuke laughed nervously at Yoruichi's unflinching - and terrifying - expression. Did she really have such little faith in him? How could she believe, even for a moment, that he would politely turn down attending a wedding at one of the most extravagant churches in Europe? Whipping a paper fan from within the folds of his sleeve, he waved the hand-built accessory in front of his mouth, hiding the bead of sweat slowly trickling down his cheek, "It's a matter of business! July is the busiest month of the year! And with the Soul Society asking about Ragyo Kiryuin, Revocs and Honnouji Academy, I can't simply *leave* Karakura Town whenever I want..."

"I'll watch over things while you're gone."

The murderous glint in Yoruichi's eyes was recognizable. Usually whenever Kisuke was on the cusp of digging his grave deeper. Which is why Tessai, against his better judgement and instincts, decided to intervene. "It shouldn't be too difficult running things in your absence. If assistance truly is required, I'm certain Iori and Jinta won't mind lending a hand moving the equipment in the basement."

His glasses shimmered opaquely in the sunlight, "Which you promised to dispose of last month."

"Hmm... can't argue with that logic."

Kisuke wisely agreed with the former captain and current assistant manager to his shop, nodding sagely despite the malevolent spiritual

pressure, "And you have a point. If Miss Satsuki truly is paying for everything, I don't see why we can't go. After all, without the fate of the world resting on our shoulders, it's not like we have anything better to do."

He collapsed onto the ground when Yoruichi kicked him in the knee.

As the only man to outsmart Sosuke Aizen struggled against the unrelenting pain, Yoruichi snorted under her breath. She didn't buy his excuse for a second. Anything better to do? If they weren't friends, she'd beat the ever-living crap out of him for daring to suggest something so ridiculous. But Kisuke was a man of his word. If he said they were going, the argument was as good as over, "The wedding's in four months! Plenty of time for you to find something nice to wear!"

"Now that's an -"

"And *not* something by you!"

His mouth snapped shut before he could offer anything more than a feeble protest. She'd seen his work. And while his skills were appreciable, allowing Kisuke to make her something appropriate was a mistake she wouldn't repeat. Not a third time. Glaring harshly in his general direction, a warning against the mischievous thoughts likely circulating in his mind, she stepped into the afternoon, rolling her shoulders to loosen the stiffen muscles, "I'm going to Isshin's to pick something up! Don't even *think* about making me a dress!"

"Who me? I'm insulted by such a baseless accusation!"

He feigned bewilderment, at least until Yoruichi disappeared in a step of exceedingly slow Shunpo. Once certain Tessai had taken a leave of absence, more like that assured they would attend the wedding without further incentive, Kisuke snapped the paper fan shut. He honestly couldn't blame their annoyance with his longer-than-normal hesitation. Because he didn't have any reason not to watch Kinue and Aikuro declare their undying love for each other. As

long as Tessai opened the store in the morning, the Seireitei shouldn't be upset if he took a few days' vacation.

If the investigation hadn't already finished, he was confident Iori was knowledgeable enough to satisfy even Mayuri's most esoteric questions.

Speaking of whom...

Kisuke couldn't help but smirk. The expression on Mayuri's face upon seeing some of the few remaining Life Fibers in the World of the Living suspended within a time-dilating Bakudo had been literally priceless. It wasn't every day the self-proclaimed mad genius was struck speechless, unable to formulate anything more than silent disbelief. Only to immediately ask dozens of questions concerning Life Fibers. Their origins. How they procreate. How they absorb spiritual energy. How they can be woven into clothing. All of which he'd answered per arrangement. Minus a few details, of course. Such as their involvement with Aizen's Hogyoku. And Kamui.

Plus a few lies when Mayuri insisted on transferring the Life Fibers to the Twelfth Division for further study. Honest stretching of details, such as warning that removing the Life Fibers from suspended animation would lead to their destruction. And that the Bakudo keeping them intact was his personal creation. Otherwise, he was certain Mayuri would have attempted to steal the threads from underneath his nose.

But a wedding?

He flipped the invitation, which Yoruichi returned before leaving, between his fingers, "I wonder how much I should give the lucky couple."

His thoughtful humming turned introspective. Almost contemplative. That was the question, wasn't it? According to custom, Kinue and Aikuro would expect shūgi-bukuro of specific demonization. If, of course, they were planning a formal Japanese ceremony. Anything

else might not require handing over money. He lowered the fan from his mouth, frowning at the insinuation. On the other hand, different customs might require other forms of gifts. Perhaps personal discounts from his store, completely free without any strings attached, would cover every conceivable base? Nudist Beach was interested in the high-end merchandise and products recently shipped from the Soul Society, some of which were quite dangerous to humans.

Which left one last thing to consider.

Already aware the invitation was no longer in his possession, Kisuke rubbed his chin, feigning ignorance at the situation. Yoruichi said he couldn't make her something nice. And, from her tone, nothing for himself. Luckily there was a third option, "What do you think I should wear?"

"Something stylish shouldn't stand out *too* much."

Ururu flipped the invitation over in her hands. The gold embossed lettering was a nice touch. It really highlighted the silver leaf pattern along the edges. Tilting her head slightly to the right, she maneuvered around Kisuke, exposing the grey blazer and matching skirt of Karakura High School, "But you know, Mister Urahara, since Satsuki's paying for everything, we should think about giving the lucky couple something very special. This is a once-in-a-lifetime ceremony. If Kinue's willing to hear us out, I'm sure we can make her a beautiful bridal gown."

"You might be onto something, Ururu."

In all likelihood, Kinue probably wouldn't appreciate the magnanimous gesture. Even if it came with no strings attached. This was her wedding, after all, and interfering with a woman's special day, even with the intent of being helpful, would only lead to trouble. And pain. Because although she no longer wore Danketsu, and the Kamui no longer was worn by her, the lucky bride was powerful

enough, in her own right, to give him, a humble and handsome shopkeeper, multiple broken bones and lacerations.

"But let's put that into consideration for a rainy day," he brushed some errant dust from his jacket. Giving advice to a bride-to-be who can punch holes through solid rock? Even *he* was nowhere near that foolish, "I'm more concerned about what *I* should wear. Although, given my rather busy schedule and general laziness, renting a suit isn't exactly out of the question."

"Gosh! Now why on earth would you say something so incredibly stupid?"

The saccharine smile adorning Nui Harime was practically glowing when she appeared on his right. Sapphire eyes swiveled towards Ururu as her blonde hair, no longer maintained as overly-impressive pigtails but hung down her back in long curl, bobbed alongside her head, "Do you honestly expect us to believe you would rent a cheap, mass-produced suit?"

Her checks puffed out, giving the facsimile of annoyance, as she plucked several threads from his sleeve. But it was her sister who voiced their collective suspicions, "We know you far too well, Mister Urahara."

"I can't get anything past you two, now can I?"

Kisuke snapped the paper fan shut, "Alright, since Yoruichi will likely get annoyed one way or another, I don't see any reason you two can't work together on this little project."

He felt, rather than hear or see, Nui and Ururu's synchronized excitement. It was odd, to say the least. Ever since accepting the Grand Couturier into his lovely abode and allowing the natural Twin Life Fiber Entanglement to form instead of forcing the connection like Ragyo Kiryuin, things had evolved in several unexpected, yet not surprising ways. For starters, he wasn't the only one to notice how personable Ururu was. More out-going and friendly. Less prone to



being shy. A complete reversal from her personality before Isshin transferred Ururu to Honnouji Academy.

Nui, on the other hand, was a lot calmer. At first, it had been quite terrifying seeing her behave in such a normal fashion. To not only live underneath his roof but act as if nothing ever happened between them. Of course, bits and pieces of her former personality from her days as the Grand Couturier surfaced every now and then. Usually whenever she became excited over something. But as long as Ururu was around, or Ichigo was willing to head on over, he wasn't particularly worried about waking up in the middle of the night with a Scissor Blade lodged in his chest.

"But I want to see your designs first," he commented with a distinct lack of seriousness, fully aware that Nui and Ururu were already gone, "Yoruichi will be awfully mad if I overshadow the lucky couple!"

Once they disappeared into the darkest depths of his store, more than likely to Iori's personal workshop, which would inevitably lead to another confrontation, Kisuke removed his hat and sighed. This wasn't the life he'd anticipated following Ragyo Kiryuin's defeat. Not by a long shot. Despite her willing participation in the Original Life Fiber's destruction, Olivier Mira Armstrong's desire for Nui Harime to 'suffer the consequences of her actions' hadn't been surprising. As the Grand Couturier, Nui had killed quite a lot of people. Far more than he was comfortable listing.

Including Kugo Ginjo, whose existence as an employee of Revocs had already raised a few questions.

Yet Isshin somehow convinced Nudist Beach he was more than capable of supervising the Grand Couturier.

And then, in the same breath, implored that *he*, of all people, accept Nui into his humble abode.

However, despite the inanity of the question, it hadn't been an insane request. He was, after all, one of the few people capable of besting

the Grand Couturier. But Kisuke was sure that wasn't the reason Isshin asking for his assistance.

"Things are getting quite interesting."

With the buzzing of insects beating against his ears, Kisuke watched the sun momentarily vanish behind a cloud. Take in the Grand Couturier? The same girl who attempted to murder him with passion and determination befitting any member of the Eleventh Division? Sometimes he wondered if Isshin passed responsibility onto his shoulders to escape the consequences of his actions. But whenever that train of thought began, he would remember Ururu's newfound happiness. The confidence she hadn't displayed prior to Honnouji Academy. There was little point worrying about trivial matters. Or, at the very least, concerning himself with Nui Harime.

Palming his bucket hat, Kisuke grimaced, "Still, I have the strangest suspicion Isshin's keeping a few secrets from me."

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May 29th, 2003

"Have a good day at school, big brother!"

The dirty plate clanked in the sink as Ichigo grabbed the bag slung over the chair, "Tell dad I'll be back late tonight."

"You joined the Soccer Club after all, huh?"

Karin poked the burnt rice next to her toast, globs of strawberry jelly oozing onto the plate. Propping her hand against her cheek, she arched an eyebrow in mild annoyance. Not at Yuzu or Ichigo, but at the idiot barreling down the stairs, seemingly ignorant of the notion anyone living in the house besides himself, "Or was it the Basketball Club this week?"

"I thought you didn't care?"

"It's not for me," she clarified her frustration in explicit terms. Why her brother chose to hire himself as a free agent for every sports club at school made no sense. He couldn't need the money. Not when Satsuki was more than willing to pay for everything. Which ignored those weird nudists and that disturbing exhibitionist. Leaning back against the chair, Karin rolled her eyes while Yuzu continued cooking, oblivious to the conversation in the background, "The old goat's getting confused. If you keep switching things up, his hair might actually catch on fire."

Ichigo lazily waved over his shoulder, one foot already out the door, "Thanks for the warning. I'll keep that in mind."

Without another word, he slammed the door just as the old goat shouted something idiotic at the top of his lungs. Scoffing as something crashed inside the house, Ichigo glared over his shoulder. God damn it. What the hell was wrong with his dad? Ever since they moved back home, or into the almost identical reconstruction of their house, the bastard's been far more annoying. And this morning... what kind of sick freak attacks his own son while he's lying asleep? Shifting his bag into a more comfortable position as the pathetic whining through the door ground to a halt, Ichigo walked into the street, one hand stifling a yawn.

"Huh, guess they're not here yet."

He stood outside his house for more than a minute, waiting patiently as the sun crested over the neighborhood. But as the seconds dragged onwards, Ichigo pulled out his phone, a frown slowly forming upon his brow.

"Maybe I missed them."

The excited chirping of birds from the trees lining both sides of the street faded into the background. Was he late? Did the bastard mess with his alarm clock? Groaning, Ichigo rubbed his neck, vowing to

punish the bastard at the first available opportunity, "Guess I'll see them in -"

"Hey Ichigo!"

Ryuko nearly tripped over herself as she finished tying the red bow on her uniform. No matter how much time passed, she'd never get used to standard school uniforms. Say what you wanted about Senketsu, but he was custom-made for her body. Not weird bows or unnecessary tying involved! Cursing quietly while Mako enthusiastically jogged at her side, chewing one of her mom's delicious mystery croquettes, bits and pieces of strange meat jutting from the bread roll, she waved at Ichigo, her bag dangling between her fingers, "Ugh! Sorry we're late! But my alarm didn't go off this morning and -"

"What are you talking about, Ryuko?"

A piece of fried chicken stuck out of Mako's mouth alongside something heavily resembling steak as she cocked her head sideways, utterly confused, "Was that today's excuse? Because you can count on me not to tell Ichigo anything super embarrassing! Especially that you threw the alarm clock across your room after you wanted another ten minutes of -"

The blush across her face meant *nothing* as Ryuko managed to cover Mako's mouth before she could say another word, "That's private! Why are you telling Ichigo?"

"Oh! I totally forgot, Ryuko! My bad!"

Mako attempted to apologize, but with Ryuko's hand suctioned against her mouth, all that emerged were some muffled noises and pieces of partially-chewed croquette. Food that Ryuko wiped away not for the first time this week. Once she was certain nothing remained, not even some of Mako's drool, she turned to Ichigo, who had watched everything without bothering to help. Grumbling - and then scoffing - at his stoic façade, Ryuko smoothed the wrinkles on

her skirt, courtesy of spending the last fifteen minutes rushing to get dress, brush her teeth and eat breakfast.

"Tatsuki said Uryu's running for class president."

She didn't give a crap if her attempt at changing the topic was obvious. Not when Mako inadvertently ruined her excuse for being late, "Can you believe the guy?"

"Yeah, he told me the other day," Ichigo shrugged nonchalantly as they began the long march to Karakura High School, "Uryu's talented. And he's organized as hell. I'll give him that much. But I have no idea what he's thinking running for -"

"WHAT'S THIS I HEAR!?"

Ichigo leaned backwards while Ryuko grabbed Mako for safety when his old man leapt out the front door, one foot barely missing his cheek. Undeterred when his perfected technique was avoided, Isshin nevertheless stuck the landing, flipping into a forward summersault while his white lab coat gently fluttered in the beautiful spring morning. Despite playing a major role in Ragyo's ultimate defeat, he hadn't replaced his infamous disguise, leaving him looking decades younger and considerably less rugged and handsome.

"Ryukien's son is running for class president!?"

With his silver hair and accompanying multicolored undertone available for everyone to see - and quite possibly mock - he pointed an accusatory finger at his wayward son, completely ignoring Ryuko and Mako, "Why did you not inform me of this serious matter?"

"Because it's none of your freaking business," Ichigo's eyebrow twitched when the bastard planted himself directly in their way, "So why don't you go back inside and stop embarrassing yourself?"

"Nonsense!"

Isshin couldn't believe the unfiltered rudeness spewing from his son's mouth. To think Ichigo would become a delinquent! It was a miracle Karin and Yuzu were no longer impressionable young girls, "As your father, I demand you run against Uryu by the end of the -"

A punch to the face, courtesy of *two* fists, sent him crashing head-first into the street.

"You bastard!"

Ryuko might have beaten him to the punch figuratively but Ichigo gave his old man another kick for good measure. This was freaking pathetic. Who the hell was the bastard trying to fool? Everyone, even Mako and Keigo, knew better than to believe the guy would be taken down by a couple of punches. Especially when the bastard tanked hits from Ragyo Kiryuin without flinching. Which meant he no longer needed to hold back in the mornings... or evenings... or whenever his dad's idiocy acted up.

"It'll be a cold damn in hell before I do anything that stupid," snorting, he grabbed his bag off the ground while Ryuko stepped on the bastard, earning an obviously fake wheeze of pain for her efforts, "If Uryu wants the job, he can have it. Because I really don't care."

"And don't drag me into your perverted fantasies," Ryuko warned, careful to stomp on the old goat's fingers, "Or I'll beat the crap out of you."

Staring at the pathetic figure twitching on the ground, Ichigo turned around as Mako waved at his dad. He had no idea why his old man hadn't dyed his hair or did whatever was needed to make himself look normal. Or, at the very minimum, less of an idiot. After the Soul Society broke through the Original Life Fiber's barrier around the World of the Living, he thought a former captain, one who apparently faked his own death to be with his mom, whose hair changed colors would draw at least a little suspicion. A few strange glances from people that knew him.

But nobody seemed to notice his old man's altered appearance.

Then again, since Ragyo Kiryuin had flaunted her inhuman looks whenever possible, they probably thought it was a fashion statement or something.

"Hey Ryuko, do you think I should maybe join the Math Club?"

"Huh?"

Ryuko was baffled by the question, "Math Club? You haven't been talking to strange people again, have you?"

"Well... the other day after lunch, I was walking back to class and got super lost," Mako flicked her lower lip. That day was clear as night. She remembered eating her mom's specially-prepared lunch, waving at Orihime before leaving to find the bathroom, "I made a right turn instead of a left. And after apologizing to those nice people for ruining their super serious talk, I helpfully mentioned they interpreted the Reimann surface incorrectly. It's just silly they thought it was elliptic instead of hyperbolic! And now, for some strange reason Gamagori won't explain, they want me to join the Math Club."

"Uh..."

Desperation flicked across Ryuko's eyes while the corner of her mouth twitched. She knew Mako was brilliant. At least, in her own special way. Hell, everyone at Honnouji Academy knew Mako was a genius when it involved boring stuff like math. But when she glanced at Ichigo for help... advice... *anything*... Ryuko deflated when he shrugged, leaving her without an excuse not to say anything.

"One of those mornings, huh?"

Tatsuki walked around the prone figure lying in a twitching heap outside Ichigo's house. Yawning as she caught up with Ichigo and Ryuko, unaware of the awkward conversation she saved the latter from having, her newly long hair, grown over several months until it

extended beyond the small of her back, shifted when she leaned forward, "Hey! Orihime mentioned something about Uryu running for class president. You really think he's going to do it?"

"Depends on whether he can beat Keigo's sister."

Ichigo was confident enough in his own abilities to admit Uryu was qualified for the job. But Mizuho stared down Satsuki without flinching. Not to mention taking on Sanageyama, "If he's serious about winning, Uryu certainly has his work cut out for him."

"I'm considering running myself."

She couldn't help but grin playfully at Ichigo's exasperated groan. Ryuko made sure to tell her everything about his tenure as Satsuki Kiryuin's right-hand man. And what Ryuko didn't know, Gamagori had been more than willing to fill in the details. So, jabbing her elbow into his ribs, Tatsuki chuckled at his annoyance, "If Satsuki Kiryuin thought you were qualified than I sure as hell am!"

"Fine. Go ahead. I certainly won't stop you."

Ichigo ignored Tatsuki's transparent attempt at getting underneath his skin. Scoffing, he looked away, refusing to watch her annoying smile. God damn it. Why did everyone believe he asked Satsuki to be her vice president? The only reason he accepted the stupid offer was to protect Ryuko and Mako from Nui. If he could have accomplished *that* without working for the Student Council, he never would have embarrassed himself, "But didn't you start working at the dojo? Do you even have time for the job?"

A subtle *crack* went ignored as Tatsuki's fingers trembled from the urge to deck Ichigo in the face.

It was impossible for anyone to be this dense! Student Council President? Her? She's rather have a rematch against Satsuki Kiryuin with two broken arms than deal with that amount of nonsense. In fact, getting her ass kicked by Sanageyama's stupid Goku Uniform



would be less painful. Scoffing out of the side of her mouth, Tatsuki glared at an uninteresting piece of trash in the road Mako told Ryuko about her dad's new job at Karakura General Hospital only to blink when the combat pass dangling from Ichigo's book bag momentarily glimmered.

"What's up with your pass, Ichigo?"

"You got me..."

He pulled the otherwise unassuming piece of wood from the bottom of his bag. Holding the former badge in his hand, Ichigo tapped the skull-like design only to grumble when nothing unexpected happened, "I think it's broken. It should have stopped working after I lost my shinigami powers. On the bright side, at least it's not screaming into my ear every few seconds."

"You should feel more confident, Ichigo!"

Piece of food stuck to Mako's cheeks as she swallowed the last chunk of her mom's mystery croquette, "It's a mystical and magical badge that allowed you to fight super-duper powerful Hollows like a superhero! The Soul Society wouldn't give you something that breaks as easily as the plumbing in our old house! So, if your fancy pass is glowing like the nightlight in my room, that means it must be working as intended!"

"It's a piece of junk!"

Before her best friend could say anything, Ryuko grabbed the combat pass from Ichigo's fingers. With a distinct lack of concern over damaging the damn thing, she tossed it back and forth, glaring at the skull design, "And who the hell thinks something this weird is useful? It has to be that creepy clown always taking to Hat-and-Clogs! And doesn't the Soul Society have phones? Why didn't they give you one of those instead of this stupid thing?"

"I've often wondered that myself..."

Ichigo caught the only evidence of his time as a substitute shinigami when Ryuko tossed it over her shoulder. She had a point. While the badge was useful for leaving his body to fight Hollows, there were several ways it could have been improved. But instead of dwelling on the past, he shrugged, hooking the pass back onto his book bag. Ukitake probably had a good reason to program the damn thing to scream into his ear like a banshee. The guy was odd. And perhaps a little too friendly. But he wasn't stupid. Not in the slightest.

Maybe he should have asked Ginjo whether Ukitake gave him a combat pass.

"That reminds me. Uryu said you helped him fight some Hollows last week."

Ryuko gave her best impression of utter dissatisfaction, "Don't get me wrong, Ichigo! I'm happy to fight those bastards! Because if I didn't... and one of them hurt Mako... I'd never be able to forgive myself."

She folded her arms underneath her chest, angrily glaring in Ichigo's general direction, "But even without Senketsu, none of those masked assholes stood a chance! I kicked all of their asses without breaking a sweat!"

That wasn't an exaggeration. After all those stories about Hollows, including the arrancar that had worked under Aizen, she'd expected badasses like Harribel or her annoyingly bitchy sidekicks. Monsters that could make her break a sweat! Creatures stronger than Satsuki's Elite Four but nowhere close to what Senketsu could pull off! As long as nobody was threatened or put into danger, she wanted to fight Hollows. Just to see what the creatures everyone in the Soul Society feared were made from. Which is why she'd gone to Uryu. The guy fought Hollows every night. Spending hours protecting Karakura Town from them. If anyone could have given her pointers on fighting Hollows, it was him.

"But ya know what's really strange?"

The miniaturized Scissor Blade hooked around her waist jingled, "Every one of the masked bastards ran away the moment they saw me! Like they were scared or something! If Hollows are so badass, why did *I* have to chase *them* down?"

"You are super scary when you're serious, Ryuko."

Ryuko smiled at Mako before grumbling under her breath, "There's something else that's bugging me. Who put Uryu in charge of Hollow control? I thought that shinigami... the guy with the weird afro... was supposed to be protecting this place?"

"Eh, Imoyama's too unreliable for the job," Ichigo mumbled without concern for the strange shinigami, "He's so freaking bad that Uryu's been forced to pick up the slack. But I'm sure he appreciates your help a lot more than Nui's."

"Tch!"

No matter how much time passed, or what happened after they stopped Ragyo, Ryuko would never get used to Nui Harime. Simply hearing the Grand Couturier's name left a bad taste in her mouth. Tatsuki might be confused about Nui since she never actually 'met' the psychopathic Grand Couturier. And maybe Mako was too carefree to realize the person who almost murdered her was living in the same town. But the entire concept was really fucked up. Nui being her sister was strange enough without having to consider the same about Orihime and Ururu. But Nui wanting to hang around her and Ichigo, as if nothing happened at Honnouji Academy, was insulting. The bitch killed her dad! She killed Mako!

And she had the nerve to act like they're friends or something!?

"Anyway!"

She spat on the ground, refusing to think about Nui any longer, "Why aren't you helping Uryu?"

"Because I'm not supposed to have powers."

Ichigo shrugged as a truck passed by, forcing them to stop before crossing the street, "Look. I don't like it. But Hat-and-Clogs has a point. The Soul Society doesn't know about Mugetsu and the others. They think Ragyo was taken down by Yoruichi and my old man with Nudist Beach and Satsuki's help. And since Inumuta wiped Honnouji Academy's servers, the Soul Society doesn't even know we were there."

"That doesn't make sense."

Tatsuki looked over her shoulder when Mako stopped walking, distracted by a butterfly flying above the sidewalk, "Can't they sense your power? Ryuko hasn't exactly been subtle."

"Maybe it's because they've never seen anyone like Ryuko," Ichigo rubbed the crick in his neck, courtesy of the old goat kicking him out of bed this morning, "Kisuke believes Mayuri's spiritual detectors aren't calibrated for Life Fibers. Or something. Which means until he thinks of an excuse for me to 'regain my powers' without drawing suspicion, fighting Hollows will only lead to awkward questions. Like who really stopped Ragyo Kiryuin."

"Good morning Ichigo! Ryuko! Mako! Hey Tatsuki!"

Even after years of accepting her friend's awkward peculiarities, Tatsuki was surprised when Orihime immediately started talking about the loaves of cheap bread she ordered last night at one of the refurbished bakeries. As she was forced into participating in a conversation about sweet bread, including whether the price was adequate or Orihime paid too much, Ryuko chuckled at Ichigo.

"You know, I never though school would be so... *boring* ."

She smirked at Orihime's strange enthusiasm, "It's actually kind of nice. Don't get me wrong, Ichigo. Honnouji Academy was exciting.

But dealing with Satsuki every freaking day got old real fast. Besides, would you want to go through all that crap again?"

"Hell no!"

Ichigo crossed his arms in disgust, "I'd rather take mind-numbing boredom than worry about Nui breaking into my room in the middle of the night!"

"ORIHIME!"

After finally realizing Orihime was talking to Tatsuki, Mako launched herself through the air, intent on giving her friend a good morning hug. But at the last second, acting purely upon instinct, Orihime ducked, allowing the enthusiastic teenager to sail overhead, outstretched arms missing their target by less than an inch. As she crashed to the ground, rolling head over heels until slamming into a trash can, one of her shoes flying off and almost hitting Tatsuki in the face, Ichigo and Ryuko sighed. The latter covering her eyes as Orihime rushed towards Mako.

"Mako! Are you alright!?"